Staff wellbeing

A positive environment for children and young people is not only important for their mental health, but is important for your mental health too.

Wellbeing matters

While you're putting your energy into creating a positive mental health environment for children and young people, it's also important to focus on your wellbeing and that of your colleagues.

Early learning services and schools can be stressful environments, and you spend a large part of your day at work. So it makes sense that your workplace and your work has an impact on your mental health.

Reducing and managing your stress levels, maintaining positive social interactions and asking for help when needed are all helpful actions. Being comfortable to ask for and give support helps reduce the fear of stigma for help-seeking and is important in building a supportive culture at your service or school.

Ultimately, taking responsibility for your mental health, and understanding that it's a key to success in your personal and professional life, is the most important action you can take.

Stress

Stress is a normal response to the demands of work. While it can affect individuals differently, prolonged or excessive stress is not good for anyone. Sources of stress can include:

- time pressures and workload
- poor student behaviour including lack of motivation and effort, disrespect, challenging authority and violence
- managing instances of bullying and other behavioural issues
- conflict with management and colleagues
- adapting and implementing change
- being evaluated by others
- poor working conditions
- self-esteem and status.

When these, or other workplace stressors, begin to impact on the mental health and wellbeing of educators, it's important to act to reduce or eliminate stress and build better ways of coping.

Heads Up

As with all workplaces, the responsibility for this action is shared between individual staff members and the organisation. There are a variety of resources relating to staff wellbeing, including Heads Up, created by the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance. Heads Up provides individuals and businesses free tools and resources to create an action plan for a mentally healthy workplace, find

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out more about your own mental health, and get tips on having a conversation with someone you're concerned about.

Staff wellbeing is a shared responsibility

A mentally healthy workplace brings benefits for employers and employees alike.

When services and schools support staff wellbeing, it has a positive impact on staff retention, job satisfaction and productivity as well as on children and young people's outcomes. The responsibility for staff wellbeing, like the benefits it brings, is shared between the learning community and individual staff.

No matter what your role – student, educator, sports coach, maintenance servicing, or administration – everyone needs to look after their own mental health. That means everyone is responsible for doing what they can to manage their own stress and build their own sense of positive wellbeing. A culture of good mental health for everyone starts with the individual.

The responsibility for staff wellbeing also rests with leadership – when the whole learning community is aligned in its understanding and practice of mental health promotion, real change is possible. When there's a shared language around wellbeing, and structures and processes to minimise work-related stressors, then individual staff feel supported and part of positive community.

Staff need to work together to create an environment and culture where all members of the learning community feel supported and have the opportunity to flourish.

Healthy culture

Leaders can act to improve the mental health of all service or school staff by looking at the cultural, structural and environmental factors within their learning community that might support or hinder staff wellbeing.

They can then protect and enhance what works well and develop new approaches as required. These actions can form part of a staff wellbeing plan. This can include:

- building a culture of help-seeking that includes all staff
- reviewing and implementing strategies, structures and processes to minimise work-related stressors
- providing resources to help staff build their sense of self-efficacy
- encouraging and improving connectedness with children, young people and colleagues
- ensuring staff receive appropriate recognition for their work
- providing clear lines of referral to the Employee Assistance Provider (EAP), union representative, wellbeing representative and external agencies
- providing staff opportunities for individual growth and personal development
- implementing workplace legislative requirements.

Ideally, the staff wellbeing plan should be integrated into a whole-setting approach to mental health that looks at the wellbeing of all learning community members.

Self-care: you do you

While others determine much of your work environment, individually you can take steps to protect and enhance your mental health and wellbeing. Managing your stress levels, maintaining positive social interactions and asking for help when needed are all helpful actions to support your wellbeing.

Doing things for yourself to make you feel better

You need to practice self-care in a way that works for you. It might include maintaining a healthy lifestyle by eating well, getting enough exercise and cutting back on alcohol and drugs.

Some other strategies which you might find helpful in managing stress:

- Monitor your stress – recognise your own signs of stress and identify situations you find difficult, so you can be pro-active about managing stress during these times.
- Learn how to manage your stress in positive ways – such as through exercise, relaxation, breathing, yoga, positive self-talk.

- Be aware of your thinking habits – challenge negative or unhelpful thoughts.
- Schedule 'time out' for yourself – pursue your hobbies or interests.
- Connect – foster and maintain your personal relationships. A sense of belonging and connection is important for your wellbeing.
- Relax – learn and use breathing techniques, progressive relaxation, visualisations or meditation to consciously relax your mind and body. Practice mindfulness by focusing your awareness on the present moment.
- Be mindful and self-aware – focus on how you are feeling and how you act, and the impact that can have on your colleagues and your students. Be supportive of others without passing judgement.
- Consider making specific times or days of the week for activities which support your wellbeing, so they become routine and are less likely to drop off at times of increased work demands or other competing priorities.
- Reflect – find a mentor through your workplace or professional networks to help you grow professionally. Take time to engage in reflective practices about your work and professional development.
- If you have spiritual beliefs, make time for regular spiritual practice, or relationships with others who share your philosophy.

Ask for support

If you feel that you aren't travelling as well as you could, it's important to reach out for support. Most of us wouldn't try to treat a broken leg ourselves, but when it comes to our mental health we sometimes think we can fix things on our own, or hope the issue just goes away by itself.

That's where our support networks, mental health organisations and health professionals come in. There are plenty of effective treatments for mental health conditions and the sooner you seek support, the sooner you can recover.

Reach out for support when you need it – from colleagues, friends, family, your GP, a psychologist, or an employee assistance program through your workplace or Beyond Blue.

If you are having thoughts about taking your life, contact Lifeline, a 24-hour telephone counselling service (13 11 14) or 000 in an emergency.

Wellbeing Tools for You

Through the Wellbeing Tools for You section you can access and choose from a wide range of online apps and resources providing valuable information and support around mental health and wellbeing.

There are tools available which offer guidance and practical strategies for yourself and other members of your learning community, including colleagues, children and people, and their families.