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National Summit on Workplace Mental Health and Wellbeing: A Focus on the Graduate Academic Environment
• Me & mental health in higher education

• Framing:
  • Wicked Problems and Total Worker Health

• Message:
Organizational Behavior Can Buffer Stress
Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning*

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ABSTRACT

The search for scientific bases for confronting problems of social policy is bound to fail, because of the nature of these problems. They are "wicked" problems, whereas science has developed to deal with "tame" problems. Policy problems cannot be definitively described. Moreover, in a pluralistic society there is nothing like the undisputable public good; there is no objective definition of equity; policies that respond to social problems cannot be meaningfully correct or false; and it makes no sense to talk about "optimal solutions" to social problems unless severe qualifications are imposed first. Even worse, there are no "solutions" in the sense of definitive and objective answers.
Mental health is a wicked problem.

In the higher education (like other businesses), it is a problem of social policy.

Mortiz and Kawa, American Scientist (2022) 110:212
WICKED Problems

- Every problem is unique
- Problems are never completely solved
- Can take a long time to evaluate solutions
- Solutions are not right/wrong but better/worse
- Every solution ramifies throughout the system
- Every Wicked Problem is connected to others
- Straddle organizational and disciplinary boundaries
- Multiple stakeholders with conflicting agendas
- There is no clear problem definition
- Are multicausal, multiscalar, and interconnected
Total Worker Health® Hierarchy of Controls

- **Eliminate**
  - Eliminate working conditions that threaten safety, health, and well-being

- **Substitute**
  - Substitute health-enhancing policies, programs, and practices

- **Redesign**
  - Redesign the work environment for safety, health, and well-being

- **Educate**
  - Educate for safety and health

- **Encourage**
  - Encourage personal change
The Stress Process

Stressors

- Job Demands
  - Workload
- Lack of control over work
- Economic Stressors
- Physical Environment
- Job insecurity
- Unemployment
- Technology
- Leadership
- Role Stress
- Work-Family Conflict
- Threat Avoidance

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Strains

Substance Use
Sleep problems
Fatigue
Burnout
Absenteeism
Mental Health/Suicidality
Accidents
Worse chronic health issues
Poor Health Behaviors
Presenteeism

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The Stress Process

Buffers

Effective Leadership  Supervisor Support  Organizational Support  Co-worker support  Psychological Safety

Flexibility  Boundary Management  Match Work to Abilities  Autonomy  Meaningful Work
Five Essentials for Workplace Mental Health & Well-Being

Centered on the worker voice and equity, these five Essentials support workplaces as engines of well-being. Each Essential is grounded in two human needs, shared across industries and roles.

Creating a plan with all workers to enact these components can help reimagine workplaces as engines of well-being.

**Components**

- **Protection from Harm**
  - Prioritize workplace physical and psychological safety
  - Enable adequate rest
  - Normalize and support mental health
  - Operationalize DEIA* norms, policies, and programs

- **Connection & Community**
  - Create cultures of inclusion and belonging
  - Cultivate trusted relationships
  - Foster collaboration and teamwork

- **Work-Life Harmony**
  - Provide more autonomy over how work is done
  - Make schedules as flexible and predictable as possible
  - Increase access to paid leave
  - Respect boundaries between work and non-work time

- **Mattering at Work**
  - Provide a living wage
  - Engage workers in workplace decisions
  - Build a culture of gratitude and recognition
  - Connect individual work with organizational mission

- **Opportunity for Growth**
  - Offer quality training, education, and mentoring
  - Foster clear, equitable pathways for career advancement
  - Ensure relevant, reciprocal feedback

*Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Accessibility
Wicked Problem:

To Improve Workplace Mental Health Address Organizational Behavior Change.

A starting place: Buffer Stress
Mission
To collaboratively advance the field of Total Worker Health® (TWH) through sharing knowledge and best practices for the benefit of working people, their families, organizations, and the community.

Vision
To advance worker health, safety, and well-being through TWH.

Visit us at twhsociety.org