

Wellbeing in the context of Challenges and current Initiatives

Points in a Continuum: Mental Wellbeing for Mental Energy

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Foreword

Life and health is influenced by one's environment and is subject to changes. Similarly with wellbeing, one does not achieve a state of wellbeing that, when achieved, will stay that way forever. As such, we could view wellbeing in the context of experiencing movement rather than limiting it to a state or a stagnant condition. Additionally, an individual's approach in life is influenced by reason and emotion stimulated in the mind through external influences. As we begin to define wellbeing in the context of health, mental health is as important as physical health and needs to be considered.

Wellbeing is the ability to radiate mental energy to a positive and proactive existence. On the other hand, passive existence leads to barriers in receiving mental energy causing one to be reactive. In defining wellbeing in this aspect, we can express our view as:

“Wellbeing is sensing mental energy that transforms into physical energy to experience a proactive existence in harmony with one's environment.”

Introduction about Wellbeing

After many years of low priority, wellbeing and mental health is now on the agenda. The term wellbeing is defined and understood in many ways, depending on a perspective. Employers, governments, international agencies and others concerned, sponsor a number of initiatives initiated to increase wellbeing. This document gives a short overview of some of the initiatives that directly or indirectly contribute to wellbeing.

To better understand complete health, other conditions such as mental health and psychosocial conditions also need consideration. As defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), "Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." Emphasized by Gro Harlem Brundtland, Director General, World Health Organization, "Mental Wellbeing is a state in which individuals can realize their abilities, can cope with the stresses of life, can work productively, satisfactorily and make positive contributions to their societies."¹

¹ **World Health Report 2001, Mental Health: New Understanding, New Hope**, WHO, 2001

Challenges

Globalization and Technological advances

Characterized by globalization, technological advances and demographical changes, today's fast paced and frenzied times create more demands and expectations on individuals to be at peak performance. These are just some of the complex factors illustrating a revolutionary environment people experience today, and many approach life in the same frantic, rushing way.

Changing environment

As life and health are never static, so is the ever-changing working life where organizations operate in many settings and individuals fill a variety of roles. These constantly changing environments cause stressors that inevitably create demands on individuals, employers and societies.

Emerging stress

Some individuals proactively change their outlook in life to better prepare themselves for stressful conditions and daily challenges encountered in their chosen lifestyle. An individual's good health is recognized as an important ingredient that provides energy, allowing one to function well and do more. Yet, regardless of clear improvement in physical health, many people experience dissatisfaction, fear, anxiety, stress and depression.

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Signified by the landmark study, Global Burden of Disease, this fact finding study implicates five mental disorders within the top ten disability adjusted life years (DALYs). The burden of mental illnesses has been seriously underestimated by traditional approaches. Depression is the second leading cause of disability and premature mortality. Mental disorders collectively account for more than 15% of the overall burden of disease from all causes and slightly more than the burden associated with all forms of cancer. By 2020, tobacco is expected to kill more people than any other disease. Collectively, these conditions cause an economic burden that impacts every level; individuals, employers and governments. These data underscore the importance and urgency of treating and preventing mental disorders and of promoting mental health in our societies.

More success stories are needed

At a time when people's expectations of health services are growing and funds are tightly constrained, measurement of illness and risk factors produces an objective assessment of healthcare financial investments. Evidence demonstrated through cost-effectiveness of interventions supports mental health promotion and illness prevention.

Current initiatives and Current focus

Work Environment: Primary Approach

The International Labour Organization (ILO) reports that the workplace is an appropriate environment to address mental health and work-related stress conditions and prevent them from developing. Two European Union (EU) surveys have shown that a substantial portion of the 147 million workers in the EU are exposed to a variety of work-related demands or

² **Global Burden of Disease**, WHO/Harvard School of Public Health/World Bank, WHO, 1996

stressors, known or highly suspected to be stress and disease-inducing.³ Employers are increasingly aware of the rising healthcare-related costs due to mental health and psychosocial factors associated with work injuries and absenteeism.

Looking Ahead: Strategies in Place on Mentally Healthy Enterprises

Key to moving forward is a commitment from various stakeholders to take action by aligning to develop policy-relevant information, bridge the knowledge gap, remove stigma, improve access to information and services and continue to dialogue on ongoing improvements that affect the work environment.

Leading Research Studies

Accounted below are leading research studies, resolutions and high priority initiatives developed in the last few years by international agencies, governments and employers in support of increasing mental health in the health agenda:

1. Global Burden of Disease. Possibly the most striking finding of the landmark Global Burden of Disease study is that the impact of mental illness on overall health and productivity throughout the world is profoundly under-recognized. Today, in established market economies, mental illness is the second leading cause of disability and premature mortality. Mental disorders collectively account for more than 15% of the overall burden of disease from all causes and slightly more than the burden associated with all forms of cancer.
2. Mental Health in the Workplace. In October 2000, the International Labour Organization released a set of situation analysis reports on Mental Health in the Workplace in five countries, namely USA, Poland, Finland, Germany and Turkey. This significant report confirmed the growing awareness and recognition of the need to address mental health issues in the workplace. Data demonstrated in this study stresses that both the direct and indirect costs associated in mental health differ; however these costs remain a significant and common concern.
3. Depression in the Workplace Study. A leading study indicates depression and substance abuse cost employers and governments more than all other human conditions. According to Ron Kessler, Ph.D., Professor, Health Care Policy, Harvard Medical School, for every \$1.00 US dollar invested in the mental wellbeing of an individual, there is a potential \$ 10.00 US dollar return on investment.
4. Guidance on Work-Related Stress. The European Commission (EC) prepared a guidance report that enterprises within the European Union member countries may adapt to suit their own work environment. This report concludes that work-related stress problems and their causes can be identified in the work environment through validated tools and methods of measurement. It also includes a flexible health management framework that may be efficiently implemented by enterprises.
5. World Health Report 2001, Mental Health: New Understanding, New Hope. WHO published a landmark report making a clear statement that mental health is crucial to the overall wellbeing of individuals, societies and countries. WHO is joined by the United Nations General Assembly together with the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the European Union (EU) in this call for action.

³ **Guidance on work-related stress**, European Commission, 1999

Resolutions

1. Joint Declaration: European Commission (EC) and World Health Organization (WHO), 2001. The EC/WHO Declaration prioritizes Stress and Depression in the EU agenda. The subsequent conclusions adapted by the European Council of Health Ministers states that all European countries should focus on the priority issues as outlined in the WHO/EC declaration.
2. European Commission Barcelona Meeting: Bridging Science and Policies. Last June 2002, the EC met in Barcelona to discuss the role of occupational health professionals in response to the EU priorities on stress and mental health issues. They appointed 3 networks to take the lead: European Network on Child and Elderly (based in Belgium), European Network on Health Promotion (based in Germany) and the European Network on Mental Health (based in Finland). The goal is to gather best practice models from EU countries and provide their recommendation for EU health policymakers by May 2003.

Initiatives

1. Club of Geneva . Club of Geneva is a nonprofit organization recognized by international agencies, governments and employers. Club of Geneva's mission is to promote and coordinate the initiatives/research on mental wellbeing in workplaces to empower international agencies, governments and employers in implementing evidence based mechanisms and tools on mental wellbeing to create efficient workplaces. Club of Geneva gathers at the annual Global Symposium on Business and Mental Energy at Work to discuss visions, strategies and actions for ongoing improvements in the field of mental wellbeing at work.
2. Global Symposium on Business and Mental Energy at Work. This annual global symposium is attended by key opinion leaders from a multi-disciplinary background representing international agencies, governments, employers, employee sectors, academics, researchers, NGOs, health professionals, financiers, consultants and insurers. The goal of the Global Symposium is to form strategies, stimulate cooperation and collaboration in addressing key issues concerning the work environment;, highlighted by discussions on change management, work/life, health management approaches, occupational health and mental health services through knowledge exchange, resource building, and networking.

Observations and Conclusions

Employers take more responsibility

Healthcare financial investments are primarily made by governments for a general population. However, governments are shifting increasingly healthcare financing responsibilities to employers. With growing healthcare demands and tightly constrained funds, an evidence-based approach in risk assessments and in measurements in economic terms may result in essential allocation of resources to address burden of diseases. Disability measurement in terms of disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) determined the top ten global burden of diseases in the Global Burden of Disease report.⁴ While enterprises assess healthcare expenditures associated with disability claims on work-injuries and absenteeism. Five mental health conditions rank in the top ten global burden of diseases,

⁴ **Global Burden of Disease**, WHO/Harvard School of Public Health/World Bank, WHO, 1996

depression ranked as second. Enterprises are increasingly aware of rising healthcare expenditures due to mental health and psychosocial factors, such as stress, smoking and alcoholism. Considering mental health as important as physical health leads to overall wellbeing of individuals, societies and countries.”⁵

Impact of Mental Health and Psychosocial Factors at all Levels

- For governments, the costs include health care costs and insurance payment as well the loss of income at the national level.
- For employers, the costs are felt in terms of low productivity, absenteeism, reduced profits, high rates of staff turnover and increased costs of recruiting and training replacement staff.
- For individual workers, low morale, anxiety, stress and burnout can lead to lost income, job loss and periods of hospitalization, associated in some cases with the stigma attached to mental illness.

Multidimensional health management approach

Maintaining healthy conditions through a multidimensional approach can achieve a high level of productivity and adaptability resulting in a dynamic way of living in harmony given the current environment. Learning appropriate coping tools may offer the possibility of movement toward greater balance. Wellbeing is a strategic issue that can be best achieved by finding out current conditions, analyzing the situation, and taking action to make things better. All too often, improving wellbeing releases the power of the people back into the business for positive gain; it does not just reduce the losses.⁶

Global Strategies: Bridging the Gap: The Way Forward for Meaningful Results

Because these issues cross national boundaries, commitment from various stakeholders is required in order to take action in reducing the economic and health burden due to mental health and psychosocial factors in workplaces. Strategies are now in place to gather and disseminate information on health and corporate policies, relevant research studies and knowledge in best practices. By aligning the knowledge and limited capital resources, international agencies, governments and employers may be influenced and empowered to implement initiatives in a meaningful way that will have a global impact. These goals constitute the vision of a newly formed global movement, Club of Geneva.

As individuals think of wellbeing, many seek ways to participate in life in a way that is creative, full and meaningful. Balancing the multifaceted state of being becomes similar to experiencing a movement that flows in harmony in life.

***“Wellbeing is experiencing mental energy
while going through a journey of change and
in harmony with one’s environment.”***

⁵ World Health Report 2001, **Mental Health: New Understanding, New Hope**, WHO, 2001

⁶ **Dangerous Waters: Strategies for Improving Wellbeing at Work** Stephen Williams and Lesley Cooper, 2001