

WORKPLACE WELLBEING

Prioritising yourself

Giving yourself permission to
notice how you are feeling



Welcome

The Workplace Wellbeing offer is a free, confidential package of support inclusive to all UHBW colleagues, whenever helpful.

Full details can be found on our website. Access using [this link](#) or by scanning the QR code.



This guide and other topics in the series are intended to provide general information only with signposts to expert sources of support. If you have any questions or suggestions, please email the Workplace Wellbeing team via wellbeing@uhbw.nhs.uk

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Prioritising yourself

So often we put ourselves last; prioritising others ahead of ourselves and even feeling selfish when we spend time focussing on ourselves.

But it is simply unhealthy to **always** focus on supporting others, either in work or at home, without also looking after our own physical and psychological wellbeing.

In the same way that we need to pay attention to what we eat and how we exercise to maintain *physical* health, we also need to know how to look after our mental or psychological health.

One in four of us will experience mental health difficulties at some point; and **all of us** can and will have periods where we struggle and feel we aren't coping.

The focus of this guide is going to be on one of the most helpful skills you can learn to start prioritising your own wellbeing. The skill is **noticing how you are feeling**; something we describe as self-awareness.

Ask yourself, how often do you make any time to stop and turn your attention inwards; considering how you are feeling?

Unfortunately many of us can be quick to label this sort of thing as self-indulgent, or a waste of our time. But unless we make a habit of checking in with ourselves, it is hard to know when something is not okay, and even harder to find solutions.

What is self-awareness?

Self-awareness is the skill of checking in with ourselves; taking brief moments to actually consider questions like:

"How am I doing?"

"How am I feeling?"

"I don't feel good; why is that?"

"What is going on for me at the moment?"

Later in this guide we will look at a simple tool you can try to help develop the skill of becoming more self-aware.

Barriers to being self-aware

Not noticing

We don't always recognise when we are struggling; sometimes because we are so distracted by the negative feelings we are experiencing, or because we don't know what signs we should be looking out for. Sometimes it can be little changes that creep up on us, or it might be that a colleague or friend is first to point things out to us such as:

- We don't quite seem ourselves
- We seem more tired or less talkative than usual
- We are now drinking 2 glasses of wine every evening instead of 1
- We keep getting into arguments with our partner or friends
- We are dreading work day after day etc.

Avoidance

Another barrier to developing good self-awareness is actively avoiding it. People often won't want to intentionally notice how they are doing for a number of reasons. It might be that they feel they are too busy, or they feel it is uncomfortable and a selfish thing to do. Or maybe they have learnt an attitude that you should just "get on with life".

Let's consider an example. Graham is a Junior Doctor at UHBW. Recently one of the Consultants asked to meet him because he was worried about Graham's wellbeing.

"I was pretty surprised. I don't have any anxiety disorders, and I'm not depressed; I just come to work and do my job."

The Consultant fed back to Graham that some of his peers had commented on his irritability and 'snappiness'. Whilst they liked him and recognised he was skilled and passionate about his work, they had started 'treading on eggshells' around him in case he snapped at them.

Whilst he heard this, Graham felt a little embarrassed that his colleagues felt this way.

The consultant helped him see that it was a positive step to notice that there was an issue, rather than just ignoring it. Graham decided it might be useful to start checking in with himself on a regular basis, to see if he could notice when he was getting frustrated in order to do something positive about it.

Why self-awareness can be helpful

Almost any type of therapy or self-help book will encourage you to develop the skill of becoming more self-aware.

Self-awareness is likely to benefit us as someone who is more self-aware is more likely to:

- Recognise when something is wrong as quickly as possible, before it gets worse
- Gain a better understanding of how they are actually feeling
- Recognise triggers and causes for their distress, which is incredibly useful to know for the future
- Consider how they can take positive action rather than ignoring it and risking it getting worse

When someone doesn't have good self-awareness and doesn't notice when they are struggling and not feeling okay, it can get worse. For example:

- They can feel confused, angry, fed-up and frustrated
- They can become snappy and have arguments with others
- They don't know what will help as they don't really know what's wrong
- They can feel "out of control" and overwhelmed by negative thoughts

Remember, it is not selfish to focus on how you are feeling.

It is a necessary step in taking care of yourself. And unless you are well, you can't effectively support others. As the saying goes, you can't pour from an empty cup.

How to develop self-awareness

Self-awareness takes a bit of practise but the benefits can be huge. To help get started, let's look at a model which can be used to develop the skill of noticing how we are. The model suggests that everyone can notice how they are feeling in **four different areas**:

1. Physical feelings: how we physically feel in our bodies, e.g. sensations we experience such as; aches, tiredness, feeling sick, shaky, sweaty, tense, the sensation of an upset stomach.

2. Moods: Your 'emotions'.

This is when we recognise we might just be experiencing an overall feeling, such as anger, frustration, sadness, fear, embarrassment.

3. Thoughts: Every moment of every day, we are all experiencing multiple thoughts, images, scenarios, and conversations; all happening in our mind.



We have many thousands of thoughts every day. We are aware of some of these, and some we aren't consciously aware of. But whether we notice them or not, some of these thoughts can significantly change our mood, even when nothing around us may have changed.

You may think of these thoughts as your internal voice.

"What shall I have for dinner later?"

"Why did they say that to me?"

"Did I lock the door this morning?"

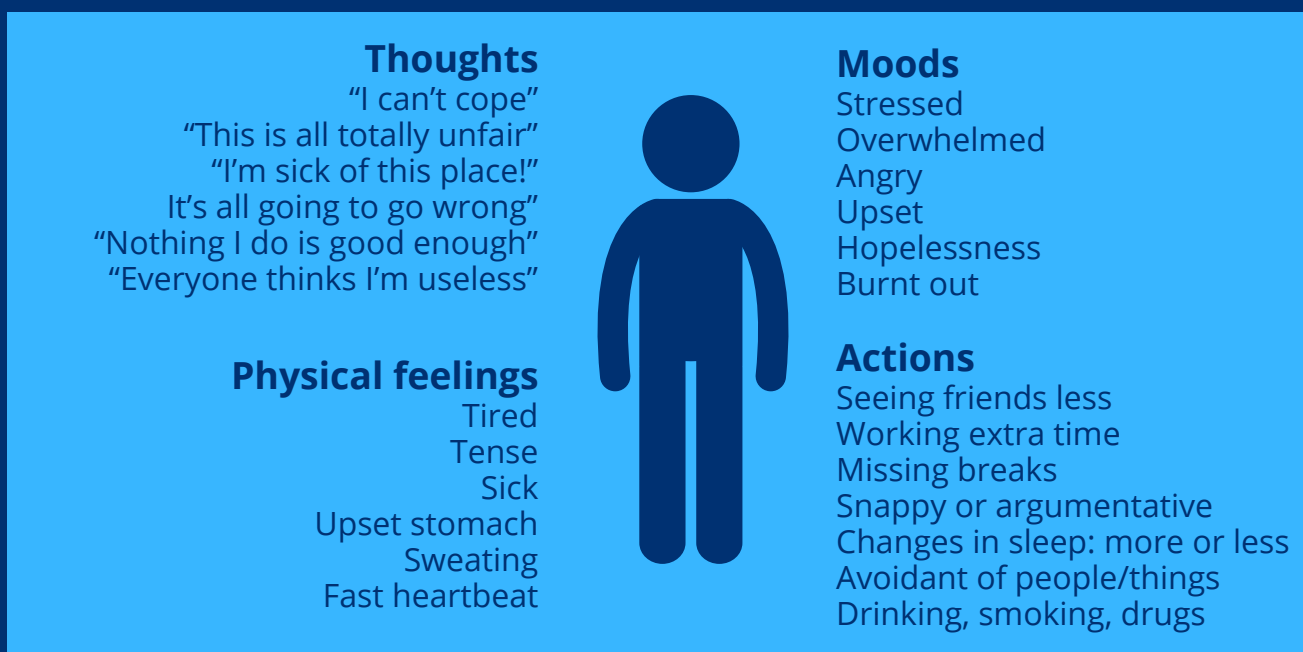
"I can't wait for a holiday!"

There is a self-care guide specifically about thoughts if you'd like to learn more - access [using this link](#).

4. Actions: Our behaviours; the things that we actually do. For example, checking our phone, going for a jog, taking a coffee break, making dinner, speaking up in a meeting, showering in the morning etc. All of these are actions that we decide to use our body to do.

When we experience events every day, these four areas can be affected; whether it's a traffic jam, a stomach ache, a conflict with a colleague, or a change to our job role. There will be a change in one or more of these four areas.

The image on the next page is a useful visual reminder of these four areas, and it presents a few further examples of what can be happening in each of these areas when someone is struggling with how they feel.



Increasing our awareness of changes in our four areas can help us to notice early when something might be wrong.

Some of us are good at noticing one or two areas in particular. For example, it might be that you already have good self-awareness of your **physical feelings**; e.g. "I know that I always get tense pain in my neck and shoulders when I'm tired."

Or perhaps you are better at noticing your **actions** (i.e. what you do or don't do); e.g. "Every time I get angry I stop talking as much, and choose to go quiet."

This is an excellent start however it may be beneficial to develop awareness in the other areas too so that you really start to notice when you need to prioritise your wellbeing and take care of yourself.

Using our four areas to become more self-aware

There are many different tools, websites, books that are available to help you develop your skill of becoming more self-aware, with most focussing on paying more attention to changes in these four areas. Let's look at one technique on the next page that you can start using right away.

Remember, developing self-awareness is a crucial step in improving your wellbeing. You can't look for solutions until you've identified the problem.

Self-awareness technique

We are going to look at a simple tool that you can use to help practice and develop more self-awareness; and in turn, a better way of noticing when you might be struggling with how you feel.

The tool is a worksheet which essentially provides a structured way of **checking in with each of the four areas** (as above) when you feel that something isn't feeling okay.

It is not the plan that you rely on this worksheet your whole life! It is more like a stepping stone where, by using it regularly for a limited time, your brain forms the new habit of checking in automatically, and becoming more aware of when something needs addressing.

Initially you might find it useful to use a copy of the worksheet at the end of every day; or maybe every other day. You might like to print out copies of the worksheet, or prefer to type the questions into the notes app on your phone. The worksheet takes you through a series of quick questions to help identify how you are doing.

Find details below to understand more about each of the worksheet questions.

1. How distressed am I?

In this case, distress simply means the negative feeling you might be experiencing.

It can be helpful to rate how distressed you were/are: from 0 (not at all) to 10 (the most distressed). If you find it easier to rate it using a % or even a sketch or picture, then do what feels helpful to you.

2. What caused this feeling?

Identifying what causes you to feel distress is one of the most useful things you can learn through developing self-awareness.

By knowing your 'triggers' you will be better able to anticipate difficulties so that they do not escalate. You may not always be able to avoid your triggers, but if you know them it may be that you can put things in place to reduce or even prevent your distress. If helpful, consider:

"When did this start today?" or "What caused me to feel this way?"

3. What is my mood?

This is your opportunity to notice your mood, or emotions. This might feel quite limited, but it is still useful to recognise what you felt, and whether there was a mixture of different emotions.

4. How am I physically feeling?

What can you feel in your body? Is there tension or aching anywhere in particular? Perhaps some sick/nauseous feelings in your stomach?

5. What are my thoughts?

What thoughts are going through your head? What are you thinking? You may find it quite easy to notice your thoughts, but some of us can find this quite challenging.

If you struggle to notice your thoughts you may find it helpful to first read the self-care guide specifically about thoughts if you'd like to learn more - access [using this link](#).

6. What am I doing? (Actions)

Have you started doing anything or stopped doing anything as a result of the situation and how you are/were feeling? For example, did you choose to stay quiet in the team meeting when you would normally speak up? Or did you decide to work through your scheduled break?

Useful tips for using the worksheet

- It is hard to form new habits. To help you remember to use this tool, why not set an alarm on your phone or online calendar for a set time at the end of every day.
- As another reminder, why not put a "how are you doing?" post-it note on your desk, bathroom mirror, by the kettle, on your mug or anywhere you are likely to see it.
- Keep trying it. Try not to get put off if you find it strange at first. If the worksheet doesn't fit your style, you can adapt it; for example, make a version on your phone in the notes app. Like learning any new skill or habit, it takes repeated practice to help your brain to start noticing and prioritising yourself

Worksheet: How am I feeling? Fill out the columns to help develop your self-awareness. If useful answer the questions as you feel now, or how you felt in the moment. (*Score yourself 0-10, where 0 is calm and 10 is very distressed).

How distressed am I feeling?*	TRIGGER What caused this feeling?	MOOD What is my mood?	PHYSICAL FEELING How am I physically feeling?	THOUGHTS What are my thoughts?
E.g. 8/10	E.g. Dave's comment in the Team meeting about us not performing.	E.g. Angry and a bit embarrassed.	E.g. Tense, particularly in my shoulders. Bit sick and I have a headache.	E.g. "This isn't fair. I never get the opportunities. Do people not think I'm good at my job?"