# Wellbeing Can Fluctuate Over Time

Workplace Wellbeing | Space to Breathe Therapy

An employee who usually copes well may need additional support during periods of increased workload, organisational change, personal difficulty or poor health.

Wellbeing is not a fixed state. People can feel confident and capable at one point in their lives, yet find the same working day considerably more demanding at another. Our ability to manage pressure changes with our circumstances, resources, health and the support available to us. A change in wellbeing is not a personal failure, nor does it automatically mean someone is unable to do their job.

Recognising that wellbeing fluctuates helps employees seek support earlier and encourages employers to respond with understanding rather than assumptions.

## Why wellbeing changes

At work, we continually balance demands against the time, energy, knowledge and support available to us. When demands rise or resources reduce, coping may become harder. Sometimes a single event is responsible; more often, several pressures combine.

- Workload and deadlines: a busier period, staff shortages, competing priorities or prolonged uncertainty.
- Organisational change: restructuring, new systems, changing managers or unclear expectations.
- Personal circumstances: bereavement, relationship difficulties, caring responsibilities or financial worries.
- Health and recovery: physical illness, pain, disrupted sleep, mental health difficulties or returning after absence.
- Environmental and individual factors: sensory load, accessibility barriers, neurodivergent needs and the cumulative effort of masking or adapting.

## Why someone who usually copes may struggle

A person may have spent months or years successfully managing a demanding role. That history is useful, but it does not guarantee they will always have the same capacity. Someone who was previously comfortable with multiple meetings, complex tasks or frequent change may need temporary adjustments when additional demands arise. Performance and wellbeing are influenced by context, not simply by attitude or motivation.

Employees may also hide difficulties because they do not wish to disappoint colleagues, worry about being judged, or believe they must maintain their previous level of output. A supportive workplace makes it safer to speak up before a manageable challenge becomes a crisis.

## Changes worth noticing

Warning signs differ from person to person. They may include difficulty concentrating, increased mistakes, fatigue, irritability, anxiety before work, reduced confidence, withdrawing from colleagues, changes in sleep, physical tension, or finding everyday tasks unexpectedly difficult. These signs are not diagnostic, and none should be used alone to make assumptions about someone's health.

Consider patterns over time, changes from the person's usual presentation and whether the work environment itself may be contributing.

## Support needs can change without changing someone's value

Needing more flexibility today does not erase an employee's abilities, experience or previous achievements. Equally, doing well one week should not be taken as proof that support is no longer required. Useful adjustments should be reviewed collaboratively and changed when circumstances change.

## Practical steps employees can take

- Notice your own patterns. Identify what has changed and when work begins to feel more difficult.
- Separate demands from priorities. Ask which tasks are urgent, which can wait and what is realistically achievable.
- Describe the impact. You do not always need to disclose private medical details to explain a work-related difficulty or ask to discuss support.
- Request a conversation early. A check-in can focus on workload, expectations and possible adjustments.
- Protect recovery time. Regular breaks, rest outside work and realistic boundaries may help, although they cannot solve an unmanageable workload alone.
- Review what helps. A temporary solution may need to be extended, reduced or replaced as circumstances evolve.

## Practical steps managers and employers can take

Good support begins with curiosity, respect and realistic expectations. Managers do not need to diagnose or become a therapist. They can listen, understand work-related barriers and consider proportionate adjustments.

- Offer regular private check-ins, especially during changes or high-demand periods.
- Ask open questions such as "What is making work harder at the moment?" and "What might help?"
- Review workload, deadlines, communication demands, meeting frequency and competing priorities.

- Consider practical adjustments: phased changes in workload, additional planning time, quieter spaces, flexible scheduling or written instructions.
- Agree what will be reviewed, by whom and when, while respecting confidentiality and consent.
- Avoid treating one productive day as evidence that difficulties have disappeared.

## A supportive check-in: an example

Employee: “I have normally managed this workload, but recently I am struggling to keep track of several urgent requests. Could we review priorities and look at short-term support?”

Manager: “Thank you for raising it. Let’s look at what is competing for your time, what can be delayed and what adjustments might make the next few weeks more manageable. We can agree a date to review how things are going.”

The aim is not to force disclosure or promise that every request can be met. It is to establish an honest, constructive conversation and a practical response.

## A flexible support plan

A simple plan can include: (1) what has changed, (2) which duties are most affected, (3) immediate priorities, (4) agreed adjustments, (5) how communication will work and (6) a review date. Keep the plan focused on the employee’s working needs, limit unnecessary personal information and adapt it collaboratively.

## Reflection questions

- What feels different about work or life at the moment?
- Which demands use the most energy, and which are manageable?
- What helped during a previous difficult period?
- What is one realistic adjustment or conversation that could help now?
- What would show that current support is helping, and when should it be reviewed?

## When additional help may be useful

If distress, exhaustion or difficulty functioning persists, consider speaking to a GP, occupational health professional, employee assistance service or a qualified mental health professional. If you believe an adjustment may be needed because of a disability or long-term health condition, you can also discuss appropriate workplace support and your rights under relevant UK equality law. Workplace approaches should be individualised, rather than based on diagnosis alone.

## Final thoughts

Wellbeing can improve, worsen and change again. That is part of being human. A psychologically healthier workplace recognises the changing relationship between demands and resources, checks in rather than assumes, and makes room for reasonable support. The goal is not to expect people to cope identically every day; it is to create conditions in which they can work sustainably, feel respected and seek help when they need it.

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This resource is for general information and reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and does not replace individual clinical, legal or occupational health advice.