

**MENTAL HEALTH IN THE STRUCTURAL ENGINEERING PROFESSION**

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**SUMMARY**

Our profession, I think you will agree, is a meaningful and rewarding one. It is also at times challenging and demands accountability. Naturally then, we could expect our mental health/ wellbeing to be tested at various times during our careers. Graduate engineers may be especially vulnerable to stresses as they begin to navigate the world of consulting: project deadlines, staffing shortfalls, challenging team dynamics and the like.

It is heartening to see growing awareness of mental health/ wellbeing in our industry. The aim of this paper is to stimulate further conversation in this area.

**MENTAL HEALTH – A DEFINITION**

According to the World Health Organization (2021), mental health is “a state of wellbeing in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.”

Mental health is not merely the absence of illness. It can be helpful to view mental health as a continuum (e.g. Figure 1) rather than a binary state of healthy or ill. It is something to be cognisant of no matter where on the continuum we may find ourselves.



Figure 1. A mental health continuum model (Delphis Learning, 2020)

The following extract provides a useful summary on the impact of mental health on our lives (from WSP New Zealand's mental health plan):

*"The current reality is that most of us will experience a mental health issue at some time in our lives or be in close contact with someone who experiences mental illness, be it a long-term condition or relatively short-term.*

*Mental health is complex. The fact that someone is not currently experiencing a mental health condition doesn't necessarily mean that they are mentally healthy. Likewise, it's possible to be diagnosed with a mental health condition while feeling relatively well in many aspects of life.*

*Indicators of mental health issues are not character flaws, weaknesses, or 'just a phase'. All of us can be vulnerable to mental health issues throughout our lives."*

## **MENTAL HEALTH AND STRUCTURAL ENGINEERING**

Our profession, I think you will agree, is a meaningful and rewarding one. It is also at times challenging and demands accountability. The need to ensure the safety of the end user brings a high level of responsibility to our work. A clear example is the seismic design, assessment and retrofit of our building stock.

We can therefore expect our mental health to be tested at various times during our careers, perhaps more so than the average worker. Graduate engineers may be especially vulnerable to stresses as they begin to navigate the world of consulting; project deadlines, staffing shortfalls, challenging team dynamics and the like. I personally experienced these struggles in my first years as a professional and I know I cannot be the only one.

It is however very heartening to see growing awareness of mental health/ wellbeing in our industry. Engineering New Zealand for example has recently published several resources on wellbeing and the transition from study to working life. Links to these are listed at the end of this paper.

## **WELLBEING STRATEGIES IN THE WORKPLACE**

In my opinion this quote from WSP New Zealand's Managing Director epitomises the approach that we should take to wellbeing in the workplace:

*"Something that we can all do is look out for our co-workers. Just think about their mood. Is somebody feeling down? Does it look as if they're struggling on a project? It's tremendously powerful to engage with somebody and say, 'Are you OK?' or 'How are you feeling today?'*

*Go and have a cup of tea with someone. Help them articulate where they are at. Then if there's greater concerns, obviously we can get help in place to support them."*

### Encouraging conversation

Communication is one of the keys to ensuring wellbeing in our workplaces. Our day to day interactions set the tone and provide support lines for when things get tough.

If you are a senior or manager reading this, I encourage you to make yourself as approachable as possible to your staff – you never know when they might need that extra helping hand.

If you are a graduate reading this, it is always best to bug your manager or senior about your work or any other issue, no matter how busy they may seem. It can be easy to keep things to yourself or shoulder responsibility above your level of experience but this is rarely the best option, corporately and for your own wellbeing.

### Working with the individual

We are all unique and have different ways of supporting our mental health. As individuals, we need to realise what keeps us healthy. Positive activities might be cycling to work, playing an instrument, walking the dog or reading a novel. Taking regular breaks throughout the day helps too. These are obvious things but are easy to push aside when life gets busy.

As organisations, we need to be flexible and accommodating of the needs of the employees. Activities that are backed corporately such as social sports leagues are a great boost to mental health.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has briefly explored the topic of mental health in our profession, explained the continuum of mental health and some of the strategies that we can adopt. It is hoped that this paper will stimulate thought and conversation on the importance of mental health in our workplaces.

## **INDUSTRY RESOURCES**

Engineering New Zealand wellbeing resources:

<https://www.engineeringnz.org/engineer-tools/wellbeing/>

Members of Engineering New Zealand have free access to the MAS Wellbeing Portal:

<https://www.engineeringnz.org/resources/mas-wellbeing-portal/>

Engineering New Zealand – transitioning from study to working life:

<https://www.engineeringnz.org/resources/kickstart-your-career/study-life-working-life/>

## **REFERENCES**

*Delphis Learning (2020) "The Mental Health Continuum is a Better Model for Mental Health"*

<https://delphis.org.uk/mental-health/continuum-mental-health/>

*World Health Organization (2021) "WHO urges more investments, services for mental health"*

[https://www.who.int/mental\\_health/who\\_urges\\_investment/en/](https://www.who.int/mental_health/who_urges_investment/en/)