

Wellbeing and the infrastructure workforce



The construction industry has a long-term issue with health and wellbeing.

This is usually attributed to the nature of much of the work we do: long hours, working away from home, tight deadlines and operations with multiple risks and hazards that have to be meticulously managed.

These factors often represent the realities of infrastructure projects. But we don't accept that they make health and wellbeing issues inevitable. They do, however, mean that keeping people safe and helping them take better care of their mental and physical health is a significant challenge. Health and wellbeing must be priorities that guide our actions every day.

The overriding aim must be to nurture an open and supportive culture. One where people are well informed, accept personal responsibility and are actively helped to maintain good mental and physical health.



Why wellbeing matters

First and foremost, caring for employees and helping them to take better care of their own health and wellbeing is important in its own right. It's what any responsible and ethical employer would do. There are well documented links between wellbeing and living a longer and more fulfilling life. We'd be failing in our duty of care if we didn't take positive steps to help people achieve this.

We're also highly conscious of the essential work we do. We're responsible for building, maintaining and improving vital parts of our transport network. It involves working to tight deadlines, often in environments where there are multiple potential risks and hazards that have to be managed. Staying fully switched on at all times is essential.

Infrastructure operatives, supervisors and managers must be fully focused on the job to ensure the safety of themselves, their colleagues and the travelling public. Anxiety, depression and simply not maintaining a healthy sleep pattern can all affect concentration levels.

The cost of poor health and wellbeing

There is a substantial economic cost of poor health and wellbeing in the construction industry.

The following statistics indicate the scale of the issues the industry faces:

- Every day, two people employed in the construction industry will commit suicide.
- 2000 serious accidents each year where people are unable to return to work.
- 2.4 million working days lost each year due to illness.
- Stress, anxiety and depression account for 27% of illness in construction.
- 82,000 new cases of work-related illness every year.



Improving wellbeing

The causes of poor physical health are better understood and probably more obvious than the causes of poor mental health. If we eat too many of the wrong things, drink too much alcohol, smoke, or don't take enough exercise, it's a fair bet that our physical health will suffer in ways that are easy to see.

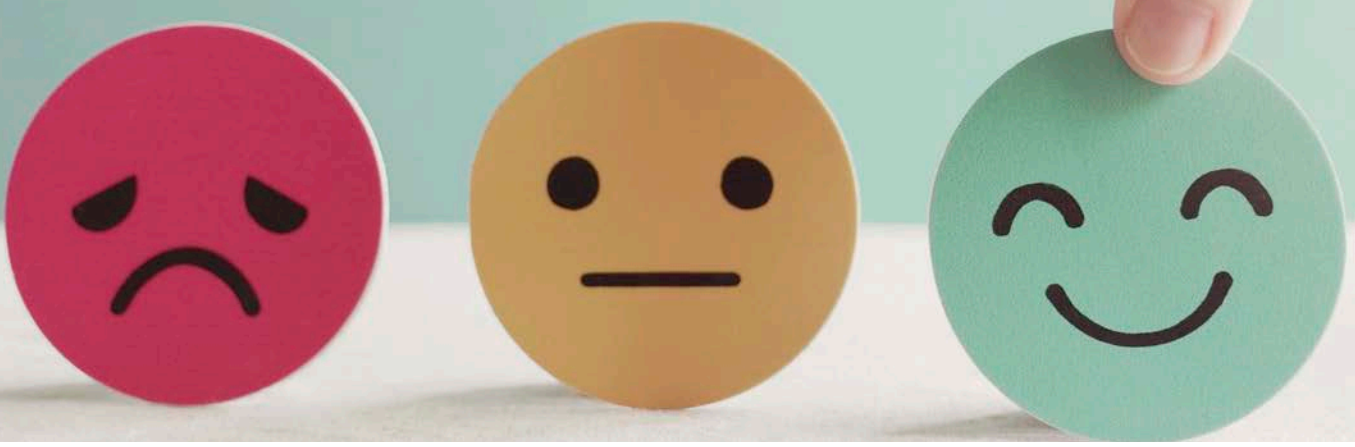
Mental wellbeing issues can be less obvious. But the principles of regular exercise and 'feeding' your mind in the right way still apply. There are many approaches that help people improve their mental and emotional wellbeing.

Seligman's PERMA+ model offers a blueprint for improving wellbeing through positive psychology:



- P** **Positive** emotions can be experienced through relationships, doing something creative in your spare time, and simply reflecting on the positive aspects of your life.
- E** **Engagement** means making time to do things you love, spending time in nature listening and observing, practising living in the moment, understanding your strengths and doing more things you're good at.
- R** **Relationships** - nurture better relationships in and outside of work, celebrate the successes of people you know and take an interest in others.
- M** **Meaning** is about doing things that matter to you as an individual and which have a purpose (however you choose to define it).
- A** **Achievements** can be inside or outside of work. Set yourself goals and celebrate when you achieve them. This could be learning a new skill or hobby or improving your physical fitness, which will give you a double benefit.

The 'plus' in PERMA+ refers to optimism, physical activity, nutrition and sleep. All of these have been proven to contribute to better mental health and wellbeing. Optimism can be a real challenge in the modern age where it's too easy to get into the habit of 'doom scrolling' on social media. Breaks from technology can be a helpful antidote.



How can companies promote better wellbeing?

Building a positive culture is essential so that people feel valued and supported. This has much more to do with how we act than what we say. A healthy culture is one where people are encouraged and feel able to speak up if they're struggling or they think a colleague may need help.

Managers should lead by example by taking care over their own nutrition and general health, taking proper breaks and using their full holiday entitlement. Make it unremarkable for people in your team to talk about their feelings.

The basics must also be in place, such as robust anti-bullying and harassment policies that are well publicised and enforced consistently.

One of the most important things any company can do is to be vigilant and aware of work situations that can be harmful to wellbeing. In the infrastructure sector this would include avoiding unrealistic deadlines and ensuring that people are not expected to work unreasonably long hours.



Specific aspects of good practice include the following:

- Ensure goals and targets are realistic and achievable.
- Over-communication is better than under-communication.
- Give people as much control over their work as possible.
- Be confident that managers and supervisors are aware of the causes of poor mental health and wellbeing, and confident about supporting team members when needed.
- Regularly take stock of health and wellbeing across your organisation.

Peer support and buddy systems offer people the opportunity to talk to someone other than their manager if that's what they'd prefer. It's also essential that managers and supervisors make themselves available for regular work-related chats and remember to check-in with staff, rather than assume everything's fine because nobody has raised an issue.

Social activities can play a big part in promoting wellbeing. This can be something as simple to organise as a lunchtime walking group. Other healthy organisational traits include recognising positive behaviours such as collaboration, teamwork and information sharing.

Organisations that are committed to health and wellbeing make employee engagement a reality rather than an aspiration.

Remote working

It's easy to assume that wellbeing issues in the infrastructure sector mainly affect project teams working onsite in higher-risk situations. But wellbeing issues can affect anyone in any occupation.

Since the pandemic many more staff work remotely for at least some of the week, including those in administrative and support functions. While this arrangement helps many people achieve a better work-life balance there is a risk of becoming isolated and alienated from your colleagues. Potential mental health and wellbeing issues can be harder to spot.

The key points with remote workers are not to leave them out of regular communications and for managers to check-in regularly to see how they're feeling and give them the chance to raise any concerns. Our experience during the Covid pandemic taught us how important it is to remain fully engaged with our teams. This discipline forms an important part of our hybrid working policy.



Stand up for better health

We shouldn't forget that the construction industry employs many thousands of office based workers. There are proven links between sedentary lifestyles and a range of serious medical conditions including diabetes, heart disease, strokes, cancer and depression.

The estimated cost of inactivity to the UK economy is estimated at £7.4bn each year, with an £0.9bn additional direct cost to the NHS. As employers we have to do all we can to get employees up and out of their chairs as much as possible and take a proper lunch break rather than eating a sandwich at their desk. Lunchtime walking groups and encouraging people to use the stairs rather than lifts are simple measures that can make a big difference.

Taking stock of wellbeing

The charity Mind has produced some excellent resources to help companies manage wellbeing more effectively. One of these specifically covers how to take stock of mental health and wellbeing in your organisation. Some of the main points are summarised below but it's worth [downloading the full guidance](#).

Companies that are serious about the wellbeing of their employees regularly take stock across the organisation. Whatever policies you have in place it's ultimately all about how people feel, both about their own wellbeing and about how the company helps them to take care of it.

Consultation doesn't necessarily mean setting up new processes. It may simply mean adapting the ones you have to ask the right questions. Tracking staff sickness data can help identify any underlying wellbeing issues.

The HSE Management Standards Indicator Tool contains a comprehensive list of questions that can help employers devise staff surveys that will reveal underlying issues that can affect workplace wellbeing.

For example, employee surveys can be updated to ask specific questions about workload, deadlines, whether people feel properly trained to do their job and whether they feel they have enough control over their work. Other questions could explore whether priorities are made clear and if people feel they have sufficient development opportunities.

A training audit can also be helpful to verify that managers and supervisors have received appropriate training on mental health and wellbeing issues.



The Lighthouse Club 5 step framework

Octavius Infrastructure is proud to be a supporter of the Lighthouse Club. We'd urge every organisation involved in construction and infrastructure to adopt the charity's 5 step framework to better health and wellbeing:

1. Sign the Building Mental Health Charter.
2. Order a Helpline Pack and promote the free 24/7 Construction Industry Helpline to your colleagues.
3. Deliver a 'Tool Box Talk' about mental health and wellbeing in your workplace.
4. Offer employees who manage people the opportunity to complete Mental Health First Aid training.
5. Ensure you have enough Mental Health First Aiders trained for your workplace (recommended 1 per 100 employees).

You can find all the details on [the Lighthouse Club](#) website.

What Octavius is doing

Looking after the health and wellbeing of our people and our supply chain partners is ingrained in our business, as part of our key pillar of Learn, Grow & Thrive. It flows from our business plans, working policies and goal setting, right through the everyday aspects of how we work.

Our Health and Wellbeing Policy is reinforced by our Leadership Team and our 45 trained mental health first aiders as well as regular check-ins and Pulse surveys to ensure that the experience of working for and with Octavius lives up to our health and wellbeing commitments.

Regular surveys ask our people about their experiences; whether, for example, they feel supported to take care of their wellbeing, are able to speak up if they have concerns and that the deadlines and goals they are set are achievable.

We hold quarterly mental health reviews with our mental health first aiders and Cat Cliffe, our Director of People and Sustainability. Not only is this an opportunity to check in on the welfare of our mental health first aiders, but the feedback from these reviews together with our survey results are all fed back into our campaigns and reported to staff in a 'you said, we did' format.

Encouraging people to speak up

Our STOPThink! cultural change programme is focused on each individual and has four modules specifically related to health and wellbeing. It encourages people to recognise and speak up when they're not at their best and to have the confidence to positively challenge when they have concerns about colleagues and supply chain partners.



Octavius has a monthly wellbeing calendar for staff and partners that focuses on a different topic each month. This is supported by our company Yammer channel and downloadable resources used in interactive toolbox talks.

Other support activities include stand downs and roadshows to help keep health and wellbeing at the front of everyone's mind. We have highly visible wellbeing ambassadors working onsite to make it easier for people to speak up whenever they have a concern.



The Lighthouse Club

A big advantage of our association with the Lighthouse Club is that our SME supply chain partners can access a similar level of employee assistance support as our own staff enjoy through our private healthcare provider. The Lighthouse Club Helpline App is a convenient way for people to check on their own wellbeing and be signposted to the support they need.

There are further initiatives within individual site teams. This can include guidance on healthier eating and cookery demonstrations.

On our long-running Gade Valley project we installed a fully-equipped gym that is free for our staff and supply chain partners to use.

There's no single action or initiative that can make a sustainable difference to wellbeing. Progress comes from embedding best practice through the day-to-day operations of our company.

"The important thing is to make health and wellbeing a priority every moment of every day. Our people and our partners recognise that we're here to support them and that when they speak up, something happens."

Neil Wilson

Safety, Health, Environment
and Assurance Director.



To learn more about our approach to wellbeing and project delivery, visit our **Transport Infrastructure Resource Centre** or contact us by email at **hello@octaviusinfrastructure.co.uk**