Education:

Wellbeing Renewal

Guidance for Practitioner Wellbeing

CARING · KIND · CONNECTED

East Ayrshire Council
Comhairle Siorrachd Àir an Ear

PRACTITIONER WELLBEING: ADVICE ON TRANSITION BACK TO SCHOOL/ECC BUILDINGS

Returning to school after a global pandemic is something that none of us have ever experienced before. The uncertainty has been unsettling and caused many to feel mixed emotions about firstly going into lockdown and now emerging from lockdown. Many feel relieved to be returning to a new "normal" and gaining some routine and certainty back into our lives. Whereas for others this is provoking much anxiety.

For the majority, lockdown has allowed us to put a pause on our lives and for the first time provided that opportunity to slow down and connect. This has also allowed us to reflect on our own wellbeing and for many prioritise our wellbeing.

For our children to thrive they need well-regulated, joyful, enthusiastic, and emotionally-well adults to model, co-regulate and meet their needs. They need adults who are happy to be at work and enjoy being with children and young people.

What is Wellbeing?

The following definition comes from Education Scotland's Connected Compassionate Communities resource, and is the central definition of EAC Education Wellbeing Renewal framework.

> *The concept of wellbeing comprises two main elements: feeling good and functioning well. Feelings of happiness, contentment, enjoyment, curiosity and engagement….equally important…experiencing positive relationships, having some control over one's life and having a sense of purpose are all important attributes of wellbeing.*
> **Huppert, (2009)**

Looking after your own wellbeing: a rationale

With a return to schools and ECCs in August, it is of paramount importance that those in caring roles like parents, carers, and practitioners, not only support the wellbeing of our children and young people, but also look after the wellbeing of themselves. Worries, pressures and unpredictability can have a detrimental impact on wellbeing, thus impacting on our ability to care, connect, support and teach our young people. We know that you cannot support others' wellbeing if you are not prioritising your own wellbeing.

Dr Karen Triesman usefully describes this as

'We need to contain the container, care for the carer'

Key findings of research undertaken with education staff in Highland Council found:

- Staff reported current wellbeing to be significantly lower than ideal wellbeing

- Over half reported they were aware of pressures on their emotional wellbeing in their job

- Support from colleagues rated higher than from school managers and central management

We know our education establishments are often where our children communicate their distress and dysregulation. It is possible that there may be more evidence of this as they transition back to schools and ECCs after such a period of time away. As the adults there for them we need to be as emotionally well as we can be in order to support them. In a recent paper from Barnardos (July 2019), on the need for support for adults in education settings, a nurture teacher explained:

"Educational staff will be there to offer calm, consistent support and strategies to help the child manage and regulate these huge emotions. But through providing this 'containment', staff also feel a range of emotions that they too need to learn to manage and deal with effectively, in order to be resilient and emotionally ready to support the child, or children, within their care... it is important that they too have support to contain all of this otherwise their own health and wellbeing can suffer, impacting on their ability to be there for those children who need them the most. '

"The well-being of children is inseparable from the well-being of all the critical adults in their lives." - Dr. Stuart Shanker

If we do not support our own wellbeing we become at risk of reaching burnout or developing *compassion fatigue* (Fidgley, 2002). Compassion fatigue refers to physical or emotional exhaustion that impacts on your ability to look after others and it normally develops as a result of caring for others. To avoid this we must look after ourselves and put our wellbeing at the centre in order to reduce the stress and anxiety we may experience on this journey to renewal.

What is Stress?

Stress is a survival mechanism. It helps our bodies get ready to react in a situation if there is danger. For example, if you are driving and a car is coming towards you, you need to feel fear/ terror to allow your brain to kick in and help you to act to avoid the danger.
It can also be good in small doses as it allows us to be alert, to get you ready for delivering that presentation or attending that difficult meeting. Manageable doses of stress can help us to effectively convey our message, to think about what is coming next, and to be alert to any questions we might receive.
If stress is predictable, moderate and controllable then over time this can actually be a good thing as it can help us foster *resilience*.
However, it is the pattern of that stress that defines whether we experience it as healthy and adaptive or negative and overwhelming. If stress is unpredictable and prolonged (as is the case for many through such an experience as a global pandemic) it can mean our tolerance to stress can be reduced and we need others to help us be calm and remain resilient.
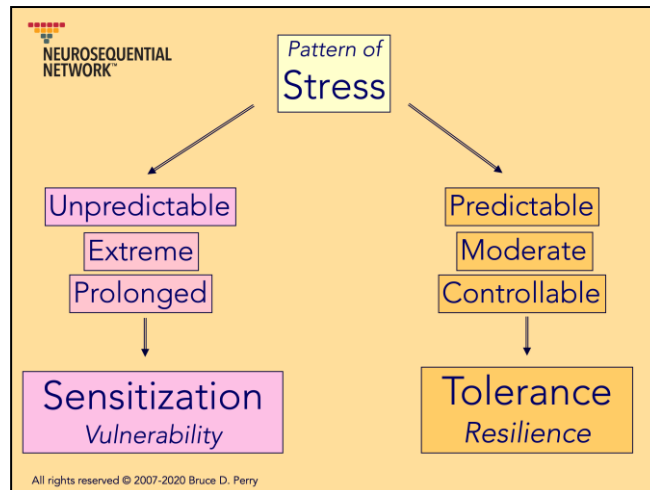
Bruce Perry (2020): The Neurosequential Network

If we start to become vulnerable to stress it can mean that we are not able to access the parts of our brain that we need to be able to think, problem solve, sequence and plan. If we are overly stressed we tend to be in the emotional and reactive part of our brains called the limbic system. That can mean we find it more difficult to think creatively, abstractly and be receptive to the needs and wants of others.

We are at our best when we are calm. We can access the thinking, abstract parts of our brain. We are better able to attune to our own needs and the needs of others.
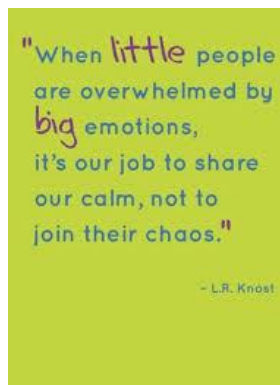

When an adult is not feeling calm, if they are dysregulated, then they are more likely to make other children or adults feel that way too. As adults we are being asked to deliver education in a constantly evolving landscape which, for most people, causes anxiety. Our children need us to be regulated and project an air of confidence, calm and fun. To be able to do this we need to feel supported, connected to our colleagues, work within a structure that helps us feel a sense of control, and have time and space outwith our place of work to have experiences that help our nervous system feel in balance, not overwhelmed, anxious or in a fight-flight-freeze response ourselves.

How do we know when we are stressed?

The first signs of stress can be physical symptoms. However, these can manifest differently from one individual to another, so it is important to understand and recognise your own warning signs. We also show stress emotionally and can feel the effects mentally. It is helpful to note any signs of stress and can even be helpful to do so with family members, or with children in your class if you are talking about stress and change. What are the first things you notice about them when they are beginning to become stressed? What do they notice?

Signs of stress and compassion fatigue

In this diagram are a few examples of both physical and emotional signs of stress. This is not exhaustive, there are many more that may or may not affect you personally, indications and impact will be specific to each individual person.
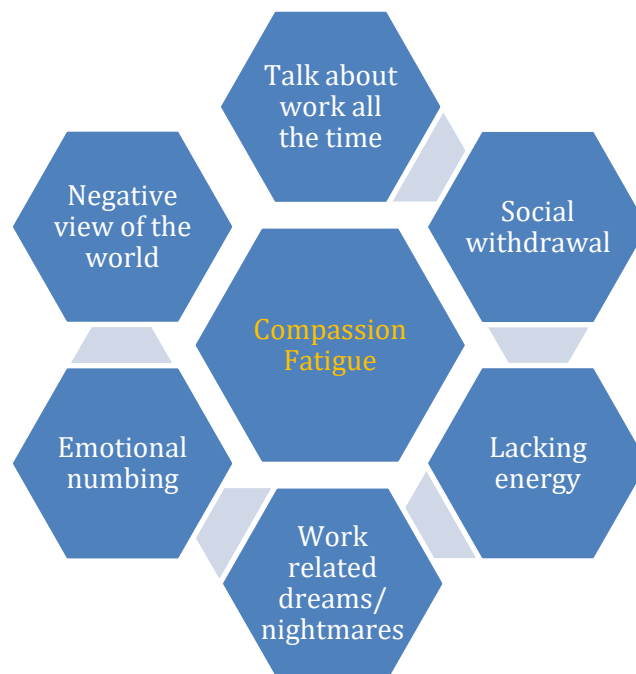
If you are feeling significantly stressed, or are worried you are having more symptoms of what may be increased stress, it is important to share that, speak to your Head or line manager, and check the advice and support outlined at the end of this document.

Systems for Supporting Staff Wellbeing

A recent survey by East Ayrshire Psychological Services gathered staff ideas on how they support their own wellbeing at work.
Responses indicated lockdown has meant staff have had to focus more on their own wellbeing than perhaps previously, with some staff concerned about how to maintain this in the transition back to school/ECC buildings. It is important to develop your own personal plan about what helps you cope when you are stressed and protect time to engage in these activities, even for short but regular periods of time.

Therefore, going back to school and ECC buildings how do we maintain that sense of calm and lower stress for us and our children?

How do we keep ourselves calm and regulated?

One key thing that helps keep us calm is engaging in predictable, repetitive, rhythmic experiences. How many of you have spent time during lockdown clearing out cupboards, tidying, cooking, painting, singing, reading? These are all regulating experiences that help keep us calm, and also help keep children feeling more regulated. It is important to plan these throughout the day, or over a period of time, for yourselves and potentially with your children. Perry (2020) says even 3 minutes of this type of activity can be enough to keep us in a calm state in regular doses. Some things may be feasible during your working day when back in a school or ECC building, such as a short walk, rhythmic breathing or singing, some short simple physical activities, again they could be for yourself at an appropriate time, or with your class or group.

When we are highly stressed we can often need someone we know and trust to help us to calm down. That might be through listening to our worries, labelling our emotions and helping us feel heard. We do not always need someone to 'fix' or 'rescue' us, just a listening ear and some empathy is enough to help us feel 'contained' such that we are able to contain the others who need us.

Many of you who have undertaken Solihull Approach training will recognise this as demonstrated in the following image:
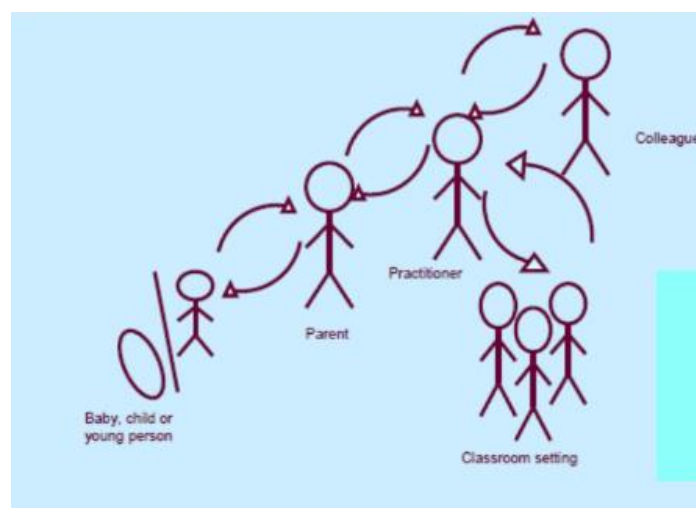
(Solihull Approach; University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Trust)

After we have been regulated and had someone relate to us, then we can begin to reason and problem solve.

Some ideas for promoting wellbeing, reduce stress and increase regulation within your establishment:

1. Ethos and culture of promoting staff wellbeing
2. Protected time for supervision support from managers on a regular basis that suits the establishment needs
3. Informal check-ins with management
4. Regular collegiate check-ins – active listening and containment, remember to think about new and newly qualified staff who may not have the same relationships in place
5. Wellbeing activities like walking lunches, after school workouts
6. Ensuring time to connect and be together safely at natural break times
7. Create a social committee to arrange protected/regular staff room meet ups at lunch time, or after school to catch up informally
8. Wonderwall or positivity boards in the staff room to note down positive feedback from colleagues, children, parents, happy events no matter how small
9. Use technology to maintain social and emotional connections. This can be within working parameters, e.g. MS Teams, and via informal social media for outwith working time and contexts
10. Laugh a lot 😊

Staff groups may want to consider what works best for the whole staff as well as what might be beneficial for individuals or smaller groups, such as buddy systems, check ins with colleagues who don't normally seek a lot of contact, and generally maintaining that sense of wellbeing of all.

It is the intention that more formal approaches to support and supervision will be considered for education staff ahead building on an initial test of change undertaken during session 19/20 that has had very positive outcomes.

"The most powerful buffer in times of stress and distress is our social connectedness; so let's all remember to stay physically distant but emotionally close. Reach out and connect; even a short text or smiling face on zoom can help." (Bruce Perry, 2020)
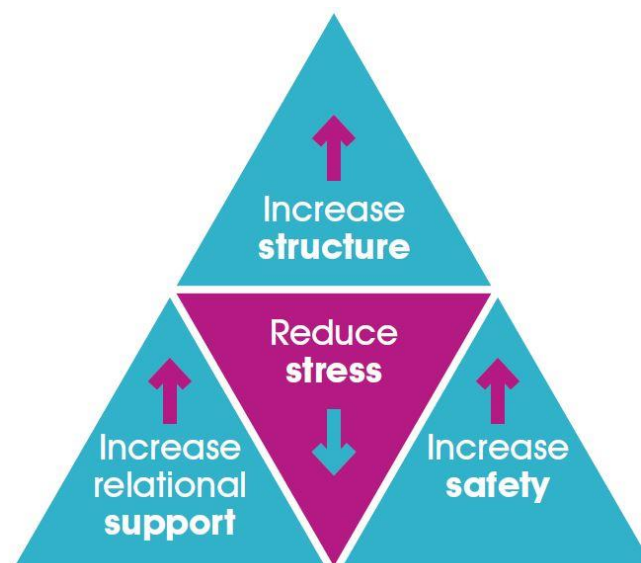
Resources for Supporting Staff Wellbeing

- Education staff HWB training calendar, with staff wellbeing mindfulness, resilience and wellbeing support materials
  HWB training calendar

- EAC Healthy Lives employee webpages, with links to Occupational Health, HR and external supports   Healthy-Working-Lives

- Within the Healthy Lives pages you can find up to date links to the **Creating Calm Programme** and the **Managing Anxiety Programme**.

    Creating Calm Programme:
    - Every **Monday** morning at **8.00am** there will be a 15 minute 'Breathing' session giving you some techniques to help you manage any stress or anxiety you may be feeling.
    - And every **Friday** evening at **5.00pm** there will be a 20 minute 'Relaxation' session with some gentle stretches and additional breathing techniques which will help you rest.
    - Additionally, remember the Creating Calm Programme runs every Wednesday and Friday at 4pm and more videos have been uploaded onto the HWL YouTube channel which will also help you with any stress or anxiety you may be feeling.
    - If you would like details on the new sessions or the existing supports, please email healthyworkinglives@east-ayrshire.gov.uk

    Managing Anxiety Programme
    This 4 week course consists of:
    - Understanding and Managing Anxiety and Stress
    - Managing Difficult Emotions
    - Improving Sleep
    - Be Happy Be Healthy Be you

    At the end of the 4 weeks, you will feel calmer, will sleep better and will have a range of tools and techniques to help you manage your anxiety and stress.
    If you would like to join this 4 week Managing Anxiety programme, please book your place at https://AmysimpsonBBA.as.me/BeyouAugust or email amy_simpson13@outlook.com for further details.

- EAC Website Wellbeing webpages for employees and communities
  EAC Wellbeing

- NHS Ayrshire and Arran Better Health Hub
  NHS-Better-Health-Hub

- NHS Scotland has recently partnered with Big Health to provide free access to Daylight. This is a smartphone-based app that provides help to anyone experiencing symptoms of worry and anxiety

- NHS Scotland has recently partnered with Big Health to provide free access to [Sleepio](#) to help improve your sleep patterns and your overall wellbeing.

- EAC Wellbeing Managers Guide, and Wellbeing Toolkit
[Healthy-Working-Lives Managers' Guide](#)

- Wider Support Directory
[Support Directory](#)

- [Organisational Development's Learning Academy](#) offers a wide variety of courses on managing stress and becoming more resilient.

Further resources for staff wellbeing and learning:

Summary below collated courtesy of South Ayrshire Psychological Services

- Hays Education offer a free **[Wellbeing First pack](#)** to help teachers and support staff through the difficult period of adapting to working with Covid-19 consideration. There are a range of new online courses around the best practice for remote working and wellbeing.

- The NES (2020) **Wellbeing Planning Tool** can also be used to support conversations and planning about staff wellbeing and supports.

- **[Looking After our Mental Wellbeing](#)** (NHS Ayrshire and Arran, 2020) document provides lots of information and tools to support our wellbeing.

- A series of **[virtual events](#)** known as Education Scotland Big Blethers will aim is to support education professionals to connect, share and collaborate.

- **[Scotland Learns](#)** provides a range of ideas and suggestions of activities to help parents, carers and practitioners support learning at home.

- The EIS has provided online advice, resources and support including a new [Working at Home](#) resource. It currently contains 4 main sections: Looking After Your Health and Wellbeing; Making Time for You: Daily Inspiration; Lockdown Learning Ideas; and Continuing Your Professional Learning.

- [Webinar sessions](#) on Glow Scotland to support and upskill practitioners in digital learning and teaching (live and on YouTube)

References

Barnardos (July 2019) *Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of education staff through professional supervision structures*.

Bruce Perry (2020) *Neurosequential Network – Covid 19 series. Retrieved on 29th June 2020 from https://www.neurosequential.com/covid-19-resources*

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