

# STARTING WITH YOU

Taking care of your wellbeing as a busy FE leader

Written by Education Support

## Introduction

As busy Further Education (FE) leaders, it's essential to acknowledge your own humanity. Your time and energy are finite resources and striking a balance between your professional responsibilities and life outside of work, including those much-needed moments of rest, is vital for your wellbeing.

But the reality is, each of you defines your own path to wellbeing and a fulfilling work-life balance. The journey will be unique for all of you. There is no right or wrong way to take care of yourself as an FE leader. Only you can know what is best for you!

This guide offers evidence-based tips and actionable tools, tailored to your role in FE, which you can revisit at any time. While these techniques have been proven to help leaders like you maintain a healthy mind, we will leave it up to you to decide which advice best suits you as an individual.

As you make your way through these practical tips and tools, it is worth bearing in mind that cultural change usually starts from the top. If mental and emotional health become a priority to you – and you are able to role-model that behaviour – it can spread throughout your FE community. Allowing staff to learn, work and grow together, which in turn has the potential to improve relationships with learners and ultimately how you teach them.

We will also explore role-modelling wellbeing behaviour to staff (and what 'role-modelling' looks like in practice) and using meta-cognitive approaches - a concept likely already familiar to educators as 'thinking about how you think'.



## Understanding wellbeing: beliefs and barriers

Contrary to popular belief, putting yourself first isn't selfish. We know FE leaders can frequently prioritise learners and colleagues' needs above their own. But as the saying goes 'you can't pour from an empty cup'. To provide the best possible experience for learners and be the best leader for your team, you need to also invest in your own health.

It can help to think of mental health like your physical health; everyone has it, and it needs to be maintained in order for you to stay well. And, looking after your wellbeing is an important

component of maintaining your mental health. But, what do we mean by taking care of your wellbeing in the context of being a busy FE leader?

In its most basic sense, wellbeing is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as [‘the state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy’](#).

It is worth pointing out that wellbeing is not exactly the same as happiness. Happiness usually refers to how people are feeling in the moment and does not always tell us about how they evaluate their lives as a whole or about how they function in the world. Wellbeing is a much broader concept than moment-to-moment happiness: it includes happiness but also other things such as how satisfied people are with their lives as a whole, and things such as autonomy, having a sense of control over and a sense of purpose in life.<sup>1</sup>

### **Breaking down barriers – real-life examples from FE staff**

The barriers to maintaining your wellbeing while working in FE can be unique when compared to other sectors, and even more nuanced when taking into consideration your particular setting – be it a general FE college, sixth form college, national specialist college (NSC), local authority (LA) or Independent training provider - or one of the many other different organisations and providers that make up your diverse section of the education sector.

Below we share examples of real-life barriers faced by FE staff and leaders, alongside some ways they have overcome them.

As you read through the list below, ask yourself: do any of these barriers or ways of thinking resonate with me? What are my own personal barriers to maintaining my wellbeing in my role? Can I add or adapt any of these solutions for my toolbox?

Feel free to grab a pen and write down your thoughts if you find it useful.



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<sup>11</sup> [New Economics Foundation \(2012\) Measuring Wellbeing: A guide for practitioners, London: New Economics Foundation.](#)



- **Witnessing women and staff with protected characteristics facing a lack of progression opportunities**

“Explore representative bodies or groups to align with, look into targeted coaching and mentoring, and work with your provider to challenge stigma/bias/discrimination. Remember, it is not about asking people with protected characteristics to do the work.”

- **Dealing with the stress of an ever-changing sector i.e. the volume of policy reform**

“One way to reduce stress amongst the team is through weekly blocked-out time for all staff and leaders, you could offer 15 minutes throughout the week to allow staff to use a wellbeing platform such as Plumm.”

- **Being responsible for your FE settings financial health and solvency in a highly-pressured, under-funded sector**

“Try approaching the issue collaboratively, involving the breadth of senior leadership teams, governors and if you are a leader at an FE College, external support from the FE Commissioner.”

- **The pressure of meeting targets and delivering on results (impacts finances, student outcomes, Ofsted, and requirement to meet local need).**

“One way to decompress and focus on what is going on for you at work is through [professional supervision](#) for FE leaders.”

- **Covering high levels of absence or key members of staff when they leave**

“Due to a shortage in the sector, we do not have "supply tutors" to cover classes' and this can put more pressure on other staff members who are present. A way of overcoming this would be to build up a bank of associate tutors who could be called upon when needed.”

- **Feelings of isolation**

“Seek support from SLT or you may benefit from a peer support group”.

- **The blurring of home and work boundaries due to hybrid working.**

“Simple steps, like setting an alarm to ensure you don't work late can help you claim back time. Share your tips with colleagues and ask them what they are doing to manage hybrid work-life!”

- **Managing expectations of parents, employers, staff and learners.**

“Communication is key! Be realistic about what can be delivered, and clear when setting expectations and boundaries.”



## Practical tools and tips for FE leaders

### 1. Where are you choosing to place the focus of your attention?

Imagine you are considering buying a new car, or remember back to when you bought your last car and were choosing what model to buy. Let's say for example you decided you wanted to buy an electric car. Did you notice that whenever you were out all you noticed on the road was electric cars? Or, perhaps you want to buy a red coat, then all you notice is people wearing red coats!

Anais Nin said, 'We don't see the world as it is, we see it as we are.' In other words, if all we allow our mind to consume, via social media or the news, is predominantly negative - then that view will consume our focus of attention.

We need to pro-actively shift our focus of attention and look for the balance. This does not dismiss or brush aside any negative fact we have encountered, but rather aids to balance out the daily, weekly and monthly experience.

If you find yourself caught with an anxious thought replaying in your mind, perhaps you are worried about the potential of an Ofsted inspection, alongside the many other plates you are spinning?! Try giving yourself some time and find a quiet spot. Then go through the following questions<sup>2</sup> and really challenge yourself:

- Is this thought definitely true?
- What if the opposite were true?
- What am I predicting? How realistic is it?
- What is a more realistic or balanced thought?
- Am I confusing thought with a fact?

### 2. Managing worry or anxious thoughts

Even when you recognise that there are certain aspects beyond your control and come to terms with them, you might still find yourself troubled by these concerns. This is a fundamental aspect of human nature, and it's impractical to expect your worries to vanish entirely.

However, by setting aside specific periods for being with your worry, you can acknowledge your concerns while also establishing boundaries to prevent them from becoming overwhelming and becoming detrimental to your wellbeing. The point of worry time is acceptance; acknowledging that 'worry' 'fear' or 'doubt' are natural emotions. It is a time to have compassion or kindness for yourself before moving to problem solving. This way you do not dismiss your emotional place by 'just being positive' neither do you get caught up in the detail of the issue. The aim of worry time is to give yourself a short period where you allow yourself to simply acknowledge what is on your mind.

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from [@journey\\_to\\_wellness\\_](#)

These worry sessions could range from half an hour each day, half an hour weekly, or even less frequently. The exact duration will vary from person to person, but setting dedicated time to explore worries or concerns for matters beyond your control could have a positive impact on your wellbeing.

If you find it easier, you can even make a note of your worries on your phone as you go about your day, or there are a number of apps available to help you track and work through your worries, such as [Worry Tree](#). This app provides a simple worry journal to record and categorise your worries, as well as a way to work through your worries using proven cognitive behavioural techniques. You can also download a worksheet for free via their [website](#).



### 3. The 5:1 theory

When it comes to human flourishing, science is getting pretty specific. Over the course of our daily lives, we have a variety of positive and negative experiences. I think most of us would agree that we are likely to be happiest when we maximise the positive and minimise the negative. But researchers suggest that it is not just about having more positive and less negative experiences in our lives – it is the **ratio** of positive to negative that matters.

That magical ratio: At or above 3:1. Researchers Fredrickson and Losada tracked people's daily experiences over the course of a month and found that people who are flourishing (as opposed to languishing) report experiencing at least three times as many positive emotions as negative emotions in their daily lives.<sup>3</sup>

And that magic ratio it is not just for your personal wellbeing, [Dr. John Gottman](#) found that stable, happy couples had about five times more positivity than negativity (5:1).<sup>4</sup> Perhaps you could ask yourself or your team: What can we do to increase the number of positive daily experiences we have?

These do not have to be large gestures and extravagant actions. They can be as simple as:

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<sup>3</sup> [Unpacking positive emotions: Investigating the seeds of human flourishing, 2007, Barbara L. Fredrickson](#)

<sup>4</sup> [The magic ratio by the Grotoman Institute](#)

- Saying thank you to a colleague
- Sharing a friendly moment with a colleague in teams/slack, or taking a moment to smile as you pass a colleague in the corridor (if you feel like it!). Did you know when our smiling muscles contract, they fire a signal back to the brain, stimulating our reward system, and further increasing our level of happy hormones, or endorphins? In short, when our brain feels happy, we smile; when we smile, our brain feels happier!<sup>5</sup>
- Chatting for a few seconds longer and ask about the person beyond the role
- Sending a text to a family member or tell someone you love them
- Making a colleague a cuppa if you are in the office
- Noticing the world around you; for example you could join other FE staff who are utilising and promoting the [monthly action for happiness calendars](#). These can be printed off, or added to your electronic calendar so the "action" for each day is visible.
- Praising someone for something that you are genuinely impressed by
- Paying a compliment that you really mean
- Offering help that you are able to give

You may do many of the things above and that is great, if you do then you could try increasing the amount of times you do them. You might be surprised at the results!

#### 4. Dealing with difference (conversation prompt)

Conflict at work has the potential to affect everyone's wellbeing. Take a look at this tool from Education Support about ways to approach difficult conversations below or watch '[The power of conversations](#)' for more tips like these. Although the speakers in this video are school leaders, the tips are very transferable to other education staff, including FE.

- **Prioritise and honour the conversation**

Instead of: "Sorry, I don't have time right now."

Try: "Can we set time aside to talk this over?"

- **Stigma exists and persists because of silence – be open to discussing historically taboo topics to break the cycle**

Instead of: "I'm probably not the best person to talk to about this."

Try: "I'm listening, please tell me more?"

- **Be curious**

Instead of: "That is how I felt when it happened to me."

Try: "How did that make you feel?"

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<sup>5</sup> [The science behind a smile, The British Council](#)

- **Conversations are like books (you should try to understand every person's chapter)**

Instead of: "I don't understand."

Try: "I'm trying to understand it from your perspective."

- **Don't shy away from taking control**

Instead of: Ignoring the issue

Try: "I wasn't comfortable with XYZ, please can we find a time to talk about it?"

- **Be clear about what you want to discuss**

Instead of: "Please can I talk to you in my office later?"

Try: "Please can we speak about what happened yesterday in the staffroom?"

- **Don't put words in their mouth**

Instead of: "You must feel XYZ."

Try: "It sounds like you feel XYZ. Is that right?"

- **Don't make presumptions**

Try: "Is my office the best place to discuss this?" "Would you be more comfortable somewhere else?"

## 5. Recognising your stress patterns

A certain amount of stress at work and in your day to day life is normal, however, long-term or chronic stress can have a detrimental effect on your wellbeing. It might affect how you feel physically, mentally and also how you behave.<sup>6</sup> One of the most effective ways to take care of your wellbeing as a busy FE leader is to try and understand, identify and deal with any stress. However, it might not always be easy to identify what is making you feel stressed at work, or there might be multiple aspects causing you to feel stressed.

Do you struggle with the unmanageable workload placed on you? Are there redundancies on the horizon in your FE setting? Are you having difficulties with your workplace relationships? [NHS Every Mind Matters](#) suggest noting what is making you feel overwhelmed or anxious at work as it happens. With the idea that understanding why you are stressed can help you work out what to do next.

You can also complete the stress patterns exercise in this [video](#) (you will need coloured pens and paper for this exercise or you can just write things down in a list if you find that more useful).

After drawing your own stress pattern, look at it carefully and ask yourself:

- Do I notice any patterns?

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<sup>6</sup> [NHS website - symptoms and causes of stress](#)



- Is it always the same things that make me stressed?
- Does stress change my body, feelings, and thoughts in the same way each time?
- Do the same things help me to feel better?



It is suggested you consider doing this activity repeatedly over time i.e. once a week for a few weeks or every day for a week and track the changes and patterns you notice. You might notice that the same thing causes you to feel stressed every time or that your stress feels and looks the same every time.<sup>7</sup>

## 6. Practical ways to work through your stress

In their book, *Burnout: solve your stress cycle*, Emily and Amelia Nagoski note that movement is 'your first line of attack in the battle against burnout'.

Take a look at their remaining six proven ways to deal with stress or 'complete your stress cycle in our guide ['Burnout: spotting the signs in further education settings.'](#) Now ask yourself: am I already doing any of these? How can I share them with my team?

## Other important considerations

### Don't over-value over-work

As FE leaders, but most importantly human beings, you are not designed to operate like machines, continuously working for long periods of time. Rest is not only essential for your health, it has been proven to make you more effective at work.

A 2021 World Health Organisation study found that working 55 hours or more per week – compared to 35-40 hours is associated with a 35% higher risk of stroke and a 17% risk of dying from heart disease. Worryingly, the 2022 [Teacher Wellbeing Index](#), which includes FE staff, showed 47% of staff *always* come to work when they are sick, instead of taking time to

<sup>7</sup> [Understanding and dealing with stress guide, The Red Cross](#)

recuperate.

A tool that can help you prioritise taking time out during the day to stay well is the 30-3-30 approach. The suggestions below are grouped into things that take about 30 seconds, things that you can do in about 3 minutes, and things that might take 30 minutes or longer. The 30 second ones are quick fix 'emergency' actions you can do if you suddenly find you are struggling to cope, whereas the others give you slightly longer to replenish.

Have a go at noting down some of your own suggestions and keeping them to hand or putting them up somewhere you can see them throughout your working day:

30 seconds	3 minutes	30 minutes
Take a few slow deep breaths.  Breathe in, count to 3, breathe out, count to 3.	Phone a loved one for a chat, leave or send a message if they don't answer.	Try to move your body - go for a walk around the block or do some gentle yoga or stretches.

### Prioritise Reflective Practice

Reflective practice comes in many forms. However, one type of reflective practice that we know is helping leaders within the education sector is professional supervision.

Professional supervision provides reflection, learning and development organised around a professional identity and holds learners at its heart. In the education sector, professional supervision offers leaders the opportunity to reflect on their core purpose in the education of their learners.

Many leaders who have accessed professional supervision find the confidential, non-judgemental space, important for tackling the challenges and isolation they face in their roles. While supervision is professional, and is always about the job and educators connection to their purpose, it also improves individual mental health and wellbeing.

You can find out about fully-funded supervision, which is specifically for FE college leaders [here](#). Or, you can also access free [e-learning](#) to help you have reflective conversations within your FE setting. This free e-learning module provides a range of techniques to support personal and peer reflective practice. Although it mentions schools, these tips are relevant to FE leaders as well.

### Invest in workplace relationships

Within an FE setting, it can be easy for teams to become fragmented, especially in the post-Covid landscape, due to delivery across multiple campuses and following a hybrid model of both in-person and remote working. But, having trusted relationships and a collegiate working environment is a fundamental pillar for building protective resilience and improving your

wellbeing.

Building strong relationships requires trust, respect and self-awareness. And this in turn can make your role more enjoyable and allow you to be in the best possible place mentally and emotionally to support your learners and colleagues alike.

Read our tips for improved relationships, barriers to connection and how to overcome them in [‘Building Collegiate Relationships: a guide for FE staff.’](#) Or learn about ways to build more trusting relationships [for staff working in FE settings](#).

### **Role-model wellbeing behaviour**

Being an effective FE leader doesn't mean you should ignore your own needs or avoid seeking help when you need it. When you set a healthy example by taking care of yourself, it can inspire your team to do the same. This setting of healthy examples is known as ‘role-modelling’ wellbeing behaviour. It will look different for every leader - take a look at these practical tips for ways FE leaders can role-model wellbeing behaviour in [‘Helping staff balance work and life: a guide for FE leaders and managers’](#).

It can also help to remember that being open about your own challenges and asking for help is a beneficial quality for a leader. It helps build trust and motivates your team. When a leader talks about their own experiences with wellbeing and times they sought help, it can encourage team members to share their struggles too.

### **Psychological safety in FE settings**

Together with role-modelling it can help to have a psychologically safe environment in your FE setting where staff:

- Are trusted and feel safe
- Can be honest with managers and colleagues i.e. if they are struggling with stress levels
- Are able to speak up when they need to
- Have the freedom and security to try new things and make mistakes
- Feel safe enough to be creative and take risks
- Can be themselves, in order to perform at their best without any risk to their mental wellbeing.
- Can safely and respectfully disagree

### **A quick exercise to try with your team**

Here's a five minute exercise you can try with your team to see how safe, open and emotionally supportive your FE setting feels to them. You can either open these questions up in a group discussion, or allow staff to provide feedback anonymously if you think that would work better:

- If someone makes a mistake in this team, will they be blamed for it?
- Can team members bring up problems and difficult issues without fear?
- Do people in this team sometimes reject others just because they are different?
- Is it okay to take a risk in this team?

- Is it easy to ask for help from others in this team?
- Would anyone in the team purposely work against the team's efforts?
- When working with this team, are unique skills and talents valued and used?

Or, try our five minute psychological safety audit on page 15 of this [guide for FE leaders](#).

## Exploring meta-cognitive approaches

Metacognition means 'thinking about your thinking'. It is something most of us do every day without noticing. It can help you to become aware of what you know about something, what you don't know and how you can apply learning to different situations. It is the conversation you have in your heads when you 'talk to yourselves' and make plans.<sup>8</sup>

This helpful diagram, which you can [download](#) for free, gives an overview of meta-cognition and self-regulated learning approaches in education. Even though this is a school resource the principles apply to the whole of the education sector.

Benefits of applying meta-cognitive approaches to your team in FE settings can include improved resilience, allowing staff to better identify their successes and challenges and which strategies work best for them. It can also open them up to emotional growth, whereby they have more awareness of their mental wellbeing and what keeps them well. They may also be better able to better understand the perspectives of colleagues or learners.<sup>9</sup>

Meta-cognitive approaches can also help you explore the thought process behind role-modelling wellbeing behaviour and help you to put it into action, while encouraging your team to be more self-reflective of their own behaviour.

The Education Endowment Foundation have published a [guidance report](#) with recommendations for ways to promote meta-cognition in education settings. You can also find further helpful information on their [website](#).

## Further support for FE leaders

It's important to remember that you don't have to choose between prioritising the mental wellbeing of yourself against the wellbeing of your colleagues or learners. They are all interconnected. Healthy FE leaders are better able to provide support to staff, who are able to better provide high quality education and support for learners.

Professional supervision might be an option if you are looking for a safe and confidential space to talk about, and process what is going on for you at work. You will usually work with qualified and experienced supervisors to focus on your mental wellbeing and help you develop new coping strategies to feel more fulfilled and in control.

A way to provide support to everyone in your FE setting is through an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP). An EAP gives you and your staff confidential support and guidance when

<sup>8</sup> [Metacognition in Action, Devon Council](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Metacognition in the classroom, High Speed Training](#)

they need it most. Or, the FE Commissioner has organised senior leader coaching in recent years, it might be worth checking with your HR department for further information on this.

**Education Support is the only UK charity dedicated to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of education staff, including those working in the FE sector. You don't need to be in crisis to talk with qualified counsellors about anything you are experiencing. You can call their free and confidential helpline 24/7 on 08000 562 561. Or check their [website](#) for free resources and tools to help you and your colleagues.**

## Sources

- [Role-modelling as a busy leader by Lynn How](#)
- [What is mental health? Mind Charity](#)
- [What is wellbeing? Mental Health Foundation](#)
- [New Economics Foundation \(2012\) Measuring Wellbeing: A guide for practitioners, London: New Economics Foundation.](#)
- [Building a culture of wellbeing in schools and education settings by Andrew Cowley](#)
- [Dealing with worry in low intensity CBT guide, University of Exeter, 2013.](#)
- [Overcoming Panic, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, A guide to using cognitive behavioural techniques by Vijaya Manicavasagar and Derrick Silove, 2017.](#)
- <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/feelings-and-symptoms/stress/>

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