

### **Working & your mental health.**

World mental health day takes place on Oct 10<sup>th</sup> 2013. To mark this special day , take a moment to consider how the work environment in which you spend a significant amount of time is affecting your mental health.

As a Senior Occupational Therapist, my work life is spent working in St Patricks Mental Health Services. An occupational therapist considers the work environment and a person's work role as a significant part of a person's life. Work and working are often explored as part of a person's occupational therapy treatment. Work is often an important and vital part of a person's recovery plan. As a result, a significant part of my day is spent exploring the role a work environment can play in keeping a person mentally healthy. This article provides you with an opportunity to reflect on working from another angle, exploring your works relationship with your mental health.

For further details on the work and role of an occupational therapist in mental health please click on this link: <http://www.aoti.ie/attachments/8e754977-54ac-43b3-bc5d-cb465fa759f4.PDF>

#### **Positive Impacts of working on wellbeing:**

When asking an adult why they work the answers will usually centre on the following; "it's important to me", "to contribute to society", "it pays me", "I have to" or sometimes a simple "I like it".

Outside of these obvious points the evidence would suggest that working affects our wellbeing in the following ways:

1. It provides a routine & structure to our day.
2. It implies a shared experience with others.
3. It provides a focus on goals that transcend one's own.
4. It defines important aspects of personal status and identity.
5. It enforces activity, a work environment demands a predictable need for action.

(Ref. Brown & Stoffel, 2011)

When a person has had an episode of mental ill health that has resulted in an absence from work, it is vital for my colleagues and I to communicate with them and explore their options for returning to work as soon as possible. There is very little reason why a person with a mental health difficulty cannot return to their job. With the benefits as listed above, work can play a vital part in a person's recovery.

If the person is willing, an occupational therapist can assess and provide strategies that may help a person's return to the workplace after an episode of illness.

#### **Negative impacts of working on wellbeing:**

The evidence suggests that work can play a key role in a mentally healthy life. But when does work begin to erode a person's wellbeing? There are several angles to consider:

*Maintaining a work role when developing a mental health difficulty:*

Mental health difficulties often develop over time. Often people may maintain a work role as they become ill, whilst withdrawing from their leisure and social roles. In these cases work has become both a stabilising factor and a considerable energy drain.

A workplace may become a sanctuary to escape difficulties in one's personal life. Providing a person with a different space in which to exist and make a difference. However if one is not coping very well and their mental health becomes compromised, presenting oneself in the work place can have negative effects.

A person may not behave how they usually do. They may be upset or tearful. They may find it difficult or impossible to concentrate and complete tasks. Their colleagues will usually begin to notice. Depending on the environment, this can be a source of stress, worry and embarrassment as a person recovers.

#### *Work related stress:*

Work related stress also impacts a person's wellbeing significantly. Again the figures differ from country to country but international evidence indicates that workers are experiencing more stress in the workplace than ever before.

When the demands of a workplace exceed a person's coping ability, they will become stressed. Over time, high stress levels will result in deterioration in health.

Often workers who experience work related stress report a decrease in confidence to do their job. If they have been absent from work for a period of time, this can make returning to the work environment a challenge.

For tips and information of work place stress please refer to <http://www.stpatricks.ie/blog/work-related-stress-how-manage-it>

#### *The quality of the job & wellbeing:*

There is also evidence that suggests that some jobs are "poor quality jobs" (uncertain environments with lack of security, lack of autonomy & stimulus). Regardless of an employee's own mental health these types of roles can have as negative an impact on wellbeing, as unemployment.

Ref. Butterworth & Leach et al, BMJ, 2011, <http://oem.bmj.com/content/68/11/806>

#### **Tips for employees to mind their mental health at work:**

While employers have a part to play in ensuring an employee's wellbeing is protected, every employee can play a part in minding their own mental health.

Here are some ideas from occupational therapy theories, to manage your own mental health in the work place:

#### *Be mindful of what motivates you:*

1. Remind yourself why you are there.

2. Introduce the concept of wanting to be there / contributing, as opposed to having to be there.
3. Explore the relationship between your values and your workplace, find common ground.
4. Find interesting projects that you can align yourself with / be part of in the wider work environment.

*Form healthy habits & routines:*

1. Make the routine work for you. Get enough sleep. If you like to, try to arrive a few mins early to plan your day. If you have a difficult time getting into or home from work, consider / negotiate changing your hours. Arrange reasons to leave on time (plan to be home / engage in different activities).
2. Try to develop healthy patterns by taking regular breaks. This means breaks throughout the work day and throughout the year, by using holiday allowances.
3. Be conscious of how your work role interacts with your other roles (being a parent, partner, friend, family member, volunteer etc). It is likely you will experience some sort of time conflict occasionally, but overall consider whether your needs are being met in each area, and take steps to change your routine to support your needs.
4. If you can, spread difficult tasks out or do them at a time when you are most energetic. For example some people prefer to tackle difficult tasks in the morning.

*Enhance & develop new skills:*

1. Keep your work / professional skills up to date. If budgets are limited try to access training in creative ways. Engage with peers to focus on topics / training needs. Often our colleagues have different strengths and skills to tap into.
2. Use your organisational skills to manage your day. Keep a clear diary / time planner and refer to it.
3. If you work with colleagues, try to use your social skills everyday & link with them. Their support can be invaluable. Camaraderie can decrease a sense of isolation.

*Explore the work "Environment":*

1. The work environment is not just its physical structures. It is also a cultural and social environment.
2. What is the cultural environment you work in? Is your role part of a "bigger picture"? Does your role have a meaning and value that's important to you?
3. Tap into works social environment, if there are opportunities for engagement in teams or initiatives explore these as a way to have fun.

**Some additional tips for employers to manage their employees mental health & wellbeing:**

The Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland (AOTI) have produced a helpful and succinct list of ideas aimed at employers to help protect employee's mental health.

<http://www.aoti.ie/attachments/b6c52c31-c5e3-44b5-842d-063eea1e0561.PDF>

So to sum up, work has a place in keeping us mentally healthy and can help us recover from a mental health difficulty. Work can also become a problem or part of a problem that affects your mental health & wellbeing. But with careful reflection & small changes your work can begin to work for you!

Sarah Carter is a Senior Occupational Therapist in St Patricks Mental Health Services. This article was written to support the St Patricks Mental Health Foundation “Walk in my Shoes” campaign:

<http://www.walkinmyshoes.ie>

If you have any queries for the author or wish to comment on this article, please do so by contacting the St Patricks Support & Information line:

<https://www.stpatricks.ie/support-information-service>