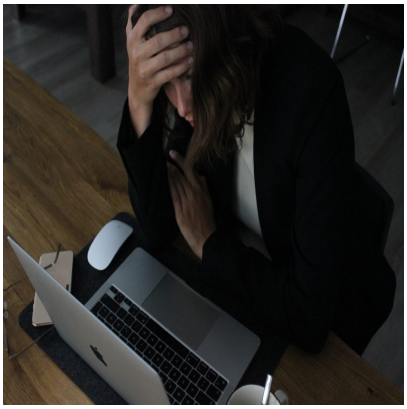


Where Does Your Organization Fall on the Well-Being Spectrum? (Why Assessments Matter)

Description

I have always had a lot of interest in mental health issues. For one thing, Iâ??ve had my own struggles with alcoholism and depression. And after serving on the boards of Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation and TriHealth, I have seen for a while that thereâ??s a great need for mental health and wellness support inside organizations. Now this issue has taken on a new urgency.

COVID has been hard on all of us. Weâ??ve entered a mental health crisis, and thereâ??s little training for leaders on how to deal with it. Thatâ??s why lately Iâ??ve devoted my time and energy to helping organizations navigate stress, burnout, and trauma, and helping leaders refill their own emotional bank account and those of their employees. A resource you may find helpful is The Well-Being Handbook: Tools & Tactics to Help You & Your Organization Heal from Stress, Burnout, and Trauma. Click here to learn more about this new e-book.

This is the first in a six-part series on helping leaders create cultures of well-being. Today weâ??ll talk about why itâ??s crucial to assess where your organization is on the well-being spectrum. In upcoming columns, weâ??ll cover topics like destigmatizing mental health issues, why empathy is the number-one leadership skill and how to be a more empathetic leader, ways to engage employees and stay connected, the power of being a well-run organization as an antidote to stress and burnout, and what a culture of well-being looks like.

Things are especially tough now. Obviously, thereâ??s fear of the virus itself. But also, weâ??ve been through an extended period of virtual work, remote learning, economic fall, and social and political upheaval. And we donâ??t know when, or if, things will ever return to normal.

All of this means employees are struggling to varying degrees. Almost everyone is feeling some level of mental and emotional stress, but itâ??s manifesting in different ways. Thereâ??s a spectrum:

Languishing. Some people are languishing. Adam Grant wrote a good article on this subject in the New York Times. He says lanÂ¬guishing is not burnout and itâ??s not depression. You are not suffering from a mental illness, but youâ??re not flourishÂ¬ing either. Youâ??re kind of stuck in the middle. Adam Grant calls it â??an absence of well-being.â?• It seems to me that languishing is the perfect word to describe the underlying feeling of disrupÂ¬tion so many of us notice these days.

Unfortunately, languishing puts us at risk for major depression and anxiety disorders down the road. If we can catch mental health issues early, when people are in the languishing phase, we can intervene and potentially prevent things from getting worse. Plus, people shouldnâ??t have to settle for languishing.

Stress. Others are feeling the effects of stress. In small doses, stress makes us productive and adds excitement to life. But when those feelings of stress get to be too much or go on for prolonged periods of time, we can have physical and emotional symptomsâ??from fatigue, to headache, to upset stomach, to high blood pressure, to irritability, to anxiety and depression.

Burnout. When stress goes on and on with no relief, over time it may lead to burnout. Psychologist Christina Maslach described burnout as having three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and a feeling of ineffectiveness. A burned out employee is not just exhausted temporarily. Theyâ??re exhausted all the time. A good nightâ??s sleep or vacation wonâ??t fix the problem.

Theyâ??re so depleted they can barely function, let alone give it their all at work. Their performance suffers. They make more mistakes. Completing even simple tasks can feel impossible. They may feel like theyâ??re putting in a lot of hours but not making an impact or changÂ¬ing anything. And, as with stress, our health suffers when weâ??re burned out.

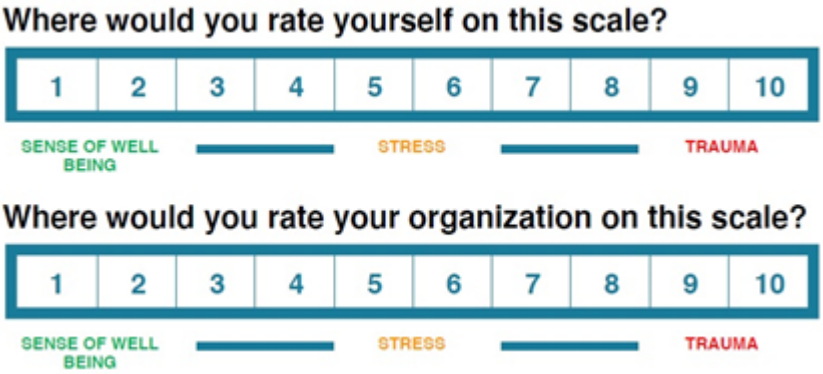
Trauma. Some employees have moved beyond stress and into the realm of trauma. While stress upsets our balance in the moment, we can get through it and move on with our lives. Trauma sends us into survival mode. It makes us feel that our life, or at least our livelihood, is threatened, and it changes how we look at the world. With stress, there is a belief that things can get back to or close to normal. With trauma, there is the realization that it may never get back to what it was. People can even experience PTSD.

People may suffer trauma on an individual level, but there is also organizational trauma. When it occurs, communication and trust can break down. Often, there is a shake-up in roles and responsibilities. Workers feel powerless and hopeless. Productivity suffers.

Itâ??s important to know where people are on the well-being spectrum so we can do the right things to help them. Stress, burnout, and trauma are different maladies. Each requires different interventions and treatments.

The bottom line: Before we can treat employees and the organization, we need to assess them. People often donâ??t realize how much they are impacted by stressful or traumatic events. Even if they do, they may not feel comfortable talking about it. Assessments can be great conversation starters. And of course they can lay the groundwork for practical interventions.

The Well-Being Handbook includes this simple emotional pain scale to use with employees. Itâ??s similar to the pain scale seen in healthcare settings. Alternately, leaders can use it to assess where they think the organization is. Either way, it can give a feel for peopleâ??s mental health.



The book also has other assessments for both individuals and the organization as a whole.

A final note: Be sure people get the chance to assess themselves in private. Mental wellness is a sensitive subject. (Weâ??ll talk more about reducing the stigma next week.) The more confident employees feel that they can have a safe conversation, the more truthful theyâ??re likely to beâ??and the more successful youâ??ll be at helping them heal, and helping your company go on to thrive.

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Author
quint-studer