

When times are tough – it is time to reconnect

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This article reflects on four areas to consider in rediscovering joy in the work we do and promoting wellbeing of our workforce – the critical factor in the quality and safe services we provide.

Introduction

Quality and safety systems are important, but they cannot operate without people. During times of sustained pressure and stress we can forget to look after ourselves and each other. This impacts our health, our personal and professional relationships and the care and services we provide to others.

The thing about this pandemic is that it is impacting workplaces and personal lives across industries and nations at all levels.

Meanwhile, the ‘normal’ work continues, but we know our teams are weary, some have left, and it is hard to gain momentum for keeping the day-to-day basics going, let alone improvement initiatives.

What can we do? We need to start with human connection and reflect on what actions we can take to help people feel safe, connected, and happy at work. We want to rediscover the joy in what we do.

Rediscovering the joy in work

In 2020, The Institute for Healthcare Improvement developed a guide to support staff wellbeing and joy in in work, with actionable strategies to specific areas of uncertainty that existed at the time.

These actions intended to help to build and sustain the healthcare workforce during and after the pandemic. I think the ideas behind these strategies have a much broader appeal in 2022 and I have used the concepts from this article to provide four points of reflection.

1. Promoting Physical and Psychological safety - focus and fact

During times of uncertainty, sticking with facts are important, as is the way we deal with rumours, speculation, and presentation of stories on social media and the media in general. To ensure physical and psychological safety, we want to focus on what we can control and avoid generalisations that assume the worst. Questions we may consider:

- What do we know as fact?
- What have we learned about what works (and what doesn't) so far?
- What facts can we provide to reassure and/or provide realistic hope?
- What innovative ideas or methods could we test?
- What quality improvement methods could we use to test these ideas?
- What processes and systems do we have to support us to stay safe?
- How are we engaging with staff as well as residents, clients, and their families on re-designing what we need to do to ensure safe and quality care?

You will notice that there is a sneaky reference or two to quality improvement. Use continuous improvement and quality improvement methods to solve a problem or test an idea to improve quality and/or safety or ease the staff burden of a clunky system.

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2. Offer the life jacket – and keep offering it

By now we should have an idea of what support looks like for staff and their families. All of us have been living under conditions of considerable stress and for aged care organisations, the Department of Health and Ageing has provided information on [grief, trauma and/or mental health supports](#) that you can use yourself, and also promote to your workforce. Questions to consider:

- How do we know what support staff need?
- Have we communicated the support available to staff?
- Have we normalised our workforce asking for support?

And remember – the first rule is to put your own lifejacket on first.

3. Support autonomy and control

Inherent, unresolved workforce supply issues existed going into the pandemic. This issue along with ongoing attrition, staff illness from COVID or Influenza and/ or caring for family who are ill means staff may be performing different roles than pre-pandemic.

Throwing people in at the deep end is not a sustainable or safe tactic in these times (it never was a good strategy anyway). The way that we train and support people to learn new roles and skills is changing. Emerging thinking from places such as the [NeuroLeadership Institute](#) finds that the attention span and capacity to learn over sustained periods of time has reduced . A recent [HBR](#) article support this thinking and states that we need to think about building learning into workflows, with what is termed “micro-learning experiences”. This lends itself well to skilling up staff for new roles or new ways of doing things.

Questions to consider:

- How have training plans been adapted to capture lessons learned and integrated into on-the-job learning?
- How do we use real-time methods (such as huddles, instant messaging, or video conferencing) to enable easy communication between the workforce and its leaders to impart information and encourage staff to ask questions?
- How do we ensure training provided focuses on the essential information to know and use?
- How do we acknowledge and support staff that they may be fearful of new roles or duties?
- How do we provide a “safety net” of support for staff who are learning new roles such as a coach or mentor?

4. Provide Meaning and Purpose

Transparency and empathy are never more important than now. As well as checking in and asking how staff are going, we can also think about asking what a source of joy or happiness for that person is.

Consistency in communication about how the organisation is dealing with challenging situations is critical and needs to connect back to our organisation’s purpose in an authentic way to provide assurance that we are truly ‘all in this together’.

At this point in the pandemic people who would usually problem-solve effectively (including you) will be experiencing fatigue, so it is worthwhile reflecting on what support systems you have in place to reduce stress or anxiety.

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Questions to consider:

- How do we communicate and connect our purpose with our approach to dealing with ongoing challenges?
- How is self-care promoted and role modelled in our organisation?
- How easy is it to navigate our critical processes and systems? How do we know?
- How often do we ask our staff (and each other) what brings us joy at work?
- How well do we promote and praise testing, learning, failing and teamwork at every opportunity?

I trust that your organisation is well on its way to harnessing this unavoidable experience to build better foundations. I also hope you and your teams can rediscover joy in what you do every day in providing safe and quality care for older Australians.

References

Balik, B et al (2020) [Conversation and Action Guide to Support Staff Well-Being and Joy in Work During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic. Institute of HealthCare Improvement](#)

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