Managing and Supporting Well-Being in a Digital World

Context and Practice for Staff in Higher Education, Dr Ceara Bergin

As remote working and socialising continues to be the norm, HECA's Academic Quality Enhancement Forum (HAQEF) organised a four-part series to run through February and March 2021 under the theme: managing and supporting well-being in a digital world. In the first session, Dr Ceara Bergin, clinical psychologist, addressed this topic within the *Context and Practice for Staff in Higher Education*.

Over 55 delegates from higher education, representing a wide range of roles, including lecturing, quality assurance, academic administration, learning technology, professional development and senior management, attended the event.

The aims of the session were:

- To consider the topics of stress and wellbeing within your roles and organisational contexts.
- To think about the additional impact of the pandemic, practically, personally, and professionally.
- To consider ways to approach, adapt to and connect with these challenges and opportunities.
- To leave with some ideas to apply to your own life.
- To feel it was an hour well spent (or at least not a waste!).

Session and Participant Context

At the beginning of the event Dr Bergin prompted attendees to be present, and to disengage from other media/distractions such as phones and email for the duration. In 'getting to know' where the audience were coming from, Ceara asked participants to describe, in one word, their week and/or how they were feeling at that time. Participants could add more than one entry. The results of the insession poll are captured in this word-cloud.



This reveals many common challenges to individual wellbeing at present, with the larger phrases being those that were repeated - including feeling tired, busy, overwhelmed and working in an environment that is intense and hectic.

The Stress Context

Having established the baseline, Dr Bergin spoke to the current context of our lives and the wider systems around us. She indicated that it was useful to think about the broader system in which we all function e.g. individually, with our family and friends, in work, our broader professional environment, and society at large. She spoke to the pandemic being a perfect storm of stress and change, where every aspect of our lives and social systems are under pressure and our usual avenues for managing stress and seeking support may not be available, and this may have additional influence on our ability to cope.

A little bit of background on the biological aspects of stress was provided to contextualise our stress response in terms of the brain, and 'fight or flight' mechanism.

Additional Demands

From a further poll, and the resulting word cloud, the variety and abundance of additional demands currently impacting on participants' lives were clearly identified. Dr Bergin introduced the Three Circle Model as a compassionate approach to contextualise how our emotional systems currently function. In this model, threat, drive and soothing systems combine to influence our overall emotional state. Having balanced emotion systems enhance our ability to think clearly, respond to difficult emotions and approach goals.



Drive

Threat

Soothe

The threat-focused system is about protection, safety seeking, and fight/flight. Emotions connected to this system include anger, disgust, fear and anxiety. The red circle (threat) is essential for survival. However, it can easily take-over our responses without our realising. This can lead to a wide-range of issues related to chronic stress, and Dr Bergin briefly identified some of the emotional and physical symptoms which

may be experienced.

The drive system is incentive and resource-focused. It activates us to work towards things that we want, desire, or seek to achieve. Emotions connected to this (purple) circle are drive, excitement and vitality. Often we use the drive system to help us manage the threat system.

The soothing system is about settling, grounding, not being in pursuit of anything, and safeness. Emotions connected to this (green) circle include being calm and content. It helps us rest and digest and have open attention. The soothing system can be restorative and regenerative.

The compassionate approach, therefore, is not always to just "make things better" or "chill" (i.e. not just simply enlarging one's soothing system). It can involve choosing to do a difficult thing – tackling a task you have put off – in recognition that this is causing you stress and that its completion is helpful to you in the longer term.

Coping Guidance

Dr Bergin identified some key guidance to support our coping mechanisms:

- Consider how close you are towards your <u>key values</u>? balancing time and values
- A brain and body cannot feel regulated if it does not have the building blocks (well fuelled, enough water, sunlight etc.)
- Regulate your brain (and body) bottom up or top down

Ceara closed the session by identifying some useful further support and research resources for participants, and facilitated a short feedback session.

Feedback

Participant feedback was hugely positive with many stating that the 'short yet powerful session' brought peace, was very enjoyable and relaxing, provided great take-aways and, importantly, that there was a feeling of togetherness arising from knowing that feelings were shared amongst many.