



beating the WORRY BUG

You are what you do. Look at any job and you will find a unique worker health profile. A sheep shearer burns more than 5000 calories a day whereas a desk worker struggles to burn calories above the level needed to remain conscious. Politicians, on-call doctors and long-haul truck drivers are among the most sleep-deprived. Publicans are the most likely occupation to die of cirrhosis of the liver. The type of work you do, and when and where you do it, all impacts on your physical and mental wellbeing. In some industries, such as medical workers and the farming community, suicide rates are up to six times the national average. Clearly, your job can have a big impact on your mental health and wellbeing.

Dr David Harris PhD looks at the complex relationship between your job, health and fitness and highlights the unique health characteristics of particular occupations and how you can turn them to your advantage for improved health, fitness and quality of life.

Work, worry and happiness

Each job has its own health profile which is surprisingly stable, often over decades, despite the fact that people come and go. There is something about the industry itself that sustains the health (and illness) profile of workers within it. So it is that your job affects your mental health and emotional wellbeing. For example, high-school teaching, social work and being a manager, consistently rate as being among the most stressful of occupations. In contrast, a recent study in the UK found the happiest workers to be hairdressers, beauticians, plumbers and members of the clergy. Whatever your occupation, whether you are aware of it or not, each day you make decisions about how you manage your work and mental health.

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The cost of doing nothing

Mental health problems cost big dollars and impose an enormous burden on the individual who suffers and society. The most common mental health problems are depression, anxiety and stress-related disorders. Depression is the most disabling illness in the Western world, also contributing to premature death by suicide, injury, cardiovascular disease, and other illnesses. Depression costs Australia

\$3.3 billion (AUD) in lost productivity each year. Six million working days are lost with a further 12 million days of reduced productivity. Comparative national costs are \$9 billion for the United Kingdom and \$83 billion (USD) for the United States. Recent research shows the costs to an Australian company of each employee with untreated depression is \$10,000 (AUD) per year.

Knowledge in the community about mental health problems such as depression is generally poor. Depression is a common illness. About one in every five Australians will experience a serious mental health problem at some stage in their life. At any given time, about one in every 20 adults is suffering from major depression. A similar number will have a less severe depression. It used to be thought that more women than men suffered from depression but recent research suggests that rates are similar in both sexes, but men are less likely to seek help and more likely to mask the depression. Studies suggest that up to three in 10 employees will have a mental health problem, commonly depression, in any one year. About half of people who have depression do not seek medical care. This is in spite of recent evidence for the effectiveness of brief interventions. More on that later in this article.

Doctors and farmers are two occupations with serious mental health problems, having suicide rates much higher than most other occupations. Suicide is strongly linked to mental health problems. Up to 90 percent of suicides occur in people suffering from a mental disorder, most commonly depression. Why are doctors, especially females, and farmers, especially males, at increased risk of mental health problems? Like most questions about health at work, the answer involves a complex interplay of personal and workplace characteristics. Doctors hold

themselves to high standards but work in settings where it is impossible to give optimum medical care. Many doctors blame themselves for what they perceive to be substandard care which creates feelings of failure and self-doubt. These negative emotions are compounded by long hours worked under high stress over many years. Chronic tiredness and stress can mask the symptoms of depression so the doctor is less likely to seek treatment. Moreover, the lifestyle of a young doctor can also reduce social contact leading to isolation and a lack of support. Thus, the conditions are set for mental health problems to flourish.

Farmers share some surprising similarities in their circumstances to doctors. They too carry heavy responsibilities yet work in an environment where optimal performance is sometimes impossible. Changes in weather or the economy, beyond the control of the farmer, can quickly result in a poor or even disastrous year. This can lead to feelings of failure and despair. Farmers are geographically isolated which reduces opportunities for social interaction, support and medical treatment. In addition, farmers often have access to guns which make a suicide attempt more likely to be fatal.

Depression at work

Depression can have a serious impact on your ability to work. You may find yourself working more slowly, making more mistakes, having trouble concentrating, being forgetful and tardy. The typical response is to try harder and soldier on, all the while knowing that you are not doing the job as well as you usually do. It is tragic that so many people persevere with undiagnosed and untreated depression, sometimes for years, when research shows that the sooner your depression is recognised and treated, the sooner you will get back to your normal life, including performance at work.



How is your mental health? Test yourself below.

AlphaOne Q-scale

Q stands for "Quality of Life" which is another way of saying how enjoyable, meaningful and fulfilling your life is. Your quality of life can be influenced by a number of everyday factors such as how well you sleep, your quality of family and social relations, how much you worry, and how good you feel about yourself. Research shows that people can increase their quality of life if they are aware of, and attend to, these everyday things that can make life pleasurable or miserable, worrying or worry-free.

The AlphaOne Q-scale is based on state-of-the-science measures of mental health and happiness. As you answer the following items, please think of the way that things have

	Q-scale item	None of the time	A little of the time	Some of the time	Most of the time	All of the time
1	I get a good night's sleep	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
2	All things considered, I feel satisfied with my family relations and/or friends	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
3	I find it difficult to relax	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
4	I feel unhappy and depressed	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
5	I lack confidence in myself	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
6	I feel under strain or pressure	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
7	Pain interferes with my work and leisure	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
8	I've lost interest or pleasure in most of my usual activities	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
9	All things considered, I feel satisfied in my work	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
10	All things considered, I feel reasonably happy with life	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1

Score
 3 for any item = one yellow flag Your quality of life may be improved with attention to issues identified by the Q-scale
 4 or 5 for any item = two yellow flags You may benefit from speaking with a doctor or clinical psychologist about issues identified by the Q-scale

Source: The Q scale is developed by Dr David Harris and Professor Ross Harris for AlphaOne, a research-based workplace health and productivity program. The items most relevant to depression within the Q scale are 4 and 8.

been for you in the past 4 weeks.

Preventing and treating mental health problems

First, understand that mental health problems such as depression and anxiety are serious illnesses. Your brain has developed a medical condition that is disrupting your moods, your thinking, and your behaviour. This is not a sign of weakness or a personal failing. You are unwell. If this was your heart playing up or your eyes then you would very likely visit a doctor as soon as possible. The same approach should be taken for maintaining your mental health. Treatment options are available that typically involve a combination of medication and psychology. Research shows that the combined approach works best. For more details, see the links below.

As protection against mental health problems, research shows the following strategies can help:

- Find at least 30 minutes to be physically active, most days. This is your number one strategy for your mental health.
- Learn to identify your ANTS (Automatic Negative Thoughts) and replace them with

PETS (Performance Enhancing Thoughts). Practice this every day.

- Practice relaxation skills every day. Deep breathing and mental imagery are useful tools.
- Manage your sleep. Create an environment and routine conducive to giving you quality sleep.
- Eat well and control the drugs and alcohol. Poor nutrition can disrupt mood and sleep, compounding mental health problems and potentially interfering with positive strategies you may be taking.
- Write down your goals. A picture in your mind of what you want to do in life helps give direction and meaning to every day.
- Find support. This is especially important if you are feeling worried about your mental health.
- Re-discover your joys and sense of humour. If it is while since you have had a good laugh then you already have a sign that your mental health is under threat.

Is your job making you depressed?

In fact, work is generally acknowledged as being positive for your health, providing you with an income, a sense of security, and contributing to your sense of self. Work also creates reasons to interact with others, which is generally good for your health. Finally, work is one of the primary means by which you acquire skills and knowledge as an adult and develop habits of life-long learning, which are so important for maintaining mental health into your older years.

NEXT ISSUE: We continue the workplace health series and consider workplaces with a culture of drinking and their impact on your wellbeing.

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