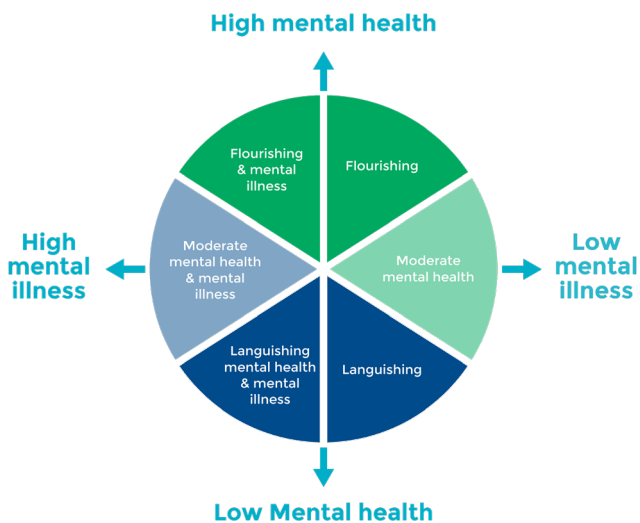


Pandemic fatigue and burnout: Practical coping strategies



What is mental health?

Mental health is on a continuum, with flourishing at one end where mental health is high and languishing at the other when mental health is low.¹



We can all sit anywhere on the mental health continuum at any time in our life depending on the amount of stressors and the coping strategies we have available to us.

When we experience good **mental health**, it doesn't mean that we don't have challenges, it means we're able to cope with what's on our plate.²

When we have positive emotions

and encounter positive social and psychological functioning *most* of the time, we are in a state of **flourishing**.³

At the opposite end, we experience a state of **languishing** when we have low levels of positive emotions and low levels of social and psychological functioning *most* of the time.⁴

Languishing is not a mental illness. It is a feeling of emptiness and apathy, like you're looking at the world through a foggy windshield, or muddling through your days. It is the absence of wellbeing. You do not have a mental illness but you are not a picture of mental health either.

Mental illness also sits on a continuum, with high mental illness at one end and low mental illness at the other end. A person diagnosed with mental illness may flourish with the right supports in place.

Only a mental health practitioner can diagnose a mental health illness, such as depression or anxiety using standardised criteria.

Pandemic fatigue

Pandemic fatigue has been defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as

a “demotivation to follow recommended protective behaviours, emerging gradually over time and affected by a number of emotions, experiences and perceptions”.⁵

What this means is that we are all exhausted as we are running on empty, both physically and emotionally. Because we’re exhausted, our coping ability is lowered, leaving us more anxious and on edge. We may also be demotivated to follow the behaviours that keep us safe from the virus. We may see some of us not physically distancing, being less vigilant with hand washing and perhaps not using QR codes. Pandemic fatigue leaves us with a feeling of ‘we have just had enough!’

Emotions and burnout

Like mental health and mental illness, emotions sit on a continuum from unpleasant to pleasant.⁶ They also range in their intensity from high to low. For example, excitement is a pleasant emotion with high energy, whilst calmness is also a pleasant emotion with a much lower energy. Both pleasant, yet one is more active than the other.

Burnout sits on the unpleasant side of the continuum. The WHO has defined it as an ‘occupational phenomenon’ resulting from workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.⁷ For a person to experience burnout, three criteria must be present:

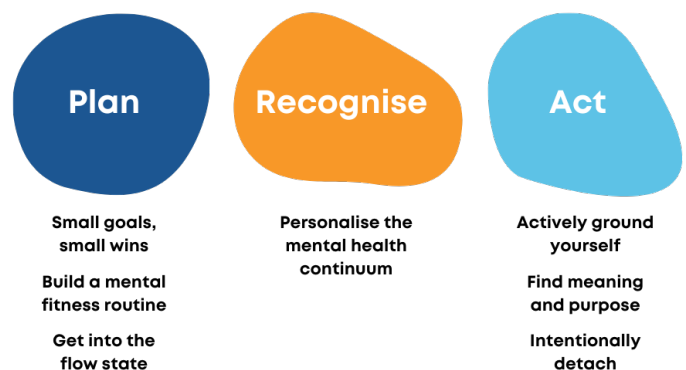
- Feelings of exhaustion or being utterly depleted
- Cynicism, deep negativism or distance from the person’s job

- Reduced job performance capacity- this reduced capacity may be real or perceived.

Stress, or pressure at work is inevitable. However, if the stress or pressure at work is not addressed properly, this may lead to burnout. It is not a mental health illness, but if you choose to ignore your experience of burnout, you are at higher risk of a diagnosis down the track.

Tips to cope with pandemic fatigue and burnout

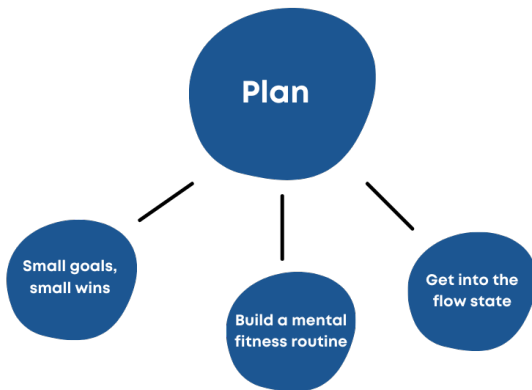
Wellbeing is everyone’s business. The organisation, team leaders and employers all have roles to play when creating a thriving workplace to support good mental health, but there are tips that you, as an employee, can incorporate into your everyday life, as well as in more challenging times, to help you stay well.



You can **plan, recognise** and **act** to support your own mental health and wellbeing. This will depend on what’s going on for you and where you sit along the mental health continuum.

Research tells us there is a ‘person-activity-fit’⁸, which means that we need to try things out to see what works for us!

How are you planning to stay well?



Small goals, small wins

Create lists and keep to routines that prioritise productive time and rest time in your day to reduce stress and overload.⁹ Think of two or three things that you need to complete and upon completion, reward yourself with a short break, such as:

- Make a cup of tea or coffee
- Listen to a favourite song
- Play with a pet
- Go for a walk around the block
- Sit in the sun or a favourite arm chair

Build your mental fitness routine

Just like your physical fitness, you need to keep working on your mental fitness to so it remains strong. To strengthen your mental fitness, explore the [5 Ways to Wellbeing](#) - **connecting, learning, giving, noticing** and **being active**¹⁰ - and consider how you can intentionally build each component into your everyday life. These will be different for different people, so it's worth exploring what works for you.

5 Ways to Wellbeing



Learn more about the 5 Ways to Wellbeing and how to insert them into your every day:

- [Wellbeing Check-in and Action Plan](#)
- [Looking After You booklet](#)

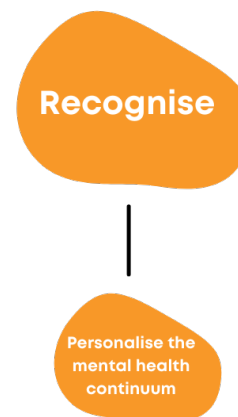
Get into the flow state

Flow is a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else matters and time flies effortlessly.¹¹ To experience flow, you need to set up time and eliminate distractions, such as:

- Block out time in your calendar
- Turn off notifications and put your phone on silent
- Eat a snack and have a glass of water on hand
- Ensure you have everything to complete the task.

How do you know where you sit on the mental health continuum?

Knowing where you sit on the mental health continuum can help you select tools to support your move to high mental health when you begin to feel like you're languishing.



Personalise the mental health continuum

Think about and plot your behaviours on the continuum, from when you have high mental health to low mental health on the scale below.

Think about what are you like when you are at your best. You may:

- Connect with friends regularly
- Go for walks each day

- Eat healthy and balanced meals
- Plan for quiet time to rejuvenate
- Take sleep seriously and go to bed at a regular time

At the other end of the continuum, think about the signs that show you may not be tracking so well. You may:

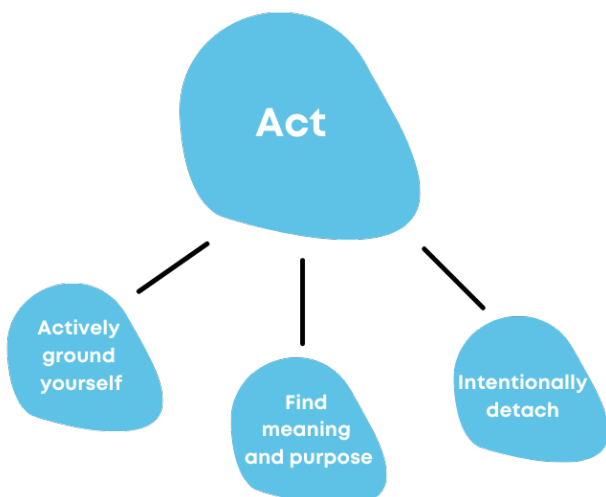
- Sleep in more than usual
- Not answer calls from friends
- Eat poorly
- Binge watch tv until very late
- Be more snappy or teary than usual

Being self-aware can make us better at our jobs, better communicators in the workplace and enhance our self-confidence and job-related wellbeing.¹²



What do I do when my mental health is low?

When you're able to recognise what is going on within yourself, you are more able to act to support your wellbeing.



Actively ground yourself

In moments of stress, it is important to be able to ground yourself and stay in the present moment.¹³ When stress is up, we have adrenaline and cortisol running through our brain and body. If you can ground yourself in the present moment, you are more likely to respond thoughtfully, rather than react.

To ground yourself you can:

- Take three slow, deep breaths to slow your nervous system's response and lessen the amount of adrenaline and cortisol running through your brain and body.
- Use the 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 technique. Acknowledge five things that you can see around you, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell and one thing you can taste.

Grounding techniques turns attention away from thoughts, memories or worries to refocus on the present moment.

Find meaning and purpose

Meaning and purpose can be found through the use of 'pro-social' behaviours. These are the opposite to anti-social behaviours and include things like helping, sharing, comforting and cooperating. These types of behaviours have a positive and uplifting effect on the receiving person, but also for the person 'doing good'.¹⁴ Some easy things to try include:

- Donating to those in need
- Volunteering time in an area of interest e.g., your child's team sport committee
- Give your undivided time to a colleague, friend or neighbour in need
- Share smiles to people you pass on the street

- Give genuine compliments to colleagues and friends

Intentionally detach

Setting yourself regular short breaks throughout the day supports your biology and allows you to detach from the work tasks at hand.¹⁵ Our biology is made up of cycles called *ultradian rhythms*. We have performance peaks of 90 minutes, followed by lows (or troughs) of about 20 minutes. This happens to all of us throughout our waking hours.

We ‘hit the wall’ at certain times of the day, especially if we push past 90 minutes without taking a break. These are the troughs. It may be a time where we crave sugar, fidget or can’t concentrate and complete a task. We may feel more exhausted as the day goes on and no amount of caffeine or sugar can pull us through.

We need to take a break for our brain to recharge before we can enter peak performance again. If you can’t afford a 20 minute break, think less – five minutes is better than none at all! You can:

- Step away from the screen and walk around your garden or the block
- Chat with a friend
- Do a short guided meditation
- Listen to your favourite song (and sing along too!)
- Make a cup of tea or coffee and sit down away from your desk to enjoy it

Final thoughts

Good mental health and wellbeing takes effort and practice. There are many tools and tips that can help you flourish, but it is up to you to know what works best in your circumstance. There is no “one size fits all” approach!

If we explore strategies to **plan** to stay well, **recognise** when we are not at our best and **act** to support good mental health, then we will minimise our risks of burnout and the depths of pandemic fatigue. We cannot change the world as we know it, but we can control our response to it.

What’s one thing you’re going to do every day to support and enhance your wellbeing?



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