

Time to shift focus

The way you look at psychosocial issues in your workplace will impact on your ability to deal with them, according to **DAVID BROWN**.

More than 50 years ago Abraham Maslow was studying highly effective people, trying to work out why they had succeeded where others had failed. He concluded that they had all experienced something truly remarkable – a “peak experience” that changed their lives. No matter what happened after that, there remained a thread from that brief moment, something they could return to for guidance and inspiration.

Wellbeing is more than the absence of psychosocial risk.

Let’s apply risk management to that idea. There would appear to be a risk associated with failure to have a peak experience. Applying the hierarchy of controls:

- Can we engineer in a peak experience?
- Can we substitute something else for it?
- Can we isolate people who haven’t had one, so they’re not a bad influence?
- Um...

It’s really important to know when an idea runs out! But risk management has served us so well that in the UK and elsewhere they’ve been building a new room on the end of the house, and calling it “psychosocial risk management”. It’s meant to contain all the soft issues – relationships, bullying, psychological trauma, meaning, leadership, workload and so on.

But it doesn’t work. The World Health Organisation is adamant that health is more than the absence of disease, and similarly, wellbeing is more than the absence of psychosocial risk.

Ask the right question

I often tell the story of debriefing workers who’d seen a fatal incident in a factory. (This was some 15 years ago, before the research came out telling us to stop debriefing sessions.) There were three psychologists, because there were so many workers involved, and we each took a group and afterwards we reported back to senior management.

The first psychologist said that her group was “angry, very angry” at management for allowing this accident to happen. The second said that his group was a bit angry. There wasn’t any anger expressed in my group, so I asked what the others had said.

- The first psychologist had warned people about all the feelings they might have. “You might feel angry” she said, and she then explained that such feelings were normal.
- The second had just mentioned them. He’d said “you might feel all sorts of things but they’re all OK, don’t worry.”
- I’d said “What is your best memory of this man?”

That question was a gift from a man at my father’s funeral. He was a work colleague of my dad, and he refused to be sad, instead he told a very funny story about their work together. We thought it strange at the time, but afterwards it sunk in – supporting the sadness feels good, but adding a light is better.

Don’t focus on warnings

What are you doing about psychosocial risks? Are you still warning people?

If they go back to their desks after your training session worried about OOS or stress or PTSD, then you’re deluding yourself if you think you’re improving safety – you’re actually worsening it.

Many people have been talking about the negative/positive issue in their own way.

Peter Cotton, a well known Australian psychologist, talks about **distress** and **morale** as two completely different things. He said (and I paraphrase) that reducing distress in the workplace is almost a waste of

time, and that you should focus on building morale instead. If an individual has a major problem with distress, then send them for an individual session with a psychologist, but don’t use distress avoidance and relaxation training with the whole workgroup.

American psychologist Abraham Maslow talked about “deficiency needs” (like food and safety) and “being needs” (like meaning and purpose). Satisfy the deficiencies a bit, then make space for the being needs, he said.

In the 1980s I worked in the rehabilitation of seriously injured people. We used behaviour therapy to fatten up the positive side of life so the person didn’t have as much time left for their insoluble worry. It worked well. ■

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NEGATIVE, NEUTRAL, AND POSITIVE – AN UNOFFICIAL LOOK AT GUARDING MINDS @ WORK

Guarding Minds @ Work is a Canadian project. You can find it at <http://www.guardingmindsatwork.ca/>. They offer a list of 12 issues, four of which David Brown has expanded on in this table.

Factor	Negative	Neutral / risk free	Positive
Psychological Support	Feeling unsupported – if there’s a problem you’re on your own, abandoned.	You don’t feel unsupported – you know the basics are in place.	You really are supported, and you know it.
Recognition & Reward	Someone else takes credit for your work, or tries to sabotage your successes.	Nobody undermines you or tries to steal the credit, but star performers don’t get extra attention or money.	The extra efforts you make are appreciated by management and recognised by your co-workers.
Workload management	Too many unfinished tasks – leads to fatigue or dispirited feelings.	Can finish enough of the work so as not to panic.	Tasks and responsibilities can be accomplished successfully within the time available.
Engagement	You feel exploited or conned by corporate vision. It doesn’t ring true to you. You are cynical about the integrity of the company.	The company is OK. No bad feelings, but you don’t feel the need to go the extra mile.	You enjoy and feel connected to your work, and you feel like doing the job well, or very well.