

## What this fact sheet covers:

- Reasons to care about workplace wellbeing
- Facts about depression at work
- Importance of work-life balance
- Finding your 'flow'
- Try our Workplace Wellbeing Questionnaire
- Strategies to increase your wellbeing at work
- Further information

## Why care about workplace wellbeing?

We spend at least a third of our life, and half of our waking hours, at work. It is important, therefore, to recognise whether we are satisfied at work, and to identify what aspects we are happy with and whether other aspects need attention. The impact workplace wellbeing has on mental health is being increasingly recognised. Stress is a determining factor in many mental illnesses and work can be a highly stressful environment. Hence, it is helpful to know strategies that assist in managing effectively in your workplace. Work fosters mental health, while unsatisfactory work or losing one's job are high risk factors for mental illness, especially depression.

## What is wellbeing in the workplace?

The work of Professor Martin Seligman and other positive psychology pioneers clearly shows that what counts at work is generated by a workplace that:

- Encourages personal growth
- Gives a sense of autonomy and confidence
- Promotes positive relationships with co-workers
- Fosters a clear sense of purpose and self-acceptance.

## Is a happy worker a good worker?

Across studies it has been found that job satisfaction is related to 'organisational citizenship' (helping others at work and the organisation outside of one's immediate work role). Those experiencing more positive emotions on the job demonstrate better performance. This does not mean, however, that an unhappy worker is necessarily a 'bad worker', but that these positive factors are associated with more favourable outcomes and their absence with fewer unfavourable ones (e.g. absenteeism, uncooperativeness, lack of punctuality) (Staw et al., 1994).

## Facts about depression at work

Research suggests that certain types of work are associated with a higher risk of becoming depressed. Depressive symptoms are more likely to develop in those who work in jobs that have:

- Higher levels of psychological demand (e.g. hospitals, welfare services)
- Lower levels of flexibility in decision-making (e.g. factory settings, poorly managed teamwork)
- Low levels of social and environmental support (e.g. council workers, increased workload without support or recognition)
- Longer work hours.

Stress arises from shifting commercial and government workplace policies, such as outsourcing, downsizing, casualising and de-institutionalisation without appropriate resources. Occupational stress also comes from isolation related to job location.

## The importance of work-life balance

The demands of work and private life are often perceived as representing two ends of a time continuum (the 'time bind'). The time bind is a complex phenomenon reflected in the simultaneous time and energy demands of family life and the workplace, both considered to be 'time greedy'. When work and private life demands are in a state of conflict (i.e. there is a lack of time to meet both due to lack of available hours) one's work-life balance is said to be in a 'time bind' (Tausig & Fenwick, 2001). Optimising work-life balance through the following strategies may effectively reduce this:

- Arrange flexible start and finish times
- Schedule meetings between 9 am and 3 pm
- Have flexible work locations (e.g. tele-working, home working)
- Recognise the importance of 'time banking' (e.g. overtime one week, work less the next)
- Seek the option of part-time work while still being able to progress a career
- Request study leave, leave without pay and career breaks – when required
- Keep in touch with the organisation when on parental leave and negotiate graduated return to work after such leave.

## 'Flow' – The psychology of optimal experience

Whenever people are in 'flow', either at work or in leisure, they report a feeling of being in the moment and as being a much more positive experience than times when they are not in flow. So how does it feel to be in 'flow'?

- Goals are clear
- Feedback is immediate
- A balance is provided between opportunity and capacity
- Concentration deepens
- The present is what matters
- The sense of time is altered ('the day goes quicker').

When challenges and the skills required are in synch, people feel happier, more cheerful, stronger, and more active; they concentrate more; and they feel more creative and satisfied. One study found that the more time a person spent in flow during the week the better was the overall quality of his or her reported experience (Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter, 2003).

## Creating flow at work

All jobs have components that can become routine, rather than offer constant excitement. One key solution is to remain alert for opportunities that offer potential to be interesting and allow you to become immersed. Here are some useful practical strategies for obtaining flow and for reducing work-related stress:

- Set clear goals
- Concentrate on what is happening (i.e. focus on the job at hand)
- Become immersed in your work



- Learn to enjoy immediate experiences (i.e. stay in the moment)
- Try to have control over your actions at work (e.g. low control/high responsibility is a source of stress at work).

## Is flow related to wellbeing in the workplace?

When you have control over the attributes listed above and you begin to feel 'in flow', then there is the rush of wellbeing, and of satisfaction that comes when the work is completed. In the long run, the more flow we experience in daily life, the more likely we are to feel happy overall. You can test your wellbeing at work using a scale we developed at the Institute, the Workplace Wellbeing Questionnaire.

## The Workplace Wellbeing Questionnaire (WWQ)

The WWQ is a 31-question measure of workplace wellbeing and can be found on the Black Dog Institute website.

Each question is answered on a 0-4 scale and four aspects of workplace wellbeing are assessed. These four domains are:

1. Work satisfaction
2. The organisation's respect for the employee
3. Employee care by the organisation
4. The degree of intrusion of work into one's private life.

When you complete the questionnaire you will see your rankings on a sliding scale that shows where you rate on each scale (somewhere on a scale of 'high', 'medium' or 'low' for each scale).

## Practical strategies to increase your wellbeing at work

Workplace programs addressing managing at work, appropriate to the organisation/industry, and skilfully delivered to staff (including bosses and managers), can improve a work culture significantly. A program that presents positive strategies such as ways to achieve efficiency yet avoid stress in the workplace will encourage the employee to look for ways of promoting resilience, better time management, a good work/life balance and a healthier lifestyle. Mental health and dealing with disability should be included in this program ideally. When looking for a job, and as part of your work, be independent of it, and try to become part of something worthwhile that is larger than yourself. This helps keep a sense of proportion. Achieve balance and peace of mind via things such as:

- Meditation and other techniques to calm the mind
- Getting involved in a hobby/interest
- Listening to music
- Sleeping well
- Eating well
- Avoiding over-stimulation
- Using exercise as a stress release
- Taking things in moderation
- Avoiding excessive work
- Avoiding the use of alcohol to 'wind down'
- Recognising the importance of work-life balance.

## Is work getting you down?

Mood disorders (depression and bipolar disorder) are common in the workforce. Early recognition and intervention is of benefit to the organization and to the employee. Recognition and early intervention reaps proven benefits in terms of lower absenteeism, better work safety records, a happier and more productive workforce and fewer compensation cases and workplace conflicts.

If you think you may be suffering from more than just everyday mood swings, try one of the self-tests for depression or bipolar disorder on the Black Dog Institute website.

## Key points to remember

- Work can be a source of stress, but it can also offer a good opportunity for creating excitement and satisfaction
- The importance of work-life balance is being increasingly recognised. If possible, speak with your employer to discuss options about finding a balance that is right for you
- If you are feeling depressed or stressed, remember there is always help available. Contact your general practitioner or a counsellor if you feel work is getting you down.

## References

- Csikszentmihalyi M, Hunter J (2003). Happiness in everyday life: The uses of experience sampling. *Journal of Happiness Studies* 4:185-199.
- Staw BM, Sutton RI, Pelled LH (1994). Employee positive emotion and favorable outcomes at the workplace. *Organization Science* 5(1):51-71.
- Tausig M, Fenwick R (2001). Unbinding time: Alternate work schedules and work-life balance. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 22(2):101-119.

## Where to get more information

Fact sheets on a range of other topics from the Black Dog Institute:

<http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/factsheets/index.cfm>

Australian Psychological Society article on workplace stress:

[http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/inpsych/stress\\_work/](http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/inpsych/stress_work/)

Positive Psychology Centre (University of Pennsylvania) - readings and videos on positive psychology:

<http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/publications.htm>

Authentic Happiness (Professor Martin Seligman's website, includes questionnaires, resources, newsletters):

<http://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/Default.aspx>

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