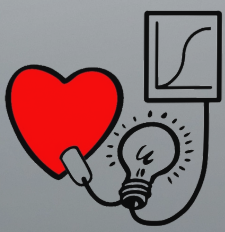




# This is how I am feeling: Emotional wellbeing in the workplace

Research report by Phil Willcox and Ashley Hilton

January 2022





# Foreword

In 25 years of working in Human Resources across a variety of sectors, employers and locations, I have witnessed a lot of emotions – positive and negative – being expressed in the workplace. I’ve also experienced the ups and downs of managing my own emotions through the difficult performance conversations, breaking of bad news and discussions of personal issues which make up a lot of the day-to-day work of an HR professional. Let’s face it: the workplace can be an emotional place. I guess it’s hardly surprising: emotions are present anywhere there is human activity. How we manage the expression of those emotions – both our own and our co-workers – is vital to reducing stress, promoting wellbeing and therefore improving performance.

I remain fascinated by both what makes people tick and how to enable people to give their best at work. I believe that learning how to manage, interpret and express emotion in the right way in the workplace can be critical to both of those objectives, which is why I found this report so interesting and – most importantly – practically helpful. After the events of the last few years, ensuring wellbeing at work and understanding how emotions have an impact on our performance are two critical issues for companies and this research provides a fantastic starting point.

Tim Scott  
Director of People, Fletchers Solicitors  
January 2022

As a People Director and leader of a team, my goal is to ensure my colleagues are engaged, equipped and supported. When the emotional wellbeing of my colleagues isn’t listened to, we aren’t allowing them to be truly authentic and bring their whole selves to work. When we feel able to be fully authentic, it’s because the right environment has been created – it feels safe! In a safe environment we are ourselves and we are able to be at our very best. We all have times in our lives when we just aren’t doing great, if we are able to talk about this and be listened to, we get through it quicker and back to high performance. Emotion at Work are a wonderful independent partner that are able to bring years of experience in supporting you to break down any barriers to the creation of a safe environment.

At Card Factory, we want our colleagues to turn up every day as themselves. To bring their emotion and to feel able to discuss it with their colleagues who are equipped with coaching tools to support them. In this report you will find some great insight and I encourage you to reach out to Emotion at Work if you would like support in creating an environment that will allow your colleagues to be at their best, more of the time.

Jennifer Lawrence  
Executive Director of People, Card Factory  
January 2022

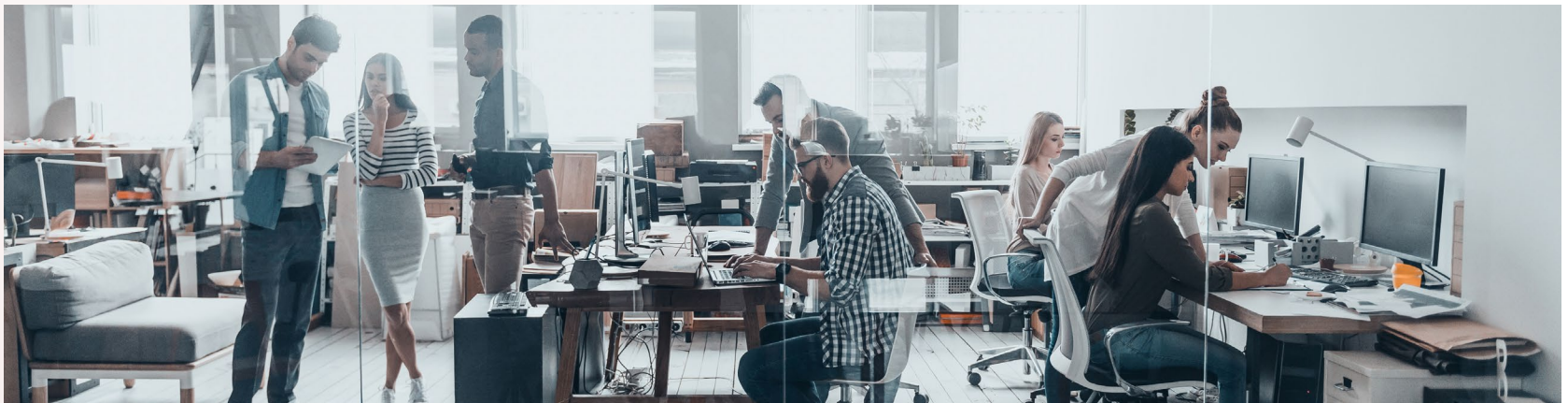
# Introduction

1.

In 2018, Emotion at Work partnered with The People Experience Hub to conduct research into emotional labour in the workplace; specifically assessing its impact on individual wellbeing within the HR sector. Emotional labour is the process of managing feelings and expressions to fulfil the emotional requirements of a job.

In the workplace, there are colleagues, managers, customers, clients, systems, and processes which can all affect how you feel at work. Emotions can have a significant impact on your experience(s) at work, how you perform, how you interact with others, and can impact your life outside of work too. We thought it worthy to assess this on a wider scale and not solely for a particular sector or industry.

The findings from this research will be divided across 3 different papers, each with a different lens, from the topical elements derived from our findings. This is the first of those papers: with this report's focus centring on the data gathered around the topic of emotional wellbeing. As such, this study looks to provide insight into the role of emotional wellbeing in the workplace and the extent to which different variables can impact how individuals experience wellbeing.



# Methodology

Prior to conducting this study, we hypothesised that those who reported that it is ok for them to express how they feel in the workplace - across a range of emotions - would be an indicator of emotional wellbeing in the workplace. We also hypothesised that the extent to which people feel they have freedom to do their best work would contribute to emotional wellbeing in the workplace as well as the extent to which people find purpose in their work.

This study was conducted using a qualitative research approach, with the research instrument being an online survey created through Google Forms. The questions were structured in the form of multiple choice, open ended and scaling questions. The survey was open from 26 July 2021 to 3 August 2021. It was mainly communicated and shared on the social media platforms Twitter and LinkedIn. There was a total of 327 responses.





# Emotional Wellbeing in the Workplace

If you want **positive employee wellbeing**, whereby the individual is less stressed, finds pleasure in their work and sleeps better, then it's important to create a workplace where people can **express how they feel** across a range of emotions, **have enough freedom** to do their best work, can **work effectively** without having stuff get in the way, and where they can **find purpose** in the work that they do.

## STRESSED

**66%** | Reported being stressed by work in the last 4 weeks

Finding purpose and meaning and having the freedom does not suggest less stress

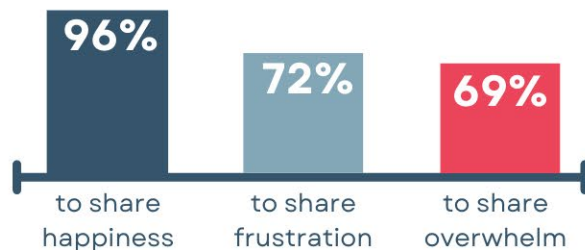


**68%** have purpose and meaning and felt stressed



**66%** have enough freedom and felt stressed

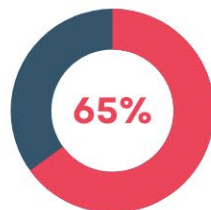
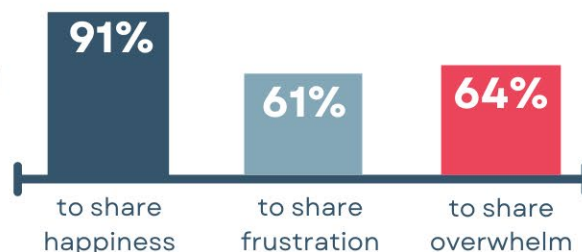
Those that disagreed with being stressed in the last 4 weeks also agreed it is ok to express how they feel across a range of emotions



## SLEEP

**34%** | Reported work keeping them awake in the last 4 weeks

Those that disagreed that work kept them awake also agreed it is ok to express how they feel across a range of emotions



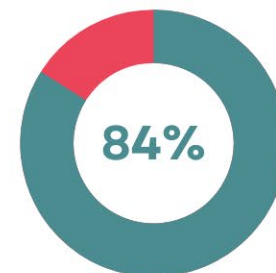
Those who agreed that stuff gets in the way of them performing their best work also agreed that work has kept them awake in the last 4 weeks



## PLEASURE

**26%** | Are neutral or disagree that they find pleasure in their work

Those who disagreed that it is ok to share when overwhelmed also disagreed they find pleasure in their work



 **Contact:** Phil Willcox: 07977 569398

 [phil@emotionatwork.co.uk](mailto:phil@emotionatwork.co.uk)

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## Methodology

This study was open to anyone who is in work. It was conducted using a qualitative research approach. Responses were gathered via an online survey created through Google Forms. Questions were multiple choice, open ended and scaling. The survey was open from 26th July 2021 to 3rd August 2021. It was promoted through social media platforms Twitter and LinkedIn. There was a total of 327 respondents.

# Backstory and context

| 4.

## What is workplace wellbeing?

Wellbeing in the workplace is a complicated and multifaceted subject whereby many elements can fall within its definition. Some elements of workplace wellbeing can include (but are not exclusive to) health, good work, personal growth, values/principles, and financial wellbeing.

Moreover, when we discuss emotional wellbeing in the workplace, this becomes increasingly complex as it requires a mechanism for the individual to express their emotions and to communicate how they feel at work. Our focus within this study rests primarily with the emotional components of wellbeing and our prime interest is in how, and to what extent, different variables impact our emotional wellbeing.

Emotion expression, and whether or not we feel it is acceptable for us to communicate our emotions at work, is a fundamental aspect of this study. Additionally, an individual's emotional wellbeing has a strong relationship with other attributes encompassed within the broader term of wellbeing which helped guide the measurements we chose to assess in this research.

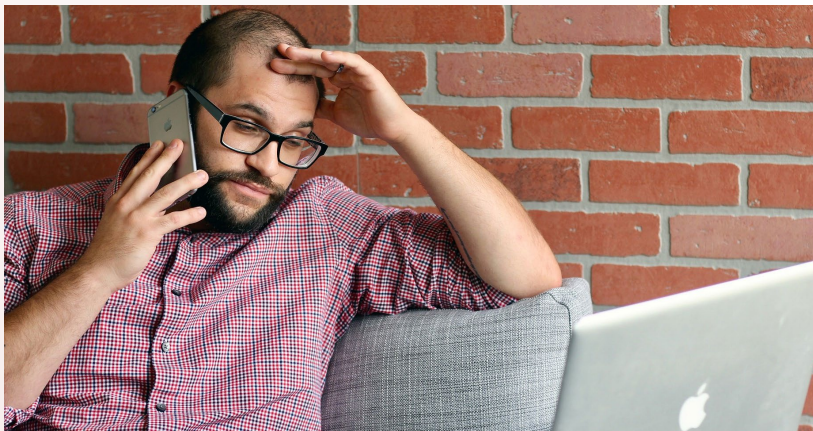
As has been widely cited throughout much of the research assessing workplace wellbeing, two key barometers of wellbeing are the levels of stress and the quality of sleep an individual experiences. For the purpose of this study, we have also chosen to assess a third indicator of wellbeing which is the degree to which an individual's work provides them with pleasure.





The role of stress, and its impact on both our biological and physiological state, is of vital importance to our overall wellbeing. As the stress response generates changes in the body - including things such as the release of cortisol, spikes in heart rate, changes in blood pressure - then this can have detrimental implications on our wellbeing.

Additionally, sustained levels of stress can impact our psychological and physiological state. Prolonged and/or intense periods of stress are associated with a range of poor physical, mental and emotional health conditions. This is important for the workplace as if organisations can identify areas that can reduce stress, then this can have a positive result against employee wellbeing and potentially on other reasons or occasions of workplace absence.



The experience of stress can also limit cognitive ability which may leave individuals more prone to poor judgement and can strain workplace relationships. Therefore, if leaders, managers and colleagues have strategies to help and support those that are experiencing stress then this will lead to better outcomes for individuals, teams and organisations. Thus, the role that stress can contribute to our overall wellbeing is of critical importance.

Sleep is also crucial to our wellbeing as it is during this time that our bodies undergo recuperation. Also, given that poor sleep quality and quantity can, and has been shown to, exacerbate the level of work-related stress we experience, the fierce cycle of these two components can have a harmful impact on our overall health and wellbeing. Therefore, should work be a factor which increases stress and consequently keeps us awake at night then this is poor for wellbeing and is important to consider for the purpose of this research.



As stated, this study also incorporates the role of finding pleasure in the work that we do. We will soon explore why the selection of this wording was important and what it can show us. With happiness often being described as a discreet emotion, pleasure is something that is more enduring and has been previously researched as an outcome of emotional wellbeing in wider studies.

An overall sense of pleasure (or for some contentment) with working life and life overall are correlated with increased resilience and ability to cope with the day-to-day challenges of work and the workplace.

Therefore, pleasure may be something that offsets or combats feelings of stress and/or work interrupting sleep. By understanding the areas that are correlated with this more enduring state of 'pleasure', it also holds the potential to support wellbeing beyond the workplace.



## What has been shown to impact wellbeing?

As per the above discussion, the three key indicators of emotional wellbeing in the workplace selected for this study included:

- Finding pleasure in the work that we do
- Experiencing stress at work
- Being kept awake by work.

The variables we believed would contribute to the degree to which we experience these indicators included:

- The ability to express how we feel across of a range of emotions
- The extent to which we have freedom and autonomy at work
- Finding purpose in the work that we do
- The extent to which stuff gets in the way of us performing our best work.

These four components were selected as the variables for this study as they are levers that organisations can pull to support employee wellbeing. Often in experimental research, the intent is to isolate variables and to examine the extent to which a single data point impacts outcomes, and researchers across these four areas have completed this sort of analysis. We wanted to bring those variables together to see how they linked to:



Each other



The three wellbeing outcomes



When correlated together against the wellbeing outcomes

With growth in the popular press and research fields into the role of purpose and freedom, these are levers that we believe organisations are already attempting to pull. We wondered how the other areas of emotion expression across a range of emotions and stuff getting in the way would correlate.

## How did we frame the questions?

Attention was given to both the construction and word choice of the questions within this survey. The language we choose to use when monitoring emotion(s) and the way an individual feels has an important role in the interpretation of the question and, consequently, how they may choose to respond.

Firstly, we chose to incorporate the word pleasure in the question, “I find pleasure in the work that I do” instead of using language around feeling happy or experiencing happiness. Happiness is a discreet emotion and is something which we experience for a period of time; it is an emotional state and, therefore momentary or episodic. Pleasure on the other hand can be categorised as a more enduring sensation. Thus, should someone feel that work brings them happiness at that moment in time, then this may be an episodic experience which could lead to a discrepancy within their response.





However, should they state that they experience pleasure in their work then this is indicative of a longer lasting enjoyment of the work that they do.

Additionally, incorporating the word “stuff” within the scaling question of “stuff gets in the way of me performing my best work” was a deliberate decision. The ambiguity of the word choice here alludes to the degree of things which may restrict an individual from the ability to deliver their highest standard of work. What we hoped to achieve was for the respondent to have control over their perspective on this question, with the word offering a level of interpretation which can span across a series of different dimensions. Hence, stuff may suggest things which can be categorised as interpersonal (breakdown in communication), personal (what is going on for me impacting how I perform), or perhaps external (being given extra work or being taken away from the work you need to complete) amongst other things.



# Findings

| 10.

If you want positive employee wellbeing, whereby the individual is less stressed, finds pleasure in their work and sleeps better, then it is important to create a workplace where people can express how they feel across a range of emotions, have enough freedom to do their best work, can work effectively without having stuff get in the way, and where they can find purpose in the work that they do.

## Stress

Notably, a substantial number of respondents (66%) stated that they had felt stressed at work in the last 4 weeks. When we break this down, there is further indication of the importance of the different variables assessed in both positively and negatively impacting the likelihood of individuals experiencing stress.

Expressing and discussing how you feel across a range of emotions had an important correlation to stress. Those who expressed that it is ok for them to share how they feel are less likely to feel stressed, with 96% of those who agree that it is ok for them to share when they are happy at work also disagreeing that they felt stressed at work in the last 4 weeks.

This relationship was replicated across all emotions incorporated within the scaling questions, and emotions which often prove more challenging to convey (frustration, anger, overwhelm) also produced important findings. 72% of those who said that it is ok for them to share when they are frustrated at work also disagreed that they felt stressed at work in the last 4 weeks. Also, 69% of those who said that it is ok for them to share when they are overwhelmed at work disagreed that they felt stressed at work in the last 4 weeks.







When analysing emotion expression and its relationship to the three indicators of wellbeing chosen for this study, the most significant findings across these elements were those just noted on page 10. This is critical for workplaces to pay attention to as workplace stress impacts many organisational outcomes including absence, engagement, relationships, and turnover.

Stuff getting in the way also proved to impact stress. When individuals have the power to perform their best work without interference, they are less likely to report feeling stressed. 69% of respondents who said that stuff **doesn't** get in the way of them performing their best work also said that they **have not** felt stressed at work in the last 4 weeks. Discreet emotion research suggests that the universal trigger for anger are obstruction(s) to a goal and so if respondents are reporting that 'stuff' is getting in the way then they are more likely to be angry. If they then cannot express that anger, then stuff getting in the way may be adding fuel to the fire. This is partly supported by our findings in that 24% of those who agreed that they had felt stressed in the last 4 weeks also agreed that stuff was getting in the way and they felt unable to express that they were frustrated.

Those who find purpose in their work appear to experience less stress. However, many who report feeling stressed still find purpose in the work that they do. 81% who state that they do find purpose and meaning in their work also said that they have not felt stressed at work in the last 4 weeks.

Yet, 68% of those who say that they find purpose and meaning in their work also agree that they have felt stressed in the last 4 weeks. Thus, while purpose can contribute to improved wellbeing it can also be present when poor wellbeing outcomes are being reported. So, purpose is potentially a lever to pull that gives individuals, teams and organisations a mix of wellbeing outcomes.

Interestingly, there was a similar relationship between stress and freedom. Whilst having freedom appears to result in less stress, many of those who reported feeling stressed at work in the last 4 weeks also reported that they have enough freedom to perform their best work. Overall, 89% of those who said they have enough freedom to perform their best work also said that they have not felt stressed at work in the last 4 weeks.

Notably, 66% of those who agree that they have felt stressed at work in the last 4 weeks also stated that they have enough freedom to perform their best work. Thus, as above, there are potentially benefits and drawback for organisations, and these areas may require more consideration.





## Sleep

The findings of this survey demonstrate an important relationship between emotion expression in the workplace and the likelihood of work keeping us awake at night.

An overwhelming number of respondents (91%) who agreed that they can share when they feel happy at work also reported that work has not kept them awake in the last 4 weeks.

Also, 64% of those who said that it is ok for them to share when they feel overwhelmed or upset at work, and 61% who said it is ok to share when they feel frustrated or annoyed, also **strongly disagreed** that work has kept them awake in the last 4 weeks.

These numbers match up with our hypotheses that those who are able to express how they feel in the workplace would likely experience greater emotional wellbeing.

These findings are also interesting from an emotion regulation perspective as suppressing or repressing emotion (because you can't express it) can negatively impact sleep. In addition, lack of sleep or poor-quality sleep inhibits effective emotion regulation.

So, there is risk of a cycle whereby the inability to express emotions interrupts sleep which makes it harder to regulate emotions. Consequently, we then have more emotions to suppress which further interrupts our sleep.

While this particular piece of research did not explore this in detail, our hypothesis would be that this cycle ends in a flooding out moment of emotion where the individual cannot hold it in any longer and all the emotion comes out at once.

This may be through shouting, tears, walking away, or another form of absence from the workplace. It may also occur around colleagues or for an individual on their own.

As for freedom, we found that those who agree that they have the freedom to perform their best work are less likely to be kept awake by work – with 80% of those who say they have freedom also saying that work has not kept them awake in the last 4 weeks.

Stuff getting in the way also impacts sleep, with 65% of those who agree that stuff gets in the way of them performing their best work also saying that in the past 4 weeks work has kept them awake at night. Those who stated that they find purpose and meaning in their work were more likely to report that work has **not** kept them awake in the last 4 weeks, with 80% of those who agree that work gives them a sense of purpose also disagreeing that work keeps them awake at night.



## Pleasure

The majority of respondents (74%) reported finding pleasure in the work that they do. Whilst this is a promising statistic, we unveiled some interesting data between pleasure and other variables when conducting a cross analysis between the different components.

The survey findings indicate that the ability to express how we feel also impacts the degree to which we find pleasure in the work that we do. 92% who agreed that it is ok for them to share when they are feeling happy at work also stated that they find pleasure in their work.





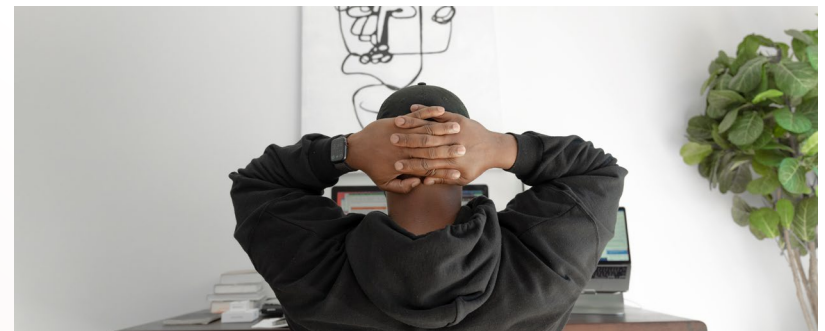
Looking at a different emotion, 84% who felt that it is not ok for them to share when they are feeling overwhelmed or upset at work also stated that they do not find pleasure in their work. This aligns with the idea that discreet happiness may link to or predict overall pleasure and that discreet sadness or overwhelm links to less enduring pleasure. If we test this hypothesis the other way, those that reported they **CAN** express overwhelm (55%) also reported finding pleasure in their work, thereby suggesting that the expression of sadness helps respondents move on from the emotion and reduce (or negate) the impact on overall pleasure.

*84% who felt that it is not ok for them to share when they are feeling overwhelmed or upset at work also disagreed that they find pleasure in their work.*

Stuff getting in the way of individual's performing their best work also had a connection to pleasure. 86% of those who said that stuff gets in the way of them performing their best work also said that they do not find pleasure in their work.

Finding purpose in the work that we do and experiencing pleasure also proved to have an important relationship. 90% of those who agree that they find purpose in their work also agree that they find pleasure in their work. On the other hand, 84% of those who disagree that they find purpose in their work also disagree that they find pleasure in the work that they do.

Having the freedom and autonomy to perform our best work appeared to have a correlation with finding pleasure in the work that we do. 86% of those who said that they find pleasure in their work also said that they have enough freedom to perform their best work. Additionally, 68% of those who disagreed that they had enough freedom to do their best work also disagreed with finding pleasure in the work that they do.



# Conclusion

This research set out to assess respondents' emotional wellbeing against three key evidence-based outcomes: the extent to which they have felt stressed over the last 4 weeks, had sleep interrupted by work and find pleasure in their work. These outcomes were correlated with variables that have a research-based link to emotional labour, self-determination and positive psychology.

The findings show that there are certain variables that universally correlate with positive outcomes which are:

- Expressing how you feel across a range of emotions
- Having freedom to do your best work
- Less 'stuff' getting in the way of doing your best work

This means that for individuals, teams and organisations, there are distinct areas that can be focused on, discussed or addressed in the workplace which can improve colleagues' levels of stress, how well they sleep and their overall pleasure in their work.

There are mixed outcomes for the final variable of respondents finding purpose and meaning in their work. The data suggests that it can correlate with respondents both agreeing and disagreeing that they have felt stressed at work. This double-edged sword is something that will need to be wielded with care and there is a tentative suggestion that if combined with the ability to express how you feel across a range of emotions then this may lead to more positive outcomes.





## Further exploration

There are several contextual implications which would be useful to overtly investigate in future research around emotional wellbeing in the workplace. Firstly, the survey was published during the COVID-19 pandemic which has had a significant impact on the overall wellbeing of individuals. Whilst we can speculate that the responses generated through this research do account for the impact of COVID-19, due to the time the study was conducted, it may prove valuable to complete further research which focuses on the impact of the pandemic on emotional wellbeing in a more direct manner.

Additionally, with the dynamic of many workforces changing as a result of COVID-19's impact to our global landscape, this is something which would be worthy to account for in additional research. It would be beneficial to assess the emotional wellbeing of individuals who solely work either in a remote or hybrid setting and who do not partake in any in-person or face-to-face work.

## Next steps

Workplace wellbeing is a phenomenon that is of growing importance and focus. Sometimes it can be hard to know the actions or choices that an individual, team or organisation can or should make in order to yield positive outcomes and results. While it would be a stretch too far to say these findings guarantee success, there is sufficient data to suggest that taking action on the variables of:

- Being able to express how you feel across a range of emotions
- Having freedom to do your best work
- Finding purpose and meaning in your work
- Limiting stuff getting in the way

Are likely to lead to positive outcomes against the extent to which people:

- Feel stressed by their work
- Have their sleep interrupted by work
- Find pleasure in their work

While it may sound simple, there are cultural, systemic, and operational challenges and barriers to achieving change in these apparently vital areas. As a consultancy that specialises in:

- Behaviour analysis and change
- Emotion in the workplace
- Evidence based practice
- Demonstrating value

Emotion at Work is perfectly placed to support individuals, teams, and organisations to be less stressed, sleep better and find pleasure in their work. We can help you achieve those things through the following:

Setting	Service(s)	Support Variables
Individual(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coaching</li> <li>• Support and resources in the Emotion at Work Community</li> </ul>	1. Expressing emotion
Team(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team development and facilitation</li> <li>• Leadership development programmes</li> <li>• Culture diagnosis and development</li> <li>• Support and resources in the Emotion at Work Community</li> </ul>	2. Having freedom to do your best work
Organisation(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership development programmes</li> <li>• Talent development programmes</li> <li>• Culture diagnosis and development</li> <li>• Organisational development consultancy</li> <li>• Support and resources in the Emotion at Work Community</li> </ul>	3. Finding purpose and meaning in your work
		4. Limiting stuff getting in the way

Should you wish to find out more about the different services Emotion at Work offers, access our website [here](#).

To access a variety of resources and assets around the topic of emotional wellbeing, register for the Emotion at Work Community [here](#)

If you want to contact Phil directly, email him [here](#) or call 07977 569398



[Phil Willcox](#)



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