

Emotional Wellbeing at Work 1

Some pressure at work can be motivating, but when it becomes overwhelming and is untreated it can lead to work-related stress. The NHS staff survey (2022)¹ found that the percentage of staff who have felt unwell as a result of work-related stress in the last 12 months, at 44.8%, has declined by around 2%, but remains above pre-pandemic levels (40.5% in 2019). There are also changes within the current context of health visiting practice (e.g. agile working and virtual meetings) that have created greater risk for our profession with fewer opportunities for informal supervision and peer support.

This Good Practice Point (GPP) resource is one of a series of two GPPs on Emotional Wellbeing at Work. This GPP aims to raise awareness around the importance of wellbeing for our practice and identifies the risk of possible vicarious trauma and burnout. The second GPP makes suggestions for approaches to promoting emotional wellbeing, for yourself and others.

Compassionate leadership

It is evident that the ability to remain compassionate both to ourselves and others is central to the art of good health visiting practice. Compassion can be defined as *'a sensitivity to suffering in self and others with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it'*². Health visiting work can bring great satisfaction, but it also exposes us to high levels of human distress, suffering and sorrow. It requires a mindset shift from nursing and the need to fix and heal patients to one where we recognise the importance of empowering families to make their own changes using a sensitive and empathetic Making Every Contact Count³ approach.

In The Courage of Compassion⁴ report for the King's Fund, the authors found that organisations with cultures of compassion promote fairness and foster individual, team and organisational wellbeing. They set out clear recommendations for organisations and call on all health and social care leaders to lead with compassion, stating that, *"it is critical that organisations also tackle the underlying causes of stress, ill health and poor wellbeing – such as chronic excessive workload, bullying, inadequate supervision, discrimination and poor teamworking – rather than focusing solely on their consequences."*

Emotional Intelligence in the workplace

The four domains of Emotional Intelligence⁵ are thought to be particularly significant (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management). Each domain is vital for any leader during a crisis, resulting in lower stress, lower emotional reactivity, and fewer unintended consequences for our leadership. 360 feedback, supervision and personal reflection can be helpful to improve self-awareness, as well as the use of tools such as Johari window⁶.

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For additional resources see www.ihv.org.uk

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Wellbeing, burnout and compassion fatigue

Frequent environmental stress associated with human pain and distress in the workplace can impact on the physical and mental wellbeing of health professionals. This can result in burnout and, in some cases, traumatic stress-like symptoms (sometimes referred to as vicarious trauma)⁷.

Be aware of vicarious trauma and burnout

The following lists may help us to recognise excessive stress or trauma in ourselves or others.

Recognising the signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma

This is not an exhaustive list, but it covers some of the common signs of vicarious trauma⁸:

- Invasive thoughts of client's situation/ distress
- Frustration/ fear/ anxiety/ irritability
- Disturbed sleep/ nightmares/ racing thoughts
- Problems managing personal boundaries
- Taking on too great a sense of responsibility or feeling you need to overstep the boundaries of your role
- Difficulty leaving work at the end of the day or noticing you can never leave on time
- Loss of connection with self and others or loss of a sense of own identity
- Increased time alone or a sense of needing to withdraw from others
- Increased need to control events/outcomes/others
- Loss of pleasure in daily activities

The effects of vicarious trauma vary from person to person. For some people, there may be a wide range of signs and symptoms, while others may experience problems in one particular area of their lives.

Recognising the signs and symptoms of burnout

This is not an exhaustive list, but it covers some of the common signs of burnout⁸:

- Physical and emotional stress
- Low job satisfaction
- Cynicism
- Feeling frustrated by, or judgmental of, families
- Feeling under pressure, powerless and overwhelmed
- Not taking breaks, eating on the run
- Unable to properly refuel and regenerate
- Frequent sick days or "mental health days"
- Irritability and anger
- Feeling disassociated from families or that you don't care

You may be more aware of responses to symptoms rather than the symptoms themselves. For example, using "vices" to dull the impact (such as alcohol, smoking, spending, eating) or you may find yourself or others "frozen" and unable to complete tasks, prone to procrastination or easily distracted.

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Good Practice Points

- Developing good emotional intelligence is important for a health visitor. Tuning into our emotions and regulating our responses to work can affect how we manage difficult scenarios. This can positively impact the outcomes, the effect on us and our wellbeing, and the impact on others around us.
- Building self-care routines into each working week to manage daily stressors is key. This may include ensuring adequate meal breaks are built into your diary, holding walking meetings or reflective catch ups with colleagues, and practising introspective activities (such as breathing exercises, meditation).
- Being authentic and vulnerable about our own mental health is an act of extreme courage that we expect from our families every day. We all require a safe place to unburden, make sense of our experiences, feel understood if we are to do our jobs well. Restorative, clinical, and safeguarding supervision are central to this, but informal peer supervision is also significant and opportunities for this should be actively built into each working week.
- Stigma and shame are still attached to emotional wellbeing and mental health issues. As leaders we need to be the change needed and use our leadership skills to challenge stigma - communicate clearly regarding the risks posed by work to our emotional wellbeing and actively seek solutions to these.
- As a diverse workforce, health visitors' individual responses to stress will vary depending on their cultural, financial, religious, and personal circumstances. In the same way, what helps will also vary between individuals. We should adopt the same person-centred approach with colleagues as we do with families, to avoid advice-giving and seek what is helpful and feasible.
- Recognising the signs of stress, burnout and vicarious trauma in ourselves and others is key to the safe delivery of the health visiting service. Where issues arise for us or others, we need to be prepared to take compassionate action and know where to find appropriate help.

Asking for help

Don't be afraid to seek help if negative emotions and thoughts are consuming you. It's the right thing to do:

- Talk to someone you trust - either a family member, colleague, manager, Occupational Health, The Samaritans or your GP
- NHS England: [Supporting our NHS people](#)
- Health Education and Improvement Wales: [Colleague Health and Wellbeing](#)
- NHS Education for Scotland: [Staff Wellbeing Resources](#)
- Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland: [Staff health and wellbeing resources](#)

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You may find our second Good Practice Point in this series helpful – looking at approaches to improving emotional wellbeing for yourself and others.

Take a look at our work in this area:

Baldwin S, Stephen R, Bishop P, Kelly P. Development of the Emotional Wellbeing at Work Virtual Programme to support UK health visiting teams. *Journal of Health Visiting*. 2020. 8, 12, 516-522. Doi: 10.12968/johv.2020.8.12.516

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Baldwin S, Stephen R, Kelly P, Bishop P. The iHV Emotional Wellbeing at Work Champions Programme: Building capacity to protect and enhance the emotional wellbeing of the health visiting workforce in the UK. *Public Health in Practice*. 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhip.2022.100230>

Baldwin S, Stephen R, Kelly P, Bishop P. Learning and reflections from the iHV Emotional Wellbeing at Work Champions Programme. *Journal of Health Visiting*. 2022. 10, 10, 2-9.

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