

Wellbeing and how to to enjoy a little more of it



“To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all.”

- Oscar Wilde

“Don’t compromise yourself. You’re all you’ve got.”

- Janis Joplin

“Life is a shipwreck but we must not forget to sing in the lifeboats.”

- Voltaire

The search for wellbeing has preoccupied people since antiquity and likely before. So what exactly is it? Perhaps wellbeing starts with feelings of life satisfaction, purposefulness and being in control of our lives. Having good relationships, enough money and good health are seen as useful. A sense of vitality, enjoying outside interests and being in balance with our environment are other factors. Perhaps it isn’t an exaggeration to say it is the search for how to best live and fulfill our human potential.

The concept of wellbeing runs right across our lives – from our work, home life, leisure time and even the quality of our sleep. Smoking, drinking too much alcohol and being a couch potato are all likely to negatively impact our wellbeing. Wellbeing clearly involves a complex mix of physical, psychological and lifestyle factors.

The good news is we can all take steps to improve our wellbeing and begin to enjoy the benefits. This helpsheet aims to help you get started thinking. For more help and practical advice you can also call the CiC 24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline.

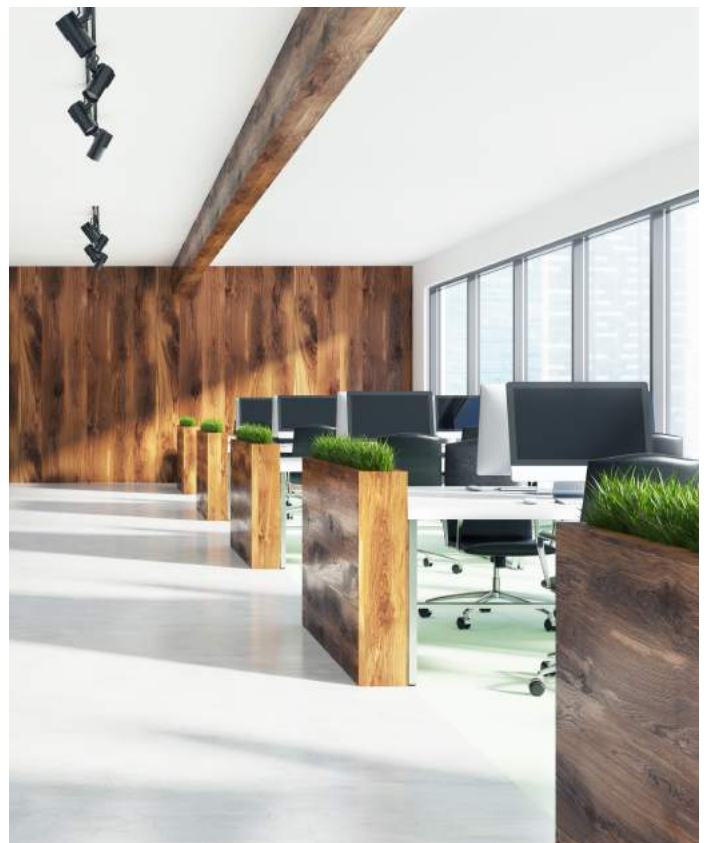
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Life at work

No job is perfect, but it is also surprising how we can start to accept some pretty big downsides as normal. It's not just lion tamers or stunt riders who run physical risks and can't afford to make mistakes. Sales people constantly on the phone in the car, businessmen dashing across roads to meetings, or office workers ignoring that niggling back pain from poor posture, can all run some physical risk. Some things might be hard to change yet small but significant improvements can be made. Meetings can be less tightly scheduled and proactive steps can be taken to look into best working practises. In this context, wellbeing isn't simply about the physical aspects, it's also about taking our welfare seriously.

The workplace can also be thought about at a more psychological level. Do we have some control over our workload, or are we at the mercy of an over-demanding boss, relentless deadline pressures, or sudden changes of mind from on high? Do we front up to angry members of the public or have clients who seem to make impossible demands? Do we work in a noisy open-plan office or, at the opposite extreme, in complete isolation, with no colleagues to share problems with? In the US, the Gallup Healthways Wellbeing Index, which surveys at least 1,000 adults every day to track changes, cites job satisfaction, ability to use one's strengths at work, your boss's or partner's treatment, and an open and trusting work environment as crucial measures.

Perhaps we can talk to a line manager about feeling overburdened, or think about where we might delegate. Or seek out some advice on how to streamline decision making. Or we can think about layout changes to the office, or try to make links to people in other departments who might be experiencing the same problems. Certainly, suffering in silence isn't going to help. Even when things are harder to change, just thinking about wellbeing enables us to start to articulate the problems which itself starts to reduce stress levels.



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On the home front

Of course, life is – or should be – about much more than work. At home, are we happy with where we live? Is it reasonably close to our workplace or do we have a long and stressful commute home? Do we feel safe walking alone in the area at night? Do we know our neighbours, so they'll happily take a parcel for us, or do we feel isolated and alienated? Are we able to comfortably afford the rent or mortgage, or is there constant nail-biting anxiety about paying our bills each month? Some of these things can be changed. Initiate a chat with a neighbour or do a quiz night at the local pub.

Is the building where we live in satisfactory condition or does it all feel vaguely on the edge? Whether it's the gas boiler that hasn't been serviced for years, the loose floorboard on the stairs, or still not having fitting that smoke alarm, these things can exert a subtle psychological pressure, yet they can often be sorted out pretty easily too.



Friends and other halves

Obviously, relationships play a role too. Most people feel better in relationships. However, there we need to avoid making assumptions. The apparently very fulfilled woman with a high-flying career and two gorgeous young children might look outwardly like she has it all, but might feel stressed and constantly torn between the two. Conversely, the singleton who lives alone might love their independence and lead a life of great happiness and fulfilment, running marathons, standing for council elections and playing in a jazz band.

Friends are no less important. Do we have a network of people where troubles can be shared, or is it just us alone in the flat with a bottle of wine when the going gets tough? Are we engaged with the wider world as much as we could be? This might mean anything from sports and hobbies to doing some volunteering. What form it takes is perhaps less important than the fact that we are engaged at all.

If all of this sounds rather complicated, why not take ten minutes to do an online survey of wellbeing such as that offered by the National Accounts of Wellbeing (www.nationalaccountsowellbeing.org) or the Institute of Wellbeing (www.instituteofwellbeing.com)? The National Accounts website will give you a spider diagram showing which aspects of your life you score highly in and where there might be room to make some changes. Thinking about these questions can help us to start focusing on what's really going on in our lives.

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Healthy body really does mean healthy mind

Perhaps this is where the changes really are down to us. We might feel we've earned that glass of wine at the end of the day, but when it's three glasses and it's every day, then something isn't right. Controlling our drinking, stopping smoking or not taking recreational drugs really will give us a health benefit. Similarly, the importance of taking regular exercise cannot be overstated, helping to raise our energy levels and reducing the risks of illnesses, from cardiovascular problems to cancers. Exercise also lifts mood through the release of endorphins and gives us a sense of accomplishment.

Similarly, stuffing ourselves with chips and burgers compromises both our physical health – increasing the risk of high blood pressure, diabetes etc – and our mental functioning, with lowered alertness and concentration levels from foods high in saturated fats. This may interact with other stressors such as high work loads. Poor diet possibly also weakens the body's immune response, so we're more likely to pick up any viruses floating around the office.

Wellbeing certainly isn't about the latest 'miracle' diet of existing on raw steak or only having carbohydrate every second Wednesday, but it is about sensible, informed eating. Broadly, diets need the right balance between carbohydrates (bread, pasta, potatoes), proteins (meat, fish, eggs), fats (red meats, dairy) and fibre (fruits, vegetables, cereals), together with minerals and vitamins (fresh fruit, vegetables). A rough split between one third fruit and vegetables, one third carbohydrates, and one third dairy, proteins and products high in fat and sugar isn't a bad start. There is some evidence that a high-protein,

moderate carbohydrate and low-fat diet works to lose weight and stay healthy (see for example the Total Wellbeing Diet (www.tescodiets.com)). The dieticians' emphasis on healthy breakfasts should not be ignored either. Skipping breakfast and fuelling up on coffee and a Danish can produce short term energy boosts, but then blood sugars are depleted and there is pay back later in the day.



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How much is in the mind?

Wellbeing questionnaires pose some thorny questions like ‘How often do you feel happy?’ or ‘Are you satisfied with your life?’. Clearly, how we answer these depends not only on external realities, but also on how we experience those realities. Some people really do seem to be glass half full people whereas others definitely are glass half empty. Why do some people experience a boss’s comments as helpful suggestions, whereas for others it feels like devastating criticism?

The reasons for this are probably a complex mix of our innate character traits, genetic anxiety levels and developmental factors – what sort of life experiences we’ve had, particularly in the early years. If the same boss reminds us of a critical parent who would regularly make us feel rubbish, then these feelings are likely to be reactivated and frustration levels rise accordingly.

That’s where talking to a counsellor or therapist can be useful. They can help you examine whether your feelings are realistic or whether some of it might be more in your head. If we can change the way we experience situations, then we really might begin to change our psychological wellbeing. As that then feeds into confidence levels, we then feel more empowered to take on some of the externals, creating a virtuous circle of improvements. A good place to start is the CiC 24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline (see below). A trained counsellor can begin to look at these issues with you, or put you in touch with someone who might help in more depth. Perhaps we all have the power to change wellbeing more than we realise, we just need to work out where to begin.

