# Mental health - What does it look like Transcript

DARREN BRITTEN: Your mental wellbeing is the unique way that you handle emotions, respond to stress and manage your outlook on life. Having a healthy sense of mental wellbeing can support you through life’s challenges. In this ADCET Podcast, adapted from a webinar titled: ‘Mental Health, What Does it Look Like?’, presenter Brandon Taylor from TAFE Queensland looks at the six building blocks of mental wellbeing and how to strengthen them in your everyday life. Over to you, Brandon.

BRANDON TAYLOR: Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you for the acknowledgment, and let me just acknowledge the Indigenous peoples and communities where I am today, here in South Brisbane, and pay my respects to Elders, past, present and emerging.

Well, wow. October. It's arrived. It's been a bit of a blur this year. I really do encourage you just to sort of sit back and take a few moments out because as practitioners, our year seems to get quicker and quicker and the semester is flying by.

Isn't it interesting that Mental Health Week, Mental Health Month has a different theme, a slightly different flavour and a different aspect across all the different states and territories, and what I'm going to run through today applies wherever you are. What we've got there is some wonderful Indigenous artwork from a young guy called Jesse James from Cherbourg in Queensland. I notice when I see the other states and territories there's some wonderful artwork out there as well. So I'm going to run through what the Queensland mental health campaign will talk to in terms of the six building blocks of mental health and wellbeing. Other states and territories may have very slightly different terminology, they may say we've got five building blocks, but I can absolutely assure you that the underlying activities, the underlying principles, will be very much the same.

Let's start at the beginning and I'm sure that you know this, but it's important that we all start at the same point. When we talk about mental health and that language has evolved and it's changed over the years, and no doubt it will continue to do so in the future, we're talking about that state of wellbeing where we can realise our own abilities, we can cope with those normal stresses of day‑to‑day life and that we can be productive and fruitful and make a contribution into our immediate community.

So we understand then that our mental health is influencing not just how we think and how we feel, but actually how we behave and how we interact with other people, how we form relationships and how we maintain those relationships, which is incredibly important as we will cover.

So what's changed of course is that mental health terminology, because it's not that many years ago if we said ‘mental health’, it was really a reference to somebody experiencing mental health illness, but that's changed now, hasn't it. When we talk about mental health, we're talking about positive mental health, and we recognise that people who are generally mentally healthy, they have that sense of contentment and meaning and purpose, both in their activities and their personal relationships. They certainly seem to have that ability to deal with stressful times in their lives and to bounce back. They seem to be quite open to change and to learning and to new ideas. And as you would expect with all of that, they tend to be people who are a little more self‑confident and have a higher level of self‑esteem. They're just some of those characteristics, if you like.

Now I've got to say, I like to think I'm a very practical person, and wherever we suggest, you know, it's important to take time for mental health, I think it's just important to acknowledge that's a challenge. It's not always easy to do that because quite frankly, there are times when, you know what, I'm just too busy, and I can hear people say, you know what? I get it, it sounds nice, but I really don't have the time to take on something else. We'll know people who say, I get it, it's nice, I hear what you're saying, but you know what, I'm okay, I don't really need this. So I think it's just important, particularly in our education sector, whether we're talking about ourselves as practitioners or a lot of the educators and the managers and the faculties that we work with, sometimes people are just tired, myself included, and maybe we've got so many competing priorities that, frankly, we're just not in the right frame of mind at that moment to embrace something else.

That said, it's important to recognise that if you feel constantly stressed, or that you feel that you're always overwhelmed, or you actually cannot recall a time when things in your life felt manageable, that's actually a red flag. That's a warning sign and that's something to be very much aware of. They're the signs that you probably need to take stock and make some small changes, and it's very much about making choices, not just taking on more, and it's also not about just throwing everything out and saying, you know what, I'm going to now do everything differently, because complete overhaul doesn't work. Small changes, small steps, that's what happens to be sustainable and to make a genuine difference.

So we're going to, quite quickly, run through the six building blocks as they appear in this particular campaign, and as I say, you'll see it’s very similar because it all comes from the research, of course, about what underpins good mental health and wellbeing.

But before we do that, because we're not just going to look at six different areas and say, right, I'm going to take on six new activities, how do we know how we are travelling as individuals? I'm sure you've seen this before. This is the life wheel and I was at a workshop about a month ago and we all did this activity, and I must admit, it was a really good reminder, and it's such a simple activity and we'll happily share this template. So you've got your wheel and it's broken into eight segments and there are numbers from the middle of the wheel moving outwards from 1 to 10, and the idea is very simple. Looking back over your life over the last, let's say, 12 months, how satisfied are you with those different aspects? These categories can be changed, but they're very much about yourself and how you feel about your life, how satisfied you are, and you essentially put a little mark in each one of those segments and it will look something like this. This is just an example, of course. So if we look at family and relationships, this person's given themselves an 8 out of 10, they're quite satisfied with their family relationships or maybe their immediate partner in the last 12 months. But if we look maybe at the social side on the other side of the wheel, this person's only given themselves a 3 out of 10. So what they're saying is that they're actually quite unsatisfied or dissatisfied with their social connection, with their social life over that last 12 months, and of course, this is very personal. It's about you and it's not anything you need to share with anybody else. But by doing this simple activity and literally drawing a line to connect all of those scores or values of how satisfied you are, you get this very easy, simple shape, and you get this very easy visual. You can simply just look at that and get an idea of where the dissatisfaction might be. Now if you're completely satisfied in all those areas, good on you. Well done. Keep doing what you're doing. But as we can see in this example, this shape shows us that maybe we need to focus just a little bit, let's say, on the social side, or what's our personal growth? Maybe it's the health. And you pick one of those, because we're talking small steps. And you think about what that might be. Now I'm going to run you through the six building blocks we'll tie into all of these.

Let's get into what ‘get healthy’ might be for you. A lot of these immediate messages, I am sure you know. I will keep a little eye out on the chat as we go. A couple of different aspects to getting healthy. The first one is being active, of course, and we know that physical activity releases those feel good chemicals into the body, the endorphins and the serotonin. We also know that four out of five Australian adults don't do enough physical activity. So we're not suggesting that you run a marathon, but if you had a particularly low satisfaction score maybe in that healthy space, maybe one of these is for you. Getting healthy is as simple as: do you want to take the stairs occasionally, do you dust off the bikes that you might have in your garage and just go for a nice gentle cycle that you haven't done in a long time? Maybe just need to get out and go for a walk, and I'm a big advocate for Park Run. If you're not aware of that it's a free 5K run or walk in communities all over Australia every Saturday morning. It's healthy and it's also a nice social as well. So there's just some ideas of what being active actually looks like.

If we then think about, well, eat well, and you know this because we've seen this messaging for many, many years. Why we should eat well, of course, the fuel that we have, frankly, supports how we function and how we feel. So, very simple stuff. At the beginning of each week on a Monday, I'm fortunate that I can walk up to a fruit barn at the end of the road and on a Monday, I go and buy my bag of fruit. It's on my desk. That way, I know that I'm going to get enough fruit during the day for my Monday to Friday here at the campus that I'm located at. I'm not much of a cook. I can do a cheese sandwich. Anything else, I need directions so I actually get my tablet in the kitchen and I follow nice easy recipes, and we've been promoting these ones this week and there's lots of others, and it's about trying to get a bit more balance in our diet because, frankly, it supports how we function and that, of course, is incredibly important.

We talk then as part of getting healthy about rest, and particularly sleep and how important that down time is, and you know if you are one of those persons that goes to bed with your phone and you're still checking messages etc, etc, put it down, switch it off, actually put it in another room if that is what you need to do. And those simple things like having a note pad at the side of the bed to jot down those reminders to remove them from your racing brain, that still works, and if you are one of those people that enjoys a drink, maybe you need to just limit how much you are drinking during the week because we know, while it's good at the time, we don't get a proper night’s sleep or rest if we're drinking alcohol. You know all of this. This is really simple stuff.

The next building block is often called ‘keep learning’ and challenging our mind and seeking out new things. This is really good because it's about interest outside of our day‑to‑day activity. So, ‘keep learning’ doesn't mean enrolling in a formal accredited study program. You can, of course. It could be something else. For those of you who are old enough, maybe you remember Demi Moore and Patrick Swayze and you've got a pottery wheel in the shed that you want to get out. It's entirely up to you. I'm suggesting that you might just want to explore your local area. I'm suggesting that, you know what, keep learning. Did you start to learn guitar many years ago and put it down? Why not bring it back out. If you're one of those people that don't feel particularly creative, guess what, it's a wonderful thing to get the paints out now and again and just make something or create something. It could be as simple as listening to some podcasts that really capture your interest, going to that exhibition or that gallery display, making the effort to do so. And of course, there's 1001, if not more, free microcredentials if you'd like something more structured. So it's really simple stuff.

I know a few colleagues have talked to this over the last 12 months or so, so we move in to show kindness, and when I talk to teachers and industry trainers, this one is a little bit unusual in the sense that people say, what's showing kindness going to do for me? The research shows us, of course, that showing gratitude and doing something kind and bringing joy to someone else is actually good for us, and there's lots of different ways of doing that. I've often said that if you're in the coffee shop or you're in your local bakery or supermarket and you can really see a member of staff under the pump and they're racing around, just say to them, hey, I can see how busy you are. You're doing a great job. You will have made their day. It's a wonderful, wonderful acknowledgment, and you've got a position to do that, and you'll actually feel good about it.

I'm going to spruik Park Run again. Park Run always look for volunteers on a Saturday morning. So easy. You've just got to stand there and wave runners through and you know what, 100 people will thank you for volunteering. You might want to go down that more formal line of volunteering through a scheme to help young parents or maybe mentor a person or share some of your life skills. Or you might even, once in a blue moon, offer your skills in a local bushcare program. You don't have to overcommit. This isn't about saying I will now do this every week for several hours, because you don't want to make it a chore or a task. Make sure it works for you. A lot of these volunteer opportunities are just that. You can pick them up when it works for you.

Now this one, of course, you will know because you'll have talked to students and colleagues, no doubt, about this, the ‘connect more’ and the developing relationships. I've got to tell you, when I'm tired, when I've had a full day or I've had a really full‑on week, the last thing I want to do is have another conversation with someone. But it is really important that we manage our relationships and our social connections because loneliness is a massive problem. Loneliness affects our physical health, our mental health, and loneliness as we get older in life is described as a killer. If you would like to know the results from the longest survey into happiness and what makes a good life, it's been running for about 80 years, this research project. There's a link on that slide to a 10‑minute video where Robert Waldinger talks about a study in the United States of America that's still going today following people in their 80s that interviewed them every two years from when they were in their 20s, and some of the life learnings couldn't be any clearer.

So our social connections are really important. As someone who has delivered a lot of sessions, particularly to guys and to a lot of men of all ages, as men get older, they tend to lose contact with their friends, with their social connections, and I say, look, take the first step. Call that mate that you haven't spoken to, not just for weeks or months, it could be a couple of years, and say, "Mate, life's just been busy. How are you travelling?" Because they will instantly say, oh God, yeah, I'm so busy as well. Now, this applies to everyone, of course. But making the time to have those social connections is so important and this is not Facebook, so I'm not remotely interested in someone that says they've got 600 friends on Facebook, because there is no quality whatsoever in that. Your social connections are not about volume and how many. It is the quality of those relationships. And you know those people, those friends that you've spent time with and maybe you've come away and thought, what a great catch‑up that was, we need to do that more often, or didn't we have a great afternoon or a great night. They're the kind of relationships you do need to nurture and manage and make sure that you put time in your calendar and theirs to catch up again.

That then takes us into ‘take notice’, and sometimes this is called awareness and you'll know that sometimes it's called mindfulness. I'm still a little cautious when I talk to teachers across TAFE about mindfulness because, you know, for a lot of people it’s, okay, are we all going outside to do yoga? And I know a lot of people enjoy their yoga, but it's not for everyone and I am making a generalisation, I know, but it's very much about being aware, and we talk about of the moment, and how we are actually experiencing life as it happens.

You can't do that with continuous alerts and notifications, so you have to turn your devices off from time to time. I always find it quite amusing if I'm — it's been a while, but if I'm at a concert or a performance or even at a sports event and somebody holds up their phone and they're taking numerous pictures and I think, you're not actually here, you're not having the experience, and aside from that, you've got a lot of blurry images that no‑one can see what it is anyway. So sometimes you've got to put the device down and just experience the situation and enjoy it.

Simple breathing exercises. Very useful. I'm actually not a brilliant gardener, but I like spending time in my garden and pottering around, and it's great sometimes if you get an opportunity just to sit down and breathe. And we often do that when we're at the beach or the coast and we just sit down and we listen to the waves. Well, we're not always in that position so you've got to fit that in where you can. Find what works for you so you can just slow down a little bit. It's not easy and sometimes when we try and do that, our brain is racing. It takes time and it takes a little bit of practice.

Then we move into about embracing nature. I put this picture in because I thought it was quite amusing. I'm not suggesting you all strip off and ride naked through your local town. I think this was a nude cycle ride in London. Of course, what we're actually saying is the outdoors is good for us. It's good for our physical health, it's good for our mental health, and I'm not talking about going on a hike for 10 hours, unless that's your thing. We're quite simply saying spend some time outdoors. We are blessed in Australia that even in our most urban areas, we are very close to greenery, green spaces, reservations, national parks, the coastline, the hinterland. Just go and sit in it and soak it up. Go for a little stroll. Go and spend some time just outdoors and appreciate and enjoy and turn those devices off.

So I've raced through that, but when we say mental health and wellbeing, and with so much information out there coming at us from all different sides, and many of us being practitioners ourselves, strip it right down and we need to show people how simple these activities are. We are not trying to do them all at once, and I really like that little life wheel activity, because it's a nice easy visual. I encourage you to do that when you have a moment.

If there are some areas there when you look back over the last 12 months and you really don't feel that you've got much satisfaction, just have a think about, well, what is it that you would like to change? What would give you some satisfaction in that social space or in that recreation space? And one small change at a time, so that in the next six months, in the next three months, you might revisit that life wheel and you might have a very different looking picture that's actually better than it is now. If it's fine at the moment, as I say, that's great, but it's just a simple little visual that helps.

So I'm actually not going to take too much more because we're almost out of time. This was the Queensland Government campaign. Each state and territory has got it's own campaign, but the messaging for these tasks, these activities, these interests that support our mental health and wellbeing are very much the same and I would encourage you as practitioners for your own health and wellbeing in your own organisations, please take a little bit of time to look after yourselves.

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