

## It's OK ... NOT TO BE OKAY ...

### Let's Talk about ... Health and Wellbeing

To continue the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Let's Talk series, we are focussing on general health and wellbeing. Animal Technologists devote their careers to looking after animals used in medical research and the welfare of their animals is of paramount importance. Current quality Culture of Care policies centre around providing the best welfare to ensure laboratory animals have the best possible life, whilst contributing to a better understanding of some of the world's major diseases.

Whilst putting so much care and attention into their animals, it is quite easy to forget an important element of Culture of Care is the health and wellbeing of the Animal Technologists involved. You can only afford excellent care and compassion if you are well within yourself. The role of the Animal Technologist leads to a roller coaster of emotions and it is important to keep on top of these emotions to avoid emotional burn out.

There has been considerable previous work conducted within the UK to establish parity of esteem between physical and mental health (Morton & O'Reilly, 2019, Mitchell et al 2017).<sup>1,2</sup> Current mental health policies aim to improve mental health and wellbeing, prevent the onset of mental and emotional distress and increase resilience. The nature of the relationship between physical and mental health is interlinked with mental health influencing physical health and vice versa.

Good health and wellbeing are important in ensuring that all Animal Technologists are able to give the best form of themselves to their animals and ensure compliance to standards of Animal Welfare as practiced within the UK. As identified in previous articles, we have discussed that It's OK ... not to be OKAY and if your health and wellbeing are being affected there are steps you can take.

The five step approach is well documented (<https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/five-steps-to-mental-wellbeing/>), and how can we embrace this within our industry?

#### 1. Connect with colleagues. Good relationships are important for your mental wellbeing. They can:

- Help you build a sense of belonging and self-worth.
- Give you an opportunity to share positive experiences and talk about the not so positive/challenging aspects of the Animal Technologist's role.
- Provide emotional support and accept support from others. The best people who understand what animal techs experience, are other Animal Technicians. Use them for support.
- Try to set some time aside during the day to ensure you connect with others, at lunch or a tea break.
- Try talking about issues outside of the workplace if it is a tough day.
- See family or friends after work to switch off. If this is not possible use technology such as Teams, Zoom or FaceTime where you can see the person.
- Use the journey home for reflection.

#### 2. Be Active

- Try to carry out some physical activity following a day at work which is important for physical and mental wellbeing.
- Try exercise such as cycling, walking, swimming, running, going to the gym maybe with a friend. This will help to refocus your mind.



#### 3. Learn new skills

- This is vitally important within a role that may be repetitive at times and it is easy for your mind to wander. Learning new skills will ensure your mind is focussed on the task ahead. This will also help you with a sense of achievement and can be a focus point. This could also be extended to home life too, try cooking something new or adventurous, take up a new hobby or learn a new language. Just find activities that you enjoy and are not pressured to do.

#### 4. Supporting others

- If you are feeling like things are starting to get on top of you, remember you are not alone. The feelings you are having are not unique and others before you and after you will feel the same, this is the emotion of caring. Reach out to others, this will improve your mental wellbeing, as research suggests that the act of giving and kindness will improve your wellbeing by creating positive feelings and a sense of reward, also giving you a feeling of purpose. Do not underestimate how much reaching out to a colleague and offering support can help not just them but you also. Being that ear that your colleague may need, helps so much and you never know that maybe a shared experience could help.

#### 5. Pay attention to the present (Mindfulness)

- In the throes of a busy and hectic schedule it can be quite easy to forget to pay attention to your own thoughts, feelings and your body. This awareness of your mind and body is commonly termed Mindfulness. Mindfulness has the potential to reduce depressive thoughts, increase emotional regulation, reduce anxiety and stress, improve memory, improve cognitive ability and lead to better physical health

(<https://www.verywellmind.com/the-benefits-of-mindfulness-5205137>)

<https://neweconomics.org/2011/07/five-ways-well-new-applications-new-ways-thinking>

### What to do if you feel you are not coping

It is important to seek help if you feel that things are getting on top of you. Please look at your employer's policies on health and wellbeing and see what support is in place.

If you do not feel comfortable approaching a colleague or employer then the following is helpful:

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/seeking-help-for-a-mental-health-problem/where-to-start/>

Please do not feel you are alone, reaching out just for a chat is really important, as you will find someone who understands and maybe someone who has felt the same way as you and overcome their worries, to coin an old saying.....it's good to talk.

#### References

Mitchell A, Hardy S & Shiers D (2017) Parity of Esteem: addressing the inequalities between mental and physical healthcare. *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment* 23(3):196-205. DOI:10.1192/apt.bp.114.014266

Morton, JW & O'Reilly, M. (2019) Mental health, big data and research ethics: parity of esteem in mental health research from a UK perspective. *Clinical Ethics* 2019. (<http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/51947/3/clinicaethicsrepository%2520version.pdf>)



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