



– Dr –

Elizabeth King

Leadership in Uncertainty

ACT NOW:

Prioritising Mental Health at Work

How to foster resilience and productivity

Written by Dr Elizabeth King

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Acknowledgements

This white paper is the result of collective wisdom. Although written by Metta Coaching, PTY LTD, it is enriched by our clients', coaches', and professionals' experiences, challenges, skills, and passions. Together, we create a more robust, wiser community.

Thank you for being a part of our mission to promote mental well-being in the workplace.

OVERVIEW



Global trends and recent events underscore the critical need for effective workplace mental health strategies. Drawing on international data and an Australian case study, this paper advocates for a strategic, evidence-based approach to address this issue.

The rise in Australian workplace mental health issues, demonstrated by the doubling of compensation claims from 2012 to 2021, highlights the severity of the problem. These mental health injuries (MHIs) result in longer absenteeism compared to physical injuries, with fewer than half of those who were affected returning to work.

Worldwide, mental health issues in the workplace result in significant economic losses, with an estimated annual impact of US\$1 trillion due to depression and anxiety. This data underscores the urgent need for systemic and cultural changes to create supportive work environments that mitigate the harmful effects of discrimination, high workloads, and insufficient support.

Positive, inclusive workplace cultures, such as those at B Corporations like Sounds True, Danone, Unilever ANZ, and Australian company Bellroy highlight the benefits of prioritising mental well-being. These companies foster supportive environments that enhance employee productivity and morale.

UNSETTLED MINDS

Leadership's Role in Supporting Mental Health

The Sobering Reality of Mental Health

Poor mental health destroys lives. Statistics show that much of the modern world is experiencing a mental health crisis, manifesting as anxiety, depression, loneliness, and increased suicide rates. At a personal level, this crisis presents health symptoms, relationship tension, and poor performance at work. **Supporting mental well-being is a low-cost, high-impact leadership intervention.**

Benefits Vs Costs

Benefits of Mental Wellbeing	Costs of Mental Languishing
Better Health	Depression
Longer & Happier Life	Earlier death
Less stress & anxiety	Inertia in the face of adversity
Successful career	Poor work performance
Better relationships	Poor relationships
More resilient	Lower immunity
Cope better with failure	Increased vulnerability



MENTAL ILL-HEALTH

Mental Well-Being in the Workplace - The Problem

The psychological landscape of the workplace is a battleground for many people, where mental well-being can often be compromised. Globally, mental health challenges in the workplace are a multifaceted problem with significant economic implications.

The direct correlation between workplace mental health and economic productivity highlights significant, yet avoidable, costs associated with inadequate mental health support systems. As nations and industries grapple with these realities, there is a compelling case for the leaders of organisations to champion mental health initiatives. In doing so, businesses contribute to the well-being of their employees and position themselves at the forefront of a global movement, ultimately enhancing the health and productivity of societies worldwide.

A global perspective

The global impact of workplace mental health issues is stark, with 15% of working-age adults affected by mental health conditions in 2019. This led to an estimated annual loss of 12 billion workdays, further highlighting the economic and societal implications of neglected mental health issues in the workforce. Mental well-being at work significantly influences both productivity and societal health. A nurturing work environment is essential for fostering mental well-being, as adverse conditions can amplify stress and precipitate mental health disorders.

Contemporary research confirms that mental health conditions severely impact professional performance and productivity. Thus, there is substantial justification for integrating mental health interventions in the workplace. Supportive management practices can mitigate these negative impacts, yielding mutual benefits for both employees and businesses.



MENTAL ILL-HEALTH

An Australian perspective

In Australia, data demonstrates a worrying trajectory of workplace misery and costs. Australia's recent history reveals a doubling of workplace mental health-related injury claims between 2012 and 2021.

In 2012, 6% of Australia's severe workplace claims were mental health injuries (MHIs), totaling 7,820 cases and costing around A\$480 million. Bullying accounted for 39% of these incidents, with other workplace stressors making up the remainder (Safe Work Australia, 2013). By 2021, the rate of serious claims for MHIs had doubled to 12%, representing 15,078 claims which were primarily due to occupational trauma, overwork, and stress. Recovery time remained steady at 14.9 weeks, significantly longer than the return for physical injuries. Unfortunately, only about half of the workers affected by MHIs reported a successful return to work (State Insurance Regulatory Authority, 2019).

With post-mental health injury, return-to-work periods outstripping those of physical injuries, and less than half of those affected re-entering the workforce, the Australian scenario underscores the urgency for sophisticated and sensitive handling of workplace mental health injuries. It also highlights the inadvertent risk of re-traumatisation through certain systemic interventions.

In Australia, the notable increase in mental health-related claims, particularly from bullying and job stress, indicates systemic failings. The extended duration for return to work, post-MHI, and the prevalent under-reporting of successful reintegration into the workforce indicate deep-seated issues in organisational and systemic responses to mental health.

EXPOSED MINDS

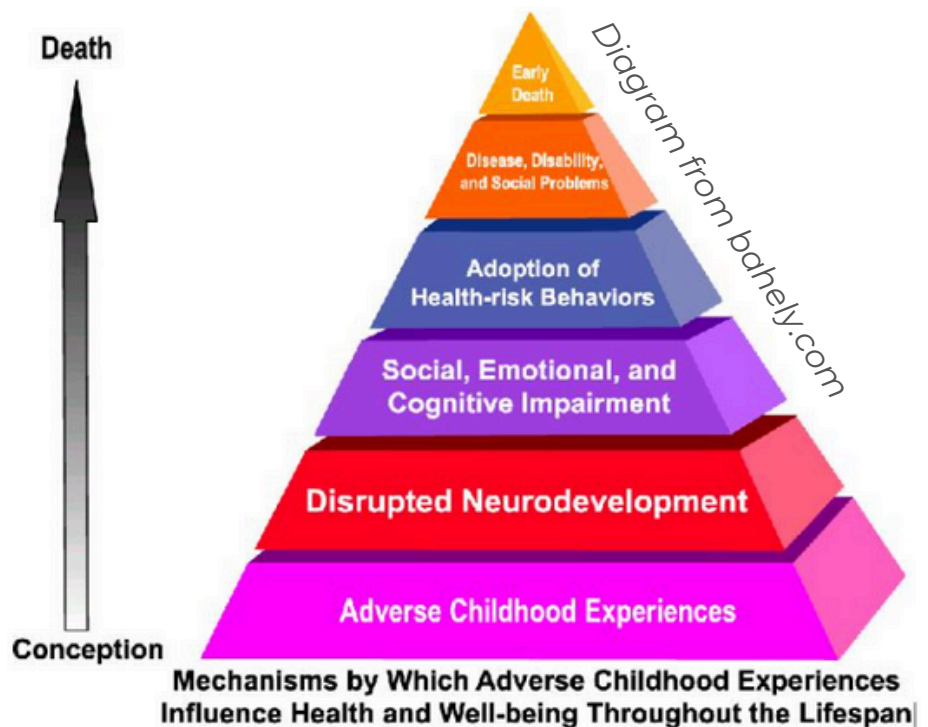
The Predictable Patterns of Mental Health

Major mental health conditions do not strike randomly; they often result from a combination of high vulnerability and stressful events. For instance, individuals in regional Australia face extreme stress from climate change, while rising living costs impact the mental health of Australians nationwide. This underscores the role of leadership in creating workplaces that do not exacerbate stress but buffer against it, reducing vulnerability.

$$\text{High Vulnerability} + \text{Stressful Events} = \text{Mental Ill Health}$$

Leadership and the Legacy of Childhood Trauma

Vulnerability can occur at any life stage, but childhood trauma leaves individuals particularly susceptible. Leaders need to understand the link between childhood trauma, mental health, and leadership effectiveness. Dr. Nadine Burke Harris' research, involving a survey of over 17,000 adults, revealed a direct correlation between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and later health problems, ranging from mental health struggles to chronic diseases.



EXPOSED MINDS

Watch the **TED** talk



Resilience in the Face of Adversity

Biographies of survivors provide valuable insights into overcoming trauma. Maya Angelou, a survivor of childhood trauma, exemplifies resilience. Her poem "Still I Rise" poignantly illustrates the human spirit's ability to overcome adversity.

The Spoken Poem is compelling – you can listen to her recite it

[here.](#) 

Still I Rise - By Maya Angelou

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?
Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise

Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise

Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise.

TOXIC WORK

Understanding and responding to toxic workplaces

The correlation between workplace culture and employee mental health is irrefutable, with toxic workplaces acting as catalysts for mental health decline. These environments, plagued by poor communication, lack of support, and inadequate recognition, lead to a culture of stress, anxiety, and diminished employee morale.



The link to detrimental environments: Toxicity in

workplaces often manifests in excessive work demands, bullying, discrimination, and insufficient work-life balance, culminating in heightened stress and psychological distress. The American Psychological Association's 'Work in America' survey, (2023), illuminated this issue. It revealed that one in five U.S. employees operate within such detrimental environments, and that this more than doubles the likelihood of reporting poor mental health outcomes.

Changing the corporate culture for individual well-being: Organisations must extend mental health support beyond the context of direct employee benefits. Real change requires a foundational shift in corporate culture to address and remediate the sources of workplace toxicity. This commitment must be reflected in comprehensive policy changes and the active promotion of mental health awareness within the workplace.

UNSHACKLING MINDS

Understanding and Reducing Stigma

Leadership effectiveness requires understanding the past to empower the future, unshackling minds from mental health stigma. Stigma remains a significant challenge for individuals with mental illness. Strategies to reduce stigma include:

- Willingness to discuss mental illness
- Willingness to seek help
- Belief that normal lives are possible
- Getting to know someone who lives with mental illness
- Rejecting inaccurate portrayals.

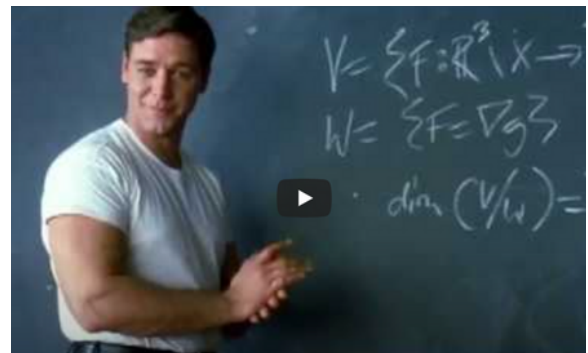
The song "1-800-273-8255" by Logic, featuring Alessia Cara and Khalid, addresses mental health struggles and encourages seeking help, contributing to breaking down stigma.



[Listen Here](#) 

Learning from Biographies

Seeking to understand mental illness through biographies can enhance empathy and knowledge. The film "A Beautiful Mind," based on the life of John Nash, portrays his struggle with schizophrenia and highlights factors like genetic predisposition and stress.



[Watch the Trailer](#)

UNSHACKLING MINDS

Ethics and Leadership in Mental Health

The challenges of mental health in the workplace highlight the crucial role of a moral compass in leadership. Ethical principles guide mental health professionals and leaders in making sound decisions. Developing a personal moral compass helps balance ethics and ensures trust, well-being, and healing in mental health care.



Guiding Principles

By adopting whole-person approaches and learning from the past, leaders can foster a healthier, more resilient workforce.

TOWARDS SOLUTIONS

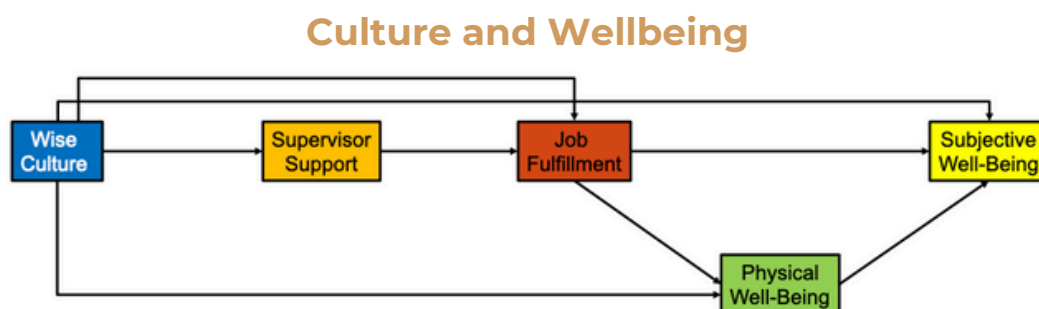
Scholarship clearly shows that the first step is to recognize the depth and severity of the mental health crisis catalyzed by toxic workplaces. The subsequent, more significant challenge lies in implementing systemic and cultural reforms that foster supportive work environments, thereby safeguarding the mental well-being of the workforce and, by extension, the global economy.

A study by Ardel and Sharma highlights the robust connections between workplace culture and employee well-being. Their research shows that wise organizations, characterized by supportive leadership, meaningful work, and comprehensive policies, significantly boost employee job satisfaction and well-being.

These organizations implement policies that promote transparency, ethical behavior, and continuous learning, which collectively foster a supportive and growth-oriented work environment.

Wise leadership was found to mediate the positive effects of a supportive workplace on job satisfaction, leading to improvements in both physical and subjective well-being. These findings underscore the importance of cultivating corporate cultures that foster well-being, wise leadership, and supportive work environments to enhance mental health and productivity in the workplace.

Read the full article [here](#).



Ardelt, M., & Sharma, B. (2021). Linking Wise Organizations to Wise Leadership, Job Satisfaction, and Well-Being. *Frontiers in Communication*, 6, 685850.

MENTAL WELL-BEING

Mental Well-Being in the Workplace - Towards Some Solutions

Embedding the role of a positive workplace to promote mental well-being across an organisation

There are three direct strategies that a workplace can implement to promote mental well-being.

1. Embracing a Positive Work Environment:

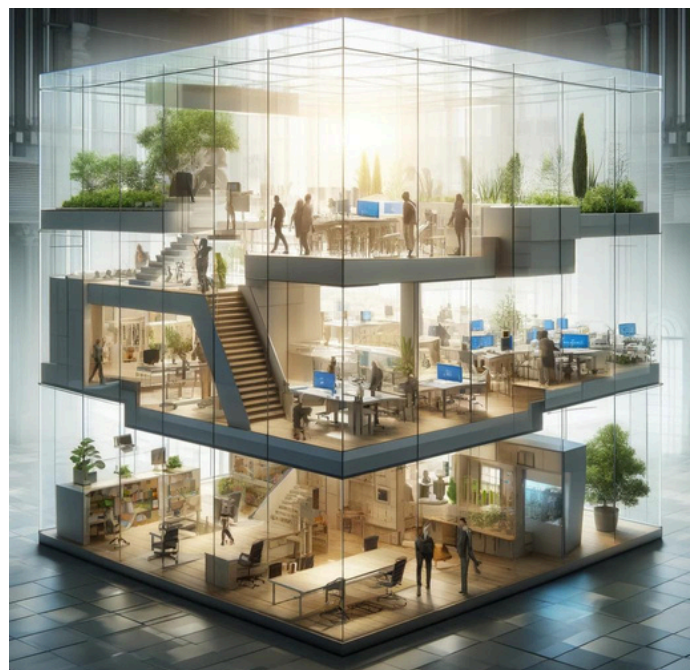
- Introduce regular mental health workshops:
- Establish a comprehensive support program
- Implement proactive leadership training - including wisdom

2. Cultivating an Inclusive Culture:

- Develop and enforce inclusive policies
- Facilitate open communication channels
- Celebrate diversity through events

3. Establishing the Impact on Employee Health and Productivity:

- Measure and report on mental health initiatives
- Present case studies of successful implementations
- Integrate mental health metrics into performance reviews



MENTAL WELL-BEING

The solution to the mental health crisis in the workplace lies in cultivating wise organisational cultures that actively create a BLOOM™ environment.

Wise leadership is key to fostering such cultures, and its power is amplified when leaders address the **basic psychological needs** outlined in **Self-Determination Theory**—**autonomy, competence, and relatedness** (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These needs directly align with the elements of wisdom in **Ardelt's 3D Wisdom Model**:

- **Cognitive Wisdom** nurtures competence by promoting professional development, critical thinking, and a long-term focus on collective well-being.
- **Reflective Wisdom** supports autonomy by fostering an environment where leaders and employees engage in self-awareness and thoughtful decision-making, free from immediate external pressures.
- **Compassionate Wisdom** enhances relatedness by building a supportive, inclusive culture where empathy and ethical concern guide organisational behaviour.



Based on Clayton & Birren, 1980

MENTAL WELL-BEING

The **BLOOM™ Framework** (Grenville-Cleave et al., 2021) draws from these same principles, advocating for leadership that cultivates **belonging, learning, opportunity, orientation, and meaning**. When leaders embody wisdom, they create environments that deliver on these elements, ensuring individuals and organisations flourish.



By aligning the **BLOOM™ environment** with the psychological foundations of **SDT** and the multi-dimensional nature of wisdom, organisations can create workplaces that address mental health challenges and foster resilience, engagement, and sustainable success.

MENTAL WELL-BEING

Summary

Addressing mental health in the workplace is an organisational necessity and a global imperative. As we deepen our understanding of mental well-being's pervasive impact on overall productivity and societal health, it becomes clear that this issue warrants a place at the forefront of organisational initiatives. By championing the development of workplace environments that prioritise mental health, we contribute to the broader mission of enhancing global mental health.

The expected outcomes extend beyond individual organisations, potentially influencing industry-wide practices and contributing to a societal shift in how mental health is perceived and managed in professional settings.

For practical support, please reach out for a conversation.



[Learn More](#) 

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MENTAL WELL-BEING



About Dr Liz King

Dr. Elizabeth King is a globally recognised authority on mental health and performance optimisation, currently serving as a director on the Board of the World Federation of Mental Health (WFMH) and chairing its Workplace Mental Health sector. With over thirty years of experience, Dr. King has developed a unique and holistic approach to enhancing mental well-being and performance by blending evidence-based coaching practices with positive psychology and advanced mind skills.

Dr. King holds a PhD in Performance, a Master's in Coaching Psychology, an MBA, and a Bachelor of Science in Biology. Her career is marked by a commitment to transparency, accountability, and social responsibility. Dr. King's work empowers leaders to excel in uncertainty, fostering resilient leadership through coaching, leadership, and wisdom.

Her contributions to the field extend beyond individual coaching and team development to influence global mental health policies, making her a leading voice in promoting mental health in the workplace. Dr. King's innovative methods and profound insights continue to shape the future of mental health and performance optimisation worldwide.

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