

THE WELLBEING WORKOUT

How to manage stress and
develop resilience

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develop resilience

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Rick: To Kirsty.

Andrew: To Jane, Hannah, Isabel and Lydia.

Cary: To Jai, Isabella, Emme, Skyla, Bodhi and Amabel—my wonderful grandchildren.

Foreword

We live in fast changing times and for many of us over recent years work intensity has been steadily increasing. We seem to work harder and live in a world where we are always on, always in contact, which might be great for us socially but is more difficult to manage effectively in the context of work. And whilst we may be working harder, financial security is not improving for many as average wages have stagnated over the last decade. Furthermore, job security itself is reducing as jobs change, and as more people work as self-employed or in the gig economy. Added to that is a more unpredictable economy and future as we see a different era of geopolitics and a future more than ever driven by advances in technology.

This changing world of work has clearly also created many new opportunities for work, and greater flexibility, and these new ways of working have helped to sustain the almost record levels of employment we see today. But the combined effect of work intensity and more uncertainty and insecurity can't ultimately be sustainable or good for us.

The evidence is there and growing. CIPD research has shown that stress is the biggest source of absenteeism, and many surveys on physical and mental health issues are showing how much these are growing as part of modern society. It is good to see the UK Government and many others raising awareness and challenging us all to address wellbeing issues both in our workplaces and in wider society.

The trend of work, organisations, and management practice over the last 30 or 40 years has been significantly driven by mantras of efficiency, of standardisation, and cultures of rules and command and control. This is undoubtedly beginning to change and not before time. We have to put people back at the heart of our thinking, and particularly recognise that helping to get the best out of them is a lot about understanding and supporting their wellbeing.

And we have to think more about the whole person, the individual, not just that element that might turn up at work. Our wellbeing is a combination of work, home and the rest of our lives and we can't just compartmentalise. Yet working culture has been one that has typically sought to ignore those other parts of our lives. Even talking about issues at home that might impact our performance at work has usually been off limits, both for the individual and for their managers.

The agenda is big. We have recognised more and more that we need to create better work, or more 'good' work, where people have more of a say in what they do, can see opportunities to develop and grow and that we use their skills and talents effectively. Our recent survey on UK Working Lives showed clearly the importance of attributes of work that help to sustain a better sense of wellbeing, which in turn leads to more engagement and productivity.

We have to teach managers much more about understanding the wellbeing of their teams and how they can impact it. Many of these skills are the so-called 'soft' skills such as listening skills, coaching and support. In turn we have to help people understand their own wellbeing, how to adjust and how to cope better with stress and the inevitable ups and downs, and to develop more resilience. We must also work harder to create working cultures that are less stressful, that support more flexible working, that don't create cultures of fear but are supportive and inclusive.

This book offers a hugely rich source of insight and very practical guidance on these and many other aspects of wellbeing. Aristotle long ago observed that the outcome of humanity and civilisation should be greater contentment or wellbeing, what he called eudemonia. That idea has been echoed by philosophers, and sometimes politicians as well, over the ages. Now is the time for us all to get more serious about it.

Preface

Wellbeing encompasses a multi-dimensional matrix of our self and our world: the physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, philosophical, social, cultural and relational. Added to this, we're all individuals, so this weaves together to create our own unique, and beautiful, tartan tapestry of personality and identity.

We might clamour for peace, calm and tranquillity but more often than not, we live in a furiously fast and frenetic environment, punctuated by demands from others as we muscle through life. We seek control but realise we live in a world of chaos.

What we want is often what we don't need; we want instant gratification but need delayed gratification. We want achievement today but need to work for it. We want to win but need to embrace coming second. We want loyalty and trust but need to earn it. We want to blame but need to forgive.

Nothing stays still. Change becomes the only constant. Life cycle events come and go and we will suffer the slings and arrows of relationship, family, work and wider crisis misfortunes.

Life isn't always pretty or easy or happy or positive but it can become prettier, easier, happier and more positive. That's where stress management and resilience comes in.

If we can learn to identify the causes, consequences and cures of our stress and, at the same time, learn how to become more adaptive and

accepting of life's ups and downs, then we're going to be pretty resourceful and robust and better able to support others.

Wellbeing involves recognising the importance of building up and maintaining the mental health of ourselves and those close to us. Meeting the tough times head on, dealing with them, getting through them and emerging out the other side will also enable us to enjoy the beautiful things in life, allowing us to better appreciate the triumphs, the joys, the achievements, the successes and the things which make us truly happy.

We hope this book helps you to nourish and enhance your own wellbeing.

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This book is dedicated to the hundreds of organisations and thousands of clients the authors have had the pleasure of working with over many years.

It is through them that the authors have learned to better understand the many issues that impact wellbeing, through effective stress management and resilience strategies. This book is a culmination of around 100 years of collective insight and learning from the authors.

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Section I

Stress Management



1

Managing Workload Pressure

Spotlight

Workload is simply the amount of work we have scheduled with our name on it, through employment, academic demands or domestic pressures. But it's not quite as simple as that. It's rare that we have complete control, management or authority regarding the demands placed upon us.

If it's the right amount of demand on us, then it gives us a reason to get up in the morning, providing a structure and routine. It might help to motivate, inspire and give us purpose and meaning. It might also contribute to our identity and persona, how we see ourselves and how others see us.

But we can also fall prey to a workload that becomes counterproductive, leading to stress and anxiety at one level, or apathy, demotivation and lethargy at the other. We can lose ourselves in our workload bubble, and we could lose sight of the wider picture and the world around us.

In much of what we do, we form a 'psychological contract'. For instance, in exchange for our work, we get rewarded by some benefit, financial remuneration, pay-off or productivity value outcome. If we work in an organisation, we might get a salary and benefits in exchange for our commitment to do our jobs. At home, it might be to carry out

domestic duties in order to create a clean, tidy and orderly home (or to keep other people at home happy about our contribution). At college, we commit to our studies as part of the process of learning and achieving the academic qualification we seek.

The key point is that it is unlikely that we will have complete control over these demands, as many will be pushed on us by others or external circumstances. The secret is how we manage or influence our workload, so it works for us and not against us.

There will be times when workload gets just too much—deadlines, targets, competing demands, pressure from others can all conspire against us. If we feel overloaded, we may feel unable to cope with the pressures, which can lead to feelings of stress and overwhelmedness.

We might think that it would feel great to have no pressures, deadlines or demands but the opposite can occur. If there's nothing, or not much to get up for, nothing to inspire and challenge us, we could get bored, apathetic and demotivated. This can lead to feelings of stress too, albeit a different type of stress.

Getting a workload right takes planning, managing and a bit of luck. But it is possible.

Top Tips

Overwork

Workload audit

Construct a realistic assessment of all the different demands on your time. It might present a daunting reality, but once you have an overview mapped out, it can help clarify what is really important, allowing you to plan and prioritise.

Plan and prioritise

If we feel swamped by work demands, it's often because we don't have a clear plan of how to meet these demands and they float around in a whirlwind of anxiety and stress. Work out exactly what your demands are, how you will meet them and when.

Schedule demands

It is fine to have a plan, but we need to turn this into action for this to mean anything. Action comes from scheduling so we can see a clear timeline and commitment regarding what and when we carry out the action. Schedule difficult tasks when you have the energy, but also identify ‘quick-wins’ to boost your self-confidence.

Communicate and talk

We can feel the weight of demands on our shoulders and often we might internalise it, accepting this as our lot. But sometimes talking about how this is affecting us can offer positive dividends. Maybe it’s a boss who should know we feel overworked and overstressed or others in our family or college tutors. Explaining the impact on us to others can open the door to sharing the pressures or changing the workload demands.

Perfectionism doesn’t exist

There’s nothing wrong with wanting to do a job well but if we believe we need to do so perfectly, we can derive an impossible expectation. We need to challenge the view that just working harder and harder can achieve perfection; a self-imposed perfectionism can lead to excessive pressure on ourselves, which in turn is never satisfied and simply perpetuates an unrealistic view of ourselves. Learn to accept that ‘doing your best’ is much more achievable (and likely) than being perfect.

Delegate to others

We can be our own worst enemy sometimes, taking on tasks that we simply don’t need to. Be ruthless and pragmatic.... Are you really the only one who can do the task or who else can help you share the load? Delegation requires trust and faith in others. Challenge the belief that only you can do the task (see the TOP TIP above—you are not perfect!).

Just say no

It can feel liberating to say ‘NO’ to someone overloading us. It’s empowering and gives a sense of control and enhanced self-worth. If you can’t say ‘NO’, work out what is inhibiting or stopping this? Will you lose your job, explode or die if you say ‘NO’? Probably not.

Duty of care

All organisations have a ‘duty of care’ towards their staff and we have a ‘duty of care’ towards ourselves too. Employers have a responsibility for limiting or mitigating undue pressure and stress on staff. Acquaint yourself with appropriate organisational policies on issues surrounding stress and well-being and, where helpful, do speak to your boss, occupational health or human resources.

Embrace choices

Sometimes feelings of overload emerge because we feel locked, trapped and unable to make any choices. But there are often choices or options hidden beneath the surface. Taking a step back to see the bigger picture can open up wider possibilities. Or consider how someone else might handle a situation, what advice might they give you? Or what would you suggest to them?

Bring in control

If you feel you have some sort of control over what you’re doing, you’ll feel you’re making progress. Even planning, prioritising and scheduling will offer a degree of control as you’re determining the what, the how and the when. You’re in charge again. You’re in control.

Stress and burnout

Despite the best of intentions, you might feel totally stressed and close to burn-out. It’s important not to ignore these signs and to act appropriately when you spot them. Are you becoming more irritable, are your normal habits changing in relation to exercise, diet and sleep? What steps can you take to back away, regroup, recover and rebuild?

Under-Work

Boredom threat

If you consider your job to be boring assess why you are bored. Is it what you do, when you do it, why you do it or how you do it? Is it the job or the task, or are other external or family issues conspiring with your boredom? Are you overqualified for your job or in a role which is not

making use of your skills? If you can clearly identify what is behind the boredom you are more likely to be able to do something about it.

Lack of tasks

You might need to add extra tasks to your role if you feel underutilised or offer to pick up extra responsibilities. Most organisations are only too pleased to respond positively to this. If this is not possible find ways to occupy yourself that fit your role. If your job genuinely limits your capabilities, seek out any deficiency or fill the gaps at weekends or in the evenings or during your commute.

Managing monotony

If your job has a routineness to it, build in new elements, mini-challenges or extra functions to the role. If you have a creative side that feels underused, think how you can add a new layer of creativity or flair. Just because others haven't or don't do this, doesn't mean you can't.

Under-acknowledged

Enthusiasm, capability and ambition are often highly prized assets. Do the people who make decisions about you appreciate what you can do or offer? How can you make yourself more visible, or what conversations do you need to have and with whom?

Outside life

Beyond work, academic studies or domestic demands, how can you seek out the emotional, satisfaction or achievement nourishment that you require? What hobby or interest could you start or reconnect with? How can you offer your time for volunteering or helping out locally? Who could benefit from your skills and how might you offer them?

Final Top Tips

Get me out of here

If you are perpetually overloaded or underloaded in your job, maybe it's time to leave. What networking, contacts or leads can you muster in advance, or where would you find the jobs which are appropriate for your skills and experience?

Health barometer

Nothing is worth undermining your health, your relationships or your family. Keep an eye on your diet, exercise and sleep. If you notice you are eating or drinking more or less, or needing more or less sleep, these may be warning signs that you need to make changes.

It's good to talk

Sometimes talking to a boss, tutor, family member, therapist or coach can defuse your stresses and pressures in a way that offers a potential way forward, or it gives you a chance to ventilate your tensions. Keep to the positive though, and avoid any self-defeating and spiralling negative talk.

Action Plan 1: How to Work SMARTER

Workloads are more manageable when your tasks are SMARTER.

- Specific** clarify exactly what is required
- Measureable** where will you start and when will you know you have finished?
- Achievable** ensure your task is achievable and appropriate
- Resourced** get the tools and skills you need to complete the task
- Timely** schedule the time required realistically
- Engaged** connect with others and seek their involvement (delegating) or help
- Rewarded** acknowledge your achievement when completed—pat yourself on the back!

Adapted from Doran (1981).



2

Choice and Control

Spotlight

How much control do we really have over our life or our work? Many consider that they are on a conveyor belt of life, destined for a path that our circumstances determine or others dictate. This can be comforting and reassuring for some who crave structure and order. But it can be stifling and limiting to others. We need to find our own acceptable level of choice and control.

When we talk about being ‘out of control’ we often mean we don’t have structure or order and that chaos swamps us. Chaos is disorder and disorganisation. But bring in order and organisation and you create structure and reduce the turmoil. There is a degree of predictability in the unpredictability of life; we can’t control the weather or the changing seasons just as we can’t choose not to get older and age. Some things we just can’t control or change.

But there are things we can control (or choose)—we can choose to wear wet-weather gear when it rains, we can change our activity and exercise routines based on our changing physical capabilities. And this introduces choice. We can choose to wear shorts and T-shirts in the rain, or we

could trek across the Antarctic at the age of 80. Neither of these are very sensible or practical (or recommended) but they illustrate the spectrum of choice.

We can feel stressed if we feel we are not in control, but why do we need control? Why is it so important and crucial to our survival? It's not. But choice is. Choice gives us options. Choice allows us to evaluate options and decide on which to take.

We might feel that some choices are incomparable. Say you are sick of your job, stressed, overworked and underpaid. You might think that's it, no choice. But you can choose to stay (work through a plan to find a promotion, recognition, enhanced self-work, achievement etc.), or you can leave (get a new job with different pay and conditions). You have two options already.

Or you could go part-time and take on another part-time job to fill the difference; or you could take a grievance out on your boss or colleague (if there's clear complicity); or you could learn delegation and assertiveness skills, or find new on-the-job skills to improve yourself.

From a point when you felt you had no control and one option, you now have seven choices—OK, some are perhaps more palatable than others, but choices lead to options and sometimes all options need to be considered.

Top Tips

Calm the chaos

In a world of chaos, it can be difficult to simmer things down. But we need a reality check here—what's contributing to the chaos in your life? Are you colluding with it, contributing or feeding it? Identify what the chaos is and this will help to map out what changes or choices emerge. Take a step back... how do things really look?

Choose your choices

With choice comes options. We're often inhibited by what we regard as a good or bad choice. Until we act on any choice, there's no such

thing as a good or bad choice. Choose random as well as well-thought through options. A solution can emerge from an unexpected source.

Creativity for choices

Finding choices when they feel somewhat remote can require creativity and dexterity of thinking. Think ‘out-of-the-box’, random, unstructured and uninhibited. How can you bring your creativity to bear?

Solution focus

If you woke up tomorrow morning and you had the control/solution you sought, what would be different? If it’s getting the kids to school on time, maybe the solution is preparation and planning—that is getting up earlier, getting the kids up earlier, having pack-lunches or school clothes prepared the night before, avoiding arguments in the morning/encouraging each other and so on. Find the solution and you can work out the potential pathway to that solution.

Perception is reality

We often strive for more control in our lives but often it’s more about the perception of control, rather than the reality of it. We need to believe that we have order and organisation even if, in reality, we don’t. And that can be enough.

Decisions decisions

Chaos and lack of control are often caused by a lack of decision-making. Taking control can mean making decisions and choosing to act. Seek out sufficient information to make a decision and go for it. Sometimes you just have to make a decision without being sufficiently informed, in which case, trust your intuition.

You control you

You might not be able to control some things, but you can actually control how you think, feel and behave towards events. Embrace and absorb the range of choices that can allow you the freedom to think, feel and behave in a whole host of different ways.

Distraction attraction

If you feel swamped in chaos, do something, anything. This might be listening to music, reading a book, going for a walk. The mere act of distracting yourself has allowed you to choose to do something and as a result you have introduced control again.

Tolerate ambiguity

‘I need to know everything’—do you? Probably not. Is it OK to know enough? And what is enough? Sometimes we don’t have all the answers, so putting up with a manageable flexibility can be liberating.

OK consequences

Inaction or indecision often comes from a fear of the consequences of making the wrong decision. Find out what you need to make a more informed decision, or trust your gut feeling, or accept that maybe you will have to ‘act in the moment’ and sometimes you will make mistakes. But sometimes you will also make the right decision.

Acceptance strategy

Once we appreciate that some things can’t be controlled, we learn to accept a new, clearer reality. This takes the pressure off things needing to be a certain way. I can’t control how long my car will last. I hope it will be a good few years, but I don’t know. I’m happy to accept that it will probably last a few more years before things may start to go wrong. That’s enough. I accept that.

Leadership

As a parent or manager, you may need to provide some authority, motivation, structure, inspiration and guidance, which can involve making tough decisions. That’s your job. Act, learn and act again. Don’t be afraid of making mistakes and enjoy learning from them.

Light from darkness

Turn hopelessness into hopefulness. There is usually a silver lining to every tricky situation. For instance, if you’re facing redundancy, you can choose to feel redundant as a person, unappreciated, unwanted and unloved ... or you can choose to embrace this as a potential exciting new beginning, the first day of the rest of your life, an opportunity

to reinvent yourself, to reappraise your values and needs to try something new, to live the life you've always wanted.

Freedom

We seek control because we consider it will give us clarity and order, structure and certainty. But what if you could shake off the anchors of control and achieve a utopian world of choices and options? How freeing would that be?

Action Plan 2: Choose How to Live Your Life

1. Identify a problem and siphon it through a feeling, thought and action choice filter.

My problem is: _____

What I choose to feel about it is: _____

What I choose to think about it is: _____

What I choose to do about it is: _____

2. Identify your problem and come up with five creative resolutions or choices which could emerge.

My problem is: _____

Resolution Option 1: _____

Resolution Option 2: _____

Resolution Option 3: _____

Resolution Option 4: _____

Resolution Option 5: _____

3. Identify what you cannot control and how to accept it.

I cannot control: _____

...so I choose to accept: _____

4. Why do you need control?

5. Is this real and accurate?

6. What freedom might you achieve if you relinquish control?

7. Project the need for control on to something which you actually can control—a hobby, interest, sport, activity, creative pursuit, entertainment, fun and so on?

I can project positive control on: _____
