

This is how I am feeling – Emotional Wellbeing in the Workplace Research

Phil Willcox: Hello, and welcome to the Emotion at Work podcast where we take a deep dive into the human condition and welcome to episode 56. And this episode is a special one both for me personally and for Emotion at Work as an organisation because it is where we are publishing our first of three research papers around the theme of emotional wellbeing in the workplace. And this first one is titled, This is how I'm feeling - The Levers for Emotional Wellbeing at Work. Now, I need to begin by expressing my gratitude and thanks to Ashley Hilton, our Insight and Community Manager here at Emotion at Work for the work and effort she's put into pulling this piece of research together both in terms of running the actual research project and in terms of the analysis and the write up as well. So this research wouldn't be where it is if Ashley hadn't had her hands in it, so thank you very much Ashley and this research matters because emotions and how we feel at work have a huge impact on wellbeing outcomes. Now the three wellbeing outcomes that we looked at, in particular for this research were the extent to which people reported being stressed by work in the last four weeks, the extent to which people reported work keeping them awake in the last four weeks and the extent to which people find pleasure in their work. And I'm saying it matters because how we regulate, express and work with our emotions on a day-to-day basis have a link with our overall physical, mental wellbeing? And often, I think anyway, a lot of the focus is on how to support people when they might be struggling, whether that be struggling from a mental health perspective, struggling from a burnout perspective, struggling from a chronic stress perspective and what we wanted to establish in this research is, how can we get in early? What is it about how people feel on a day-to-day basis and the extent to which they can work with their emotions on a day-to-day basis? And how does that then impact these wellbeing outcomes. So we put a four week window around the stress and the sleep side of things, for that reason, because emotions are transitory, emotions last for seconds and minutes, whereas mental health conditions are much more enduring. So when we're looking to establish the extent to which emotions are impacting these wellbeing outcomes, that's why we put that four week window around it. And what I and Emotion at Work want to do and what Emotion at Work does is commit to enrich the lives of everybody by placing emotion where it belongs, at the heart of work. And one of the key ways that we can provide that enrichment is by equipping individuals, teams and organisations to constructively work with emotions on a day-to-day basis. And what we've got here in these findings that I'm going to share with you shortly, is some really interesting correlations between emotions and the extent to which people feel they have purpose and meaning in their work. And the extent to which people feel they have freedom to do their best work, and the extent to which stuff gets in the way of people performing their best work and how those four things link to these wellbeing outcomes around being stressed in the last four weeks. Work impacting sleep in the last four weeks and finding pleasure in your work. So what I think has happened in the workplace over the last probably 10 years, maybe 15 is a greater focus on things like purpose and meaning and greater focus on things like freedom and autonomy and removing barriers to people being able to do their best work. So the classic leadership idiom of find out what people are good at, and then get out of their way, as an example.

So what we wanted to establish was for you as an individual what can you do that is going to help you be less stressed, sleep better and find pleasure in your work? We also wanted to establish, if you're a leader or a manager in an organisation, what can you do with your teams that can help them be less stressed about work, have work interrupts their sleep less and find more pleasure in

their work? We also wanted to help senior leaders or people, professionals within organisations in terms of thinking, well what levers can we pull? What can we do systemically within the organisation that can help reduce people's stress about work, help them sleep better, so work isn't interrupting their sleep, and to find more pleasure in their work. And that's what this research is trying to do, is to establish how do these things, these four variables linked to those three wellbeing outcomes. So our survey was done between the 26th of July and the 3rd of August, it was completed by 327 respondents that we asked. We asked a mixture of demographic questions, some questions about people's roles within organisations and we asked then some scaling questions in terms of the extent to which people agreed with different statements or questions. And then we correlated those things together, all with a view of how can that help me as an individual, teams and organisations as a whole? So what were some of our headlines then? Well, of our respondents 66% of those, so two thirds reported being stressed by work in the last four weeks. So I've deliberately let that sit for a moment, so to two thirds of our respondents, so 209 people, no 218 people sorry, said that they had been stressed by work in the last four weeks and that's massive. And that, in its own is enough of a reason for me to go, this research really matters. So what I then look at, what links into that then, what correlates with stress. So purpose and meaning, has an interesting relationship with stress, as does having enough freedom to do my best work. So of those that said, we have purpose and meaning in our work 68% of those also said I felt stressed in the last four weeks. So whilst having purpose and meaning is something that can add value to an organisation, there's some research that suggests that it supports motivation, that it can support that nebulous term of employee engagement, but what our data suggests is having purpose and meaning does not equal having less stress. Now, the hypothesis would be then that having that sense of purpose and meaning, where your work means something beyond the transaction of the work itself, may contribute to stress because we care about what we do. And we know that the work that we do has an impact beyond, on others beyond the work that we do ourselves. And similarly, when people were asked about do you have enough freedom to do your best work, of those that said, yes, so those that agree they have enough freedom to do their best work 66% of those, so again, two thirds of those still said they'd felt stressed in the last four weeks. So even though as an organisation you might be going right, we need to find purpose and meaning, or as a leader, you're saying we need to find purpose and meaning, or as an individual, you can find that in your work that on its own, won't stop you feeling stressed, in a way might contribute to it because of that sense of greater good that may come as a result. Similarly, if you go with that classic leadership idiom that I shared earlier on of, find out what people are good at and then get out of their way, getting out of their way doesn't seem to equate to less stress either because of those that said, we have enough freedom to do our best work, two thirds of those still felt stressed in the last four weeks. So what might help more then. So, of those that said they hadn't felt stressed in the last four weeks, so if those that disagreed with feeling stress in the last four weeks, they also reported in higher percentages that it was okay to express how they felt across a range of emotions. So 96% of those said it was okay to share when they're happy, 72% Of those that said they hadn't been stressed in the last four weeks said it was okay to share when they were frustrated. And 69% said it was okay to share when they were overwhelmed.

So the expression of emotion across a range of emotions, so happiness, anger or frustration, sadness and overwhelm, the ability to express those things correlate with feeling less stressed. Now, it doesn't surprise me that 96% of people said it was okay to share happiness because happiness is one

of those emotions that it's okay to share in the workplace I would argue. What I found interesting was the 72% saying that it was okay to share when they were frustrated and 69% sharing when they were overwhelmed. And if we compare that then, so those that reported they had been stressed in the last four weeks, when we look at the extent to which they agree that they could express how they felt across a range of emotions, so happiness was 88% compared to the 96 for those that reported they hadn't felt stressed, anger was 47%, in comparison with the 72. And then feeling upset or overwhelmed was 37, in response to the 60, or in comparison sorry, are in a response in comparison to the 69. So we've got demonstrable differences then, in the extent to which people can share how they feel across a range of emotions and the extent to which then they report being stressed in the last four weeks. So for me, that is really important. If as a way of reducing the extent to which people feel stressed, what I need to make in place is an opportunity for people to talk about when they feel anger or frustration or where they feel upset or overwhelm, then that's a really important lever to pull. And I, that's a lever that I don't think is pulled enough in organisations at the moment, especially when you think about the other levers that we looked at. So purpose and meaning isn't a lever you can pull, freedom doesn't appear to be a lever you can pull, expression of emotion appears to be a lever that you can pull that is correlated with feeling less stressed about work within a four week period.

So let's look at another wellbeing outcome then. So let's look at sleep. So of our respondents, 34% of those reported that work has kept them awake in the last four weeks. So one in three people of our respondents said that work had kept them awake in the last four weeks. Now, sleep and emotions have a very, what's the world I'm looking for, almost symbiotic relationship, in that poor sleep severely impacts an individual's ability to regulate their emotions. So if people are struggling to sleep, that's going to make it harder for them to regulate their emotions, which may in turn cause them to be more stressed. Which and that stress then has a potential impact of keeping that keeping them awake at night, or they have to regulate that stress. So that stressor they experience is an emotion based response, so they have to regulate that and it's harder to do when you're tired. So almost then you risk getting into this cyclical problem of, or challenge of sleeping poorly, how to regulate emotion, how to regulate emotion feel stressed, stress stops me sleeping and around we go again. So when we look at those that disagreed that work kept them awake, so the 66% of people that said work wasn't keeping them awake or hadn't kept them awake over the last four weeks, of those 91% said it was okay to share when they were happy, 61% said it was okay to share when they were frustrated and 64% said it was okay to share when they were upset or overwhelmed. So not quite the same figures as we had for stress, but again, we've got a strong correlation between expressing how you feel across a range of emotions, and then work not interfering or keeping people awake at night. So let's do that comparison, again, like we did with stress. So that comparison, then those that agreed that work keeps them awake at night, 82% of those said it was okay to share when they were happy. So again, fairly high, not as high as the the 91 for those that disagreed. So those that agree that work keeps them awake at night 40% of them said it was okay to share when they were frustrated. And 28% said it was okay to express when they felt upset or overwhelmed. And again, you're looking at huge swings here. So anger, there's a 21% swing from 61% of those that said work doesn't keep me awake at night, 61% said that they can express when they're angry or frustrated. But those that said work does keep them awake at night, only 40% can do that. And then the swing in overwhelm or upset is even bigger. So those that said work doesn't keep them awake at night, 64% of those who said it was okay to share when they were

overwhelmed. But for those that said work does keep them awake at night only 28% said they could talk about when they feel overwhelmed, or they can share when they feel overwhelmed or upset at work. So there, we're looking at a 36% variation. So again, there seems to be a theme coming out that if I can't talk about how I feel across a range of emotions, then I am more likely to be kept awake by work at night. So earlier on, I talked about the links between tiredness and emotion regulation. But we could also look at the links between tiredness and concentration. We can look at the links between, for example, tiredness and productivity and being tired is a poor thing for any of those outcomes. Now, granted, I'm just talking about the workplace, you've also got tiredness and home as well. So even though I'm talking about emotional wellbeing in the workplace, if I'm not sleeping well that's not just going to affect me at work, that's going to affect me at home too.

So I guess why this research matters so much is because this ability to express how we feel across a range of emotions is so important for the workplace. Now, I haven't talked about one of the levers yet so I'll introduce that now for the first time. So our four levers to do a quick recap, so one was purpose and meaning in the workplace. Another one was freedom to do your best work. Another one was the expression of emotion across a range of emotions and then the fourth one is stuff getting in the way. So of those that agreed that stuff gets in the way 65% of those, so again two thirds of those said that stuff getting in the way, they also said that work keeps them awake at night. So does that mean that stuff getting in the way equals keeping people awake at night? Not necessarily, at the same time for those that said stuff does get in the way of them doing their best work, they are also saying two thirds of them anyway, are saying that work has kept them awake in the last four weeks.

So you might challenge me and go well Phil, why have you just had stuff gets in the way, that's a massive kind of catch all term and absolutely right it is because I thought about doing something more specific but then I would need to list every variable of a thing that could possibly get in the way and I thought that would just be unrealistic. We can't account for every single variable so let's keep it big and broad and so my recommendation off the back of that then is to say, ask yourself if you're an individual, what is it that gets in my way? And then what can I do to remove or overcome it? If you're a manager or a leader within an organisation, or you lead a project team, or you work with others on a task or an initiative, ask what's getting in the way and think about what we can do to take those things out of the way. Some of them we might not be able to, but some of them we might and if we can get those things out of the way, then that's likely, in this example, to lead to someone's sleep being less interrupted by work. Or if you're working across an organisation, so you're a senior leader in a business or a people professional. And you're thinking, well what can we do ask, ask your colleagues, ask your teams, ask your peers, what is getting in the way and then what can you do to remove it? And at the risk of stealing one of my summary recommendations for later, for me there's like an implicit message here around listening to others. So either listening to how they feel, or giving people the chance to express how they feel, and or listening to what's getting in the way. And the more we can do that, it looks as though from this research anyway, that that's more likely to lead to those wellbeing outcomes of less stressed work, not keeping people awake, and finding pleasure in work as well. So earlier on, I talked about the duality of the relationship between purpose and meaning and stress and freedom and stress. When I think about those two levers with our other wellbeing outcomes then around sleep and finding pleasure in work, then there's more of a consistent set of findings. So for example, of those that agreed that they have the

freedom to perform their best work 80% of those disagreed that work kept them awake in the last four weeks. So of those that said they have freedom to perform their best work, 80% of those also said that work has not kept them awake in the last four weeks. Similarly, those that agreed that they found purpose in their meaning in their work also, 80% of those said that work doesn't keep them awake at night. So having freedom and having the freedom to do your best work and finding purpose and meaning in your work can certainly seem to, according to this data anyway, correlate with the work not keeping people awake at night. So if we look at the final wellbeing outcome then which is the extent to which people say they find pleasure in their work, 74% of our respondents said that they find pleasure in their work. So 26% were either neutral in response to that question, or they disagreed that they found pleasure in their work. So what we're interested in then is, what is it about those that disagree? What correlates with that? And what we found was an interesting one, particularly around overwhelm, so I'm picking up overwhelmed because sharing when you're overwhelmed or upset at work, the swing for the extent to which work keeps people awake and the extent to which people reported being stressed in the last four weeks, the variation of expressing overwhelm was the greatest in those two areas. So if I think about pleasure and then overwhelm in particular, so for those that disagreed that it was okay to share where they were overwhelmed, 84% of those also disagreed that they find pleasure in their work. So those that say, I can't talk about feeling upset or overwhelmed at work, 84% of those people also said they don't find pleasure in their work and that correlation is massive. So if I can't talk about feeling upset or overwhelmed at work and then 84% of them, so four out of five people also say they don't find pleasure in their work and that huge. So what else do we find around the extent to which people said they find pleasure in their work? So 86% of those who agreed that stuff gets in the way of performing their best work, also disagreed that they found pleasure in their work. So in the same way that the finding on expressing upset or overwhelm a huge proportion of those also said that they don't find pleasure in their work, is the same or a similar story for those that say stuff gets in the way. So those that are saying stuff gets in the way of their work, 86% of those also say they don't find pleasure in their work. If we look at the other two levers that we can pull then, so finding purpose seems to have an important relationship. So 90% of those agree that they find purpose in their work also agree that they find pleasure in their work and then when we look at having the freedom and autonomy to do their best work, 86% of those who said they find pleasure in their work also said that they have enough freedom to do their best work. So finally, for pleasure then, let's have a look at the extent to which people so they can express how they feel across a range of emotions and the similar findings to what we've had from the other two wellbeing outcomes. So 92% of those who agreed it's okay for them to share when they feel happy also said they find pleasure in their work. So you could argue, well, that would make sense because if I feel happy and I can express my happiness, then that may lead to that longer-term state of pleasure. So what have we found? Against those three wellbeing outcomes of the extent to which I've been stressed in the last four weeks, the extent to which work keeps me awake at night in the last four weeks and the extent to which I find pleasure in my work, there are certain components or elements or levers that we can pull that might affect those wellbeing outcomes, where we are less stressed, sleeping better and finding more pleasure or finding pleasure in our work, consistently the expression of emotion across a range of emotions is correlated with improved wellbeing outcomes. Hence the name of this report, This is How I'm Feeling.

The extent to which I got purpose and meaning and I have the freedom to do my best work seems to correlate strongly with the extent to which work keeps people awake at night and the extent to which people find pleasure in their work. The watch out is that purpose and meaning and freedom also correlate with being stressed in the last four weeks. So what do we do about that, then? Well, on the 17th of December 2021, at 930 GMT, we have a webinar where we're exploring this report in more detail, we're talking about some practical hints, tips and strategies that you can use either as an individual, as a leader, as a manager, or someone that works with teams and across organisations as a whole. To register for that webinar, if you go to www.emotionatwork.co.uk, on the homepage you'll find a link where you can go and register for that webinar. Now also registering for that webinar will also get you access to the full report. So the full report will be made available to anyone that registers even if you don't come to the webinar, registering to come or registering for it will get you access to the full report and you get the opportunity to sign up for a series of hints, tips and strategies as to how you can pull some of these levers in the workplace. And I'd also say, listen, really listen to what people are thinking and what they're feeling. The idea of being able to express when you're frustrated or angry and being able to express when you're upset or overwhelmed and creating the spaces or the opportunities for that to happen, based on this data alone suggests that that can have a big impact in terms of the extent to which people feel stressed and the extent to which people are kept awake at night by their work.

So I hope to see you at the webinar on the 17th of December. If you listening to this after the 17th of December, then a recording of that webinar will be made available in the Emotion at Work community and you can join the Emotion at Work community at <https://community.emotionatwork.co.uk/groups>. Links to all of those places will be found in the show notes. Thanks very much for listening. I hope you enjoy the full report and if you are listening to this before Christmas, Merry Christmas.

You've been listening to the Emotion at Work podcast and if you've got this far you must be interested in the role that emotions have in the workplace either within individuals, between people, in teams or in organisations as a whole, so head over to the Emotion at Work hub which you can find at <https://community.emotionatwork.co.uk/groups>. Thanks for listening.