

Putting well-being into practice

By Jill Secker



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“Developing well-being at work is one of the most challenging tasks in contemporary society.” (Laine & Rinne, 2015)

At the OTNZ-WNA Clinical Workshops in September a curious group of occupational therapists explored the question of how to maintain well-being in our work lives.

What is well-being?

While “well-being” is talked about everywhere – in the media, in advertising gym programmes, even on consumables such as deodorant – it is notoriously difficult to define. In conceptualising well-being White (2010) uses this definition, albeit at an intuitive level:



Why do we need to consider our well-being in our workplace?

There are a number of research articles exploring well-being at work/burnout/staff turnover of occupational therapists, particularly in the mental health field in New Zealand and around the world. My experience as a supervisor and a practitioner leads me to believe these issues are relevant across the profession. In their research exploring retention of Australian occupational therapists in mental health, Scanlan, Meredith & Poulsen (2013) noted that all aspects of well-being measured in their study significantly influenced staff turnover. These aspects included job satisfaction, professional recognition, work/life balance, and experiencing challenging and personally meaningful work.

This led to the first question the workshop participants explored:

What does your work life look like when you are successfully tending to your well-being?

Balanced: Other things happening outside work, time for others, less stress, calm happier home life, self-awareness, inspired, time to spend with friends/family, the desire to go to work.

Physical: Rested – mentally, spiritually, emotionally focused – energy for the job, regular breaks, lunch, eating well, looking and feeling less stressed, breath settled.

Organised: Effective time management, planning time, lists, minimal paper on desk, more level-headed, organised.

Productive: Fewer mistakes, more productive, innovative, open to change, thinking straight, completing tasks productivity increases, able to deal with stressful situations with more confidence.

Connected: Have time for others, making group decisions, less negative, passion for work, positive, enthusiastic, excited, hear and listen better, happier and healthier staff, able to be present, better communication.

Sounds great, doesn't it? So then...

Why is tending to our well-being in our work lives so hard?

Workload: Time restraints, always reshuffling, work demands and targets, “do more for less”, emails/phone pressure, admin overload, travel expectations, costs, throughput.

Work culture: “It's the norm”, unrealistic expectations, accountability, distractions, always more to do, self-care not in your work culture, technology – quick response expected, feeling responsible to team/clients.

Personal: Own expectations, guilt, other's needs first, easy to move own needs down the list, wanting to do it all well, not good at delegating, trying to please others before ourselves – ahead of well-being, “busy people have higher status”, caring too much, i.e. emotionally involved.

Yet why is it so important?

- To avoid physical breakdown.
- To stop sending unhealthy messages to new graduates.
- Because overworking gives our children and families unhealthy messages.
- Burnout risk.
- We need boundaries to support personal/professional space.
- If you don't look after yourself, you can't look after others.

So, we pooled our collective wisdom to answer the last question.

What effective tools are you aware of to maintain your well-being at work?

Physical: Regular breaks, regular exercise, water bottle, swimming, outdoor time, balanced diet, walking during lunchtime, good sleep, Tai Chi, Pilates, breathe, cycling, wine.

Balance: Outside pursuits, hobbies, protect my weekend, family time, taking leave, leave work at work, balance of giving and receiving, detachment through reading.

Boundaries: Knowing your limits, ability to hold boundaries, somewhere quiet for a break, phone on silent – responding when able – prioritising, taking breaks.

Connection: Morning karakia, team building/bonding, playing music, laughing, social functions, lunch together/sharing food, morning tea culture, connecting with colleagues who work remotely, time to tell stories.

Reflective practice: Supervision, mindfulness, reframing, being present, peer/group supervision, meditation.

Other: Time management strategies, ignoring “should”, saying “I have done well today”.



These collated ideas correspond with those detailed in the article by Gupta et al (2012). They identified coping strategies used by occupational therapists to counter the effects of stress, which included spending time with family and maintaining professional/personal balance, control of work responsibilities, maintaining a sense of humor and self-awareness/self-monitoring.

Food for thought:

Consider these elements when you look at building your strategies for well-being at work:

- Practice: Do them often until they become routine
- Proactive: Choose to put things in place before you need them
- Personalise: Make them relevant to you and what you enjoy
- Fun: Choose activities that lighten your mood
- Habit: Attach the strategy to something you already do
- Align to your values: Make it meaningful.

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Jill Secker is a professional supervisor with a background in occupational therapy who has provided supervision to people in helping professions since 1999. Jill has worked in hospital systems, private practice and with a variety of social agencies in New Zealand and overseas. She is passionate about the value of practitioners attending to their own well-being. Jill lives in Whangarei, but enjoys connecting with supervisees all over New Zealand through her business, Emerge Supervision Services (www.emergesupervision.nz).

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