

Washing Your Mind at Work

By Robert Acton, Ph.D.

“Wash your hands!” Mum would yell. As kids we thought she was nagging at us but we now understand that she was protecting us. Scientific evidence is clear that washing our hands breaks the chain of bacteria and inhibits disease. Wouldn't it be nice if we could simply “*wash our minds*” and break the chain of mental health problems so common today. And business leaders are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of employee's mental health within the workplace.

Evidence suggests that there is a high prevalence of behavioural problems in the workplace and that these problems are often associated with mental health concerns. In a recent study of a large US corporation, approximately one out of six staff reported receiving a diagnosis of some form of mental health problem such as depression or anxiety (Berndt, 2000). Depression is the leading cause of disability in developed countries and it is associated with more sick days and higher rates of short-term disability than any other chronic condition (Druss et al., 2000; Kessler et al., 1998; Simon et al., 1995). Attending to mental health is an important business factor. Not only is it important in terms of factors such as absenteeism and disability but work atmosphere and productivity and, ultimately, the bottom line.

To illustrate this point let's take the example of Mary. She goes home frustrated almost everyday and complains to her husband about her experience at work. She has many thoughts during the day about her supervisor that are hostile and negative such as “Who does he think he is anyway?” and “He's not going to push me around.” These thoughts give an indication that she believes her supervisor to be unfair and controlling. Mary feels angry and resentful most of the day and, as a result, by day's end is fatigued. She behaves in a hostile manner by subtly resisting his requests, telling her colleagues about her negative

feelings about the boss, and then keeps it going at night by involving her husband. She is really an angry, hostile person who not only is not working to her potential but also is actively crippling the organization.

If Mary could *wash her mind* she would be able to take personal responsibility for herself, feel better, and not poison the office atmosphere. If only a little soap and water would do the trick! She needs, however, to follow a few steps to make it easier for herself and those around her. To wash our mind and be more emotionally intelligent Mary would need to follow some basic rules involving three action steps (i) Gain Awareness, (ii) Take Action and (iii) Evaluate The Results:

AWARENESS

- Be aware of her upsetting thoughts and feelings
- Recognize that she feels upset a good portion of the time
- Put herself in others' shoes and think what others observe in her
- Recognize that her emotional experience at work is unhealthy and harmful to herself and others
- Desire to feel better at work

TAKE ACTION

- Set a goal for how she wants to feel at work and about her work
- Slow down and approach her goal with a focus on a series of daily, easily accomplishable steps
- Take personal responsibility and not focus on others
- Be aware of the negative dialogue in her mind and try to avoid thinking errors such as thinking each problem is a catastrophe
- Look for and relish in the positive experiences she actually does encounter
- Focus on keeping her body healthy. Take regular breaks, work out, eat well, and stretch.
- Associate with emotionally healthy and satisfied colleagues at work. Refuse to talk negatively with them. Don't simply complain. Find a solution instead.
- Find a mentor or coach who can objectively help her have more success at work

- Define how an emotionally healthy employee would act, think, and feel. Work everyday to be that person

EVALUATE

- Set aside a time each week to review her progress
- Evaluate how close she is to accomplishing her goal of feeling satisfied at work
- Determine what she did this week to help her meet her target and do it more next week
- Think of what happened that created a barrier to her success and try to work around it
- Finally, set her new target for the next week.

Working to have a healthy mind in the workplace sets one apart from others and allows a person to be personally and professionally accountable at work. What does being emotionally healthy at work mean? Being emotionally healthy at work involves being goal directed, solving problems effectively, being personally responsible, maintaining and nurturing healthy, respectful relationships with all other people at work, keeping a good work/home life balance, and recognizing the work is hard. For the most part, people work within three main areas: (1) job goals and tasks, (2) interpersonal functioning with colleagues and customers, and (3) our view and judgements of ourselves. Developing a healthy and mindful approach to work means that employees can benefit by attending to their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours across all three functional areas.

In Mary's case, she may benefit from doing a personal analysis starting with acknowledging she frequently angry and hates being that way. Moreover, if she can see that others dislike her constant complaining and negativity she will be more likely to be motivated to change her ways. She should recognize that her negative reactions likely are affecting her job performance (she resists job direction by her supervisor), her interpersonal functioning (her negative talk spoils the team atmosphere) and her self-confidence at work (she hates being there).

Setting a goal for herself to feel satisfied in her work may take her down many roads including making adjustments to her own behaviour in her current position, moving to another position within the firm, or more drastically, finding another place of employment. Once she has established that she wants to feel confident and satisfied at work, she needs to attend to what she is doing to contribute to her negative world. This self-analysis may result in Mary realizing that she may be submitting to a supervisor's bullying tactics or to actively being hostile in her interactions with others. In this case, she may need to change her environment by dealing with the bullying boss or change her own behaviour. Deciding to be active director of her own life, rather than feeling controlled by others, can free Mary up from an experience of resentment and potentially depression.

A good first step in her action plan may be to stop complaining and blaming of others at work. She could look for colleagues that are emotionally healthy and start associating with them. Avoid the emotionally unhealthy ones. Focus on what works and where she obtains satisfaction in her daily tasks. She may benefit from identifying an aspect of herself that she can work to improve such as being more patient and accepting of others. Reading articles about healthy thinking and effective management of emotions may prove useful. Find a coach or mentor either at work or in her personal life that would help her be objective and encourage her steps to emotional recovery at work.

Finally, at the end of each week while on her way home, Mary should stop and privately review her progress for the week. This will help her recognize her successes of the week, improve her self-confidence and give her strength to take on the new challenges for the week ahead.

Working to be emotionally healthy at work is sometimes hard work. The benefits are immense, immediate, and powerful to both the individual and the organization. A little soap goes a long way.

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