

# Documenting three good things could improve your mental well-being in work

September 4 2017, by Kate Isherwood

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The UK is facing a mental health crisis in the workplace. [Around 4.6m working people](#) – 64% of the British population – suffer from either depression or anxiety. In total, [25% of all EU citizens](#) will report a mental health disorder at some point in their lives.

People who have been diagnosed with a [mental health](#) disorder, or show symptoms of one, and remain in work are known as "presentees". These individuals may have trouble concentrating, memory problems, find it difficult to make decisions, and have a loss of interest in their work. They underperform and are non-productive.

Medication and/or talking therapies – like [cognitive behavioural therapy](#) (CBT) – have been shown to be highly effective in treating common mental [health](#) disorders. But these interventions are aimed at those who are already signed off sick due to a mental health diagnosis ("absentees").

Stress and pressure in work is not the same as at home, so those with [mental health issues](#) who are still in work need a different kind of help. In the workplace, employees can be subject to tight deadlines and heavy workloads, and may potentially be in an environment where there is a stigma against talking about mental health.

## **Reframing mental health**

So what can be done for those working people who have depression or anxiety? Research has found that simply treating a person before they are signed off sick will not only protect their mental health, but can actually result in increased workplace productivity and well-being. For example, when a [group of Australian researchers](#) introduced CBT sessions into a British insurance company, they found it greatly improved workplace mental health.

In the study, seven three-hour sessions of traditional CBT were offered to all staff in the company. The sessions focused on [thinking errors](#), goal-setting, and time management techniques. At follow up appointments seven weeks and three months after the sessions had ended, the participants showed significant improvements in things like job

satisfaction, self-esteem, and productivity. They had also improved on clinical measures of things like attributional style – how a person explains life events to themselves – psychological well-being and psychological distress.

However, there have been concerns that using the types of treatment typically given to people outside work may be distracting to an employee. The worry is that they don't directly contribute to company targets, instead offering more indirect benefits that can't be as easily measured.

But there is an alternative that doesn't take up too much company time and can still have a huge impact on employees' mental health: [positive psychology](#).

## **Three good things**

In the last 15 years, psychological study has moved away from the traditional disease model, which looks at treating dysfunction or mental ill-health, towards the study of strengths that enable people to thrive. This research focuses on helping people to identify and utilise their own strengths, and encourages their ability to flourish.

Positive psychology concentrates on the development of "light-touch" methods – that take no longer than ten to 15 minutes a day – to encourage people to stop, reflect and reinterpret their day.

Something as easy as writing down three good things that have happened to a person in one day is proven to have [a significant impact](#) on happiness levels. In addition, previous research has also found that learning how to [identify and use one's own strengths](#), or [express gratitude](#) for even the littlest things, can also reduce depression and increase happiness too.

This is effective in the workplace as well: when a positive work-reflection diary system was put in place at a Swiss organisation, researchers found that it had a [significant impact on employee well-being](#). Writing in diaries decreased employees' depressive moods at bedtime, which had an effect on their mood the next morning. The staff members were going to work happier, simply by thinking positively about how their shift had gone the day before.

Added to this, when another group of [researchers asked](#) employees of an outpatient family clinic to spend ten minutes every day completing an online survey, stress levels, mental and physical complaints all significantly decreased. The questionnaire asked the participants to reflect on their day, and write about large or small, personal or work-related events that had gone well and explain why they had occurred – similar to the three good things diary. The staff members reported events like a nice coffee with a co-worker, a positive meeting, or just the fact that it was Friday. It showed that even small events can have a huge impact on happiness.

The simple practice of positive reflection creates a real shift in what people think about, and can change how they perceive their work lives. And, as an added benefit, if people share positive events with others, it can boost social bonds and friendships, further reducing workplace stress.

Reframing the day can also create a feedback loop that enhances its impact. When we are happier, we are more productive; when we are more productive, we reach our goals, which helps us to focus on our achievements more, which in turn makes us happier.

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