

# Managing Mental Health And Wellbeing While Working In A Laboratory

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Working in medical laboratories has undoubtedly been a fruitful journey over the last 7+ years. I have picked up numerous skills, first in Microbiology as a Medical Laboratory Assistant and more recently in Immunology as an Assistant Practitioner (AP). I take a great deal of pride in providing the best possible patient care, which gives me a sense of fulfillment and helps me sustain a high level of quality.

My reflection followed the methodology of the ERA reflective method which simply analyses what happened, the significance, and the following action (Experience, Reflection, Action)<sup>2</sup>. I looked and my mood and behaviour had become lower and more irritable. The significance was a reduced enthusiasm to be in work, but fortunately, the care I put into my work I did not feel was impacted. Another question was ‘why?’, on reflection I struggle to delegate tasks, making me feel I take on more than I should. This can have an impact on the quality of work performed as stress increases.

The workplace can be a naturally stressful environment, with high workloads and ever-changing scenarios including staff sickness. In times of stress, it is often the case to try and power through and avoid asking for assistance. The resolution for my problem was simple, a discussion with management to spread the workload between other colleagues. I now recognise that I must delegate and ask for help earlier.

With the apprenticeship degree alongside my role in the lab, it is more important now to ensure some kind of balance to maintain a healthy work/study/life balance and take effective steps to maintain fitness to practice, not only for me but all registered/non-registered healthcare science staff.

Multitasking is an important skill in the lab. For instance, at any time, I may be processing specimens, supervising junior staff, and communicating with the support staff registered Biomedical Scientists (BMS), which can be stressful at times but manageable. Being fully competent, I am often asked to provide additional support for colleagues at my level and registered scientists due to the experience I have gained. Three years ago, I had an opportunity to be involved in a project in the department focused on HIV monitoring in developing countries. My role in this project evolved into developing and implementing the official in-house standard operating procedure, completion of risk assessment and COSHH, and provision of training for all staff involved. This was the moment I had noticed the impact of stress in the workplace.



Figure 1: A diagram of the ERA Reflection Cycle<sup>4</sup>

Mental health is described as a person's state of mental well-being, enabling them to work well, communicate, build relationships, and cope with stresses in life<sup>5</sup>, with well-being viewed as an individual's positive outlook on their life with the absence of negative thoughts, combined with physical well-being<sup>1</sup>. This does not mean that there will never be bad days, some days are worse than others and at times it can be difficult to handle. It is natural as human beings that tolerance wanes from time to time. The ability to identify, interpret, and manage these feelings is what enables me to balance my mental health and well-being. Without balance, emotions can soon spiral out of control.

A lack of self-understanding and balance may lead to slight distractions and irritation, an outburst in emotions, mood changes, lack of concentration, or may even lead to physical illness. For me (with the help of my colleagues), the irritation and low mood were noticed, and I took steps to resolve the issue by identifying the root causes.

I had to reflect on myself and my feelings and analyse why my behaviours and mood had changed, without being so formal as to document my feelings on paper. The stress container model is a method of summarising stress management<sup>3</sup>. The container is your individual capacity of storing stress with one main outlet for allowing 'water' to exit. Water stored in the container represents the various sources of stress (e.g., family, work, loneliness, money). If stress exceeds the container capacity or fills faster than it empties, water overflows just like stress overflows into outward emotions. Extra holes can let the water and stress escape from the container and prevent overfilling, such as talking with friends, exercise, resting, doing something personally satisfying.

Managing mental health and well-being is an ongoing effort and never ends. Looking after yourself and others in the laboratory benefits not only myself but my colleagues and the patients we care for.

If you do want to speak to someone then talk to a close friend, or family member, AskUs at the University of Salford, occupational health/MHFA in the workplace, or a support service. If you need help, please ask.

List of Mental Health and Well-being support services and information

- Mental Health UK - <https://mentalhealth-uk.org/>
- Mind - <https://www.mind.org.uk/>
- C.A.L.M - <https://www.thecalmzone.net/>
- Shout 85257 - <https://giveusashout.org/>
- Rethink Mental Illness - <https://www.rethink.org/>
- Time to Change - <https://www.time-to-change.org.uk/mental-health-and-stigma/help-and-support>
- Local GP Practice
- 999 in emergencies
- Occupational Health in the workplace



Figure 2: A diagram of the stress container model<sup>3</sup>





## References

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- 4.Mental Health: strengthening our response. Retrieved 06/02/2023 from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response#:~:text=Mental%20health%20is%20a%20state.and%20contribute%20to%20their%20community.>
- 5.WHO. (2022). Mental Health: strengthening our response. Retrieved 06/02/2023 from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response#:~:text=Mental%20health%20is%20a%20state.and%20contribute%20to%20their%20community.>