How can organisations protect the well-being of prison staff?

Dr Georgia Barnett is a Chartered and Registered Forensic Psychologist and Dr Helen Wakeling is a Chartered Research Psychologist. Both are Founding Partners of KTA Research and Consulting, putting knowledge into action through evidence-based practice in criminal justice settings.

This article is a transcript of a presentation given at The Perrie Lectures in 2024. The Perrie Lectures is an annual event which has the purpose of stimulating dialogue between criminal justice organisations, the voluntary sector, and all those with an academic, legal, or practical interest in people in prison and their families. The theme of the 2024 event was 'Recruiting, training, and developing great prison officers'.

Staff well-being is a subject close to our hearts. We are both psychologists and before leaving in March we spent 22 years working for HM Prison Service during which time we visited countless prisons and met, worked alongside, and conducted research with, a huge number of staff. We have seen first-hand the amazing work prison staff do, as well as the challenging environment they face day after day.

Prisons are a high threat environment; staff have relatively little control over what can be an unpredictable and dangerous workplace. Prison officers regularly see and deal with difficult, emotional, threatening, and dangerous situations. Some get hurt physically, and some incur psychological injuries. First and foremost, we have a moral duty to protect the well-being and resilience of prison staff, but this has secondary benefits. By paying attention to well-being we help retain talented people in our organisations. Poorer well-being is linked to higher rates of sickness, lower rates of retention and poorer performance.[1] Our decision-making and general competence is affected by stress.[2] According to the latest workforce statistics, for the 12 months to the end of March 2024, the most common reason for sickness across HM Prison and Probation Service was mental ill health, which accounted for just over 40 per cent of known absences.[3]

So why do we need to focus on well-being? To protect prison staff, to keep staff, and to put them in the best position to do an important job well.

What are well-being and resilience?

There is no one agreed definition of well-being, but according to the 2014 Care Act, this encompasses several areas of life including personal dignity, contribution to society including participation in work/training or education, physical, mental, social, domestic, family and economic health, protection from abuse and neglect, control over day-to-day life and suitable living conditions.[4]

Resilience varies over the course of a lifetime, but is a process of adapting, positively, to difficult circumstances.[5] Resilience is affected by lots of things, including your physical health, how you think and feel about a potential source of stress, the social and practical support that is available to you, your environment and circumstances, and the wider systems and networks that you are a part of or living in.[6]

Applying an evidence-based approach to staff well-being

We are committed to promoting and supporting evidence-based practice (EBP); the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of the best available evidence when making decisions. This involves integrating multiples sources of evidence in a structured approach to understand a problem and devise a solution. Figure 1 is a model developed by Rob Briner, an occupational psychologist who has done considerable work in this area, which suggests that we should obtain data from four different sources when examining and developing a response to an issue.[7]

1. Islam, M. S., & Amin, M. (2022). A systematic review of human capital and employee well-being: Putting human capital back on the track. *European Journal of Training and Development, 46*(5/6), 504-534.
2. American Psychological Association (2013). *How Stress Affects your Health: Factsheet.* APA.
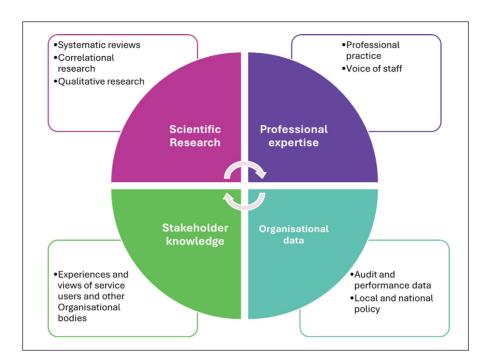3. HMPPS (2024). *HM Prison and Probation Service workforce quarterly:* March 2024. Ministry of Justice.
4. HM Parliament (2014). *Care Act* 2014. London.
5. Ljntema, R.C., Burger, Y.D., & Schaufeli, W.B. (2019). Reviewing the labyrinth of psychological resilience: Establishing criteria for resilience-building programs. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research, 71,* 288-304
6 . Windle, G. (2011). What is resilience? A review and concept analysis. Reviews in Clinical Gerontology, 21, 1-18.
7. Briner, R. (2019). *The basics of evidence-based practice.* SHRM.

Figure 1. *Model of key sources of evidence*

The four sources of evidence comprise:

1. Scientific research: This tends to have the greatest rigour, relevance and independence. This includes systematic reviews, quantitative evaluations, correlational research and qualitative research.

2. Clinical or Professional expertise: This includes professional practice and the knowledge of staff working in the area of interest; this is the voice of experience.

3. Stakeholder knowledge: This includes the experiences and views of service users and partner agencies across the sector, which is another vital source of evidence.

4. Organisational data: This comes from the local setting and organisations themselves. This includes audit and performance data, local and national policies as well as information on situational constraints (such as resources and time).

Using EBP can help us to improve our chances of achieving positive outcomes, to use scant money and resources wisely, and to ensure that organisations continue to learn and grow.[8]

In this lecture we use these four sources of evidence to understand the factors influencing well-being for prison staff, as well as to identify some of the strategies which can help.

Factors that influence the well-being and resilience of prison staff

Starting with the scientific research, there's broad agreement that there are key work-related stressors — environmental, task-related, role-related, social, and emotional labour — which affect well-being at work for those in critical occupations.[9] We see these stressors in the accounts of prison officers' experience,[10] and key stakeholders, for example, prison managers, who identify stressors in each of these categories as impactful on the well-being of prison staff.[11] We see these factors in organisational data, like exit and staff surveys as well as in national and international research with people working in prisons.[12] This triangulation of evidence means we can be confident that these factors are important and make a difference to the well-being and resilience of prison staff. There are also individual-level factors that affect well-being and resilience of

8   Latessa, E. J. (2004). The challenge of change: correctional programs and evidence-based practice. *Criminology & Public Policy, 3,* 547-560.

9.   Meadows, M. P., Shreffler, K. M., & Mullins-Sweatt, S. N. (2011). Occupational stressors and resilience in critical occupations: The role of personality. *Research in Occupational Stress and Well-Being,* 39-61.

10. Gayman, M. D., Bradley, M.S. (2013). Organizational climate, work stress, and depressive symptoms among probation and parole officers. *Criminal Justice Studies, 26,* 326-346.

11. Nichols, H., Saunders, G., Harrison, K., Mason, R., Smith, L., & Hall, L. (2024). It's not ok to not be ok . . . when you're a prison governor: The impact of workplace culture on prison governors' wellbeing in England, Scotland and Wales. *Incarceration,* 5.

12. Steiner, B., & Wooldridge, J. (2015). Individual and Environmental Sources of Work Stress Among Prison Officers. *Criminal Justice and Behaviour, 42,* 800-818.

prison officers — personality traits like optimism, tendency to ruminate, as well as the support network that people have outside of work and what's going on in their wider lives — but we are focussing in this lecture on factors specific to the workplace.

Environmental stressors

The first workplace stressor is the environment and specifically perceived exposure to threat or harm at work. There is evidence from studies across the world, that the well-being of staff in critical occupations is affected by how exposed they feel to threat.[13] There is also small-scale research outside of the U.K. to suggest that officers working with more dangerous prisoners, who are at highest risk of assault, report highest levels of stress,[14] and that rates of substance misuse in jails affect how safe officers here in the U.K. feel.[15]

Task-related stressors

The second group of stressors are task-related. These are things that get in the way of or affect completion of job tasks, and include time pressure and work overload, work complexity, and interruptions.[16] Research by the University of Lincoln found that unrealistic expectations and heavy workloads were a key source of stress for prison managers.[17] Research with frontline staff tells a similar story.[18] The latest workforce statistics tell us that the resignation rate for band 3-5 officers was 8.4 per cent in the year ending 31 March 2024 and that during this time, an average of 11 working days were lost to sickness in public sector prisons, all of which likely impacts on the workloads of those who remain.[19]

...the well-being of staff in critical occupations is affected by how exposed they feel to threat.

Role stressors

Role stressors comprise role overload, role conflict, and role ambiguity. Role overload is when you are wearing too many different hats and it becomes difficult to fulfil the expectations of all of them in the time available to you. Role ambiguity is when the boundaries and expectations of your role are not clearly defined or are open to interpretation. Role conflict is when you hold one or more roles that pull that you in different directions; that conflict with each other. Research with frontline prison staff tells us that balancing care and control, and the conflict between maintaining security and working to rehabilitate people in prison, can be really difficult.[20] International studies suggest that this is a key source of strain for prison officers in some other jurisdictions too.[21]

Social stressors

Social stressors relate to relationships and social interactions at work, and include incivility, abuse and harassment, which are all common occurrences in prisons. Social stressors also include relationships with colleagues, managers and leaders, and research suggests that a perceived lack of support from colleagues can be a key source of stress amongst prison officers.[22] There is also good evidence that leadership styles and the behaviour of leaders are linked to stress levels of staff and conversely, resilience.[23]

All of these stressors are exaggerated when there are problems with retention and sickness which affect staffing levels, as staffing levels affect workloads, roles change to meet gaps in provision and how people interact, and people's relationships with their colleagues

13. Vyas, K. J., Delaney, E. M., Webb-Murphy, J. (2016). Psychological impact of deploying in support of the U.S. response to Ebola: A systematic review and meta-analysis of past outbreaks. *Military Medicine, 181,* 1515-1531.
14. Misis, M., Kim, B., Cheeseman, K., Hogan, N.L., & Lambert, E.G. (2013). The impact of correctional officer perceptions of inmates on job stress. *SAGE Open, 3*(2), 1–13.
15. Kinman, G., & Clements, A. (2021). New psychoactive substances, safety and mental health in prison officers. *Occupational Medicine.* 71.
16. Searle, B. J. (2017). How work design can enhance or erode employee resilience. In M. F. Crane (Ed.), Managing for Resilience: *A Practical Guide for Employee Well-being and Organizational Performance. Routledge.*
17. See footnote 15: Nichols et al. (2024).
18. Finney, C., Stergiopoulos, E., Hensel, J. et al., (2013). Organizational stressors associated with job stress and burnout in correctional officers: a systematic review. *BMC Public Health 13,* 82.
19. See footnote 3: HMPPS (2024).
20. Butler, H.D., Tasca, M., Zhang, Y., & Carpenter, C. (2019). A systematic and meta-analytic review of the literature on correctional officers: Identifying new avenues for research. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 60,* 84–92.
21. E.g. Clements, A. J., & Kinman, G. (2020). A forgotten profession: The need to invest in the well-being of prison officers. In Birch, P. & Sicard, L. (Eds.), *Prisons and Community Corrections: Critical Issues and Emerging Controversies.* Taylor & Francis.
22. Walters, G. D. (2020). Getting to the source: how inmates and other staff contribute to correctional officer stress. *Journal of Crime and Justice, 45*(1), 73–86.
23. Adler, A. B., & Saboe, K. N. (2017). How organisations and leaders can build resilience: Lessons from high risk occupations. In M. F. Crane (Ed.), *Managing for Resilience: A Practical Guide for Employee Well-being and Organizational Performance.* Routledge.

change. We may also see more challenging behaviour from prisoners who too are under increasing strain because of these issues, as well as the growing prison population.[24]

Emotional labour

There is also a distinct stressor for those in helping professions; emotional labour — having to routinely repress or display certain emotions, alongside use of empathy[25] — which can lead to compassion fatigue (emotional and physical exhaustion which can result from absorbing the emotional stress of others, making it difficult to empathise and care for people) and burnout (when people become emotionally, mentally and physically tired as a result of experiencing excessive and extended periods of stress).[26] A review of research into emotional labour by HM Inspectorate of Probation highlighted 'surface acting' as particularly problematic; this is when people have to simulate an emotion to fulfil expectations of their professional role, displaying feelings that they are not experiencing, which is linked to burnout.[27] In addition to surface acting, prison officers have to manage their fear of victimisation when working in unpredictable circumstances, and research suggests that those who feel less powerful and more afraid are more likely to quit.[28]

However, it is also the case that jobs that involve emotional labour can have some benefits too, including a high level of job satisfaction, because these are jobs that matter, that have real world impact, and have meaning and value. Doing tasks that have real-world significance, which feel meaningful and help provide a sense of purpose, is linked to greater resilience and less strain.[29]

Stressors are present in life, in and out of work, and it is not inevitable that they put a strain on people's

> Doing tasks that have real-world significance, which feel meaningful and help provide a sense of purpose, is linked to greater resilience.

mental and physical resources, leading to poor mood and impacting negatively on health. We often can and do recover from stressors, our energy is replenished, and we experience more positive emotions.

If we acknowledge that prison staff work in conditions characterised by key work-related stressors that have the potential to cause strain, important questions are how we can protect staff from potential harm by reducing the presence, frequency or intensity of workplace stressors, and how can we encourage recovery from contact with those that remain.

Strategies for protecting well-being at work

One way of determining what we can do to protect prison staff well-being, is to use an approach put forward by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to improve mental health at work.[30] A similar tiered-approach is also mentioned in the NICE guidelines for mental health at work.[31] This approach suggests that we need to look at strategies that 1) prevent harm, 2) protect and promote well-being, and 3) support those in need.

1. Prevent harm to well-being at work

To improve the well-being and resilience of staff in prisons, we need to think about how to prevent and address the causes of stress and burnout. Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, 'We need to stop just pulling people out of the river. Some of us need to go upstream and find out why they are falling in.' We need to stop waiting for people to become unwell and start addressing the factors which are causing them to become stressed and unwell in the first place. It is about being proactive rather than reactive, and further having a better understanding of the positive influences on well-being which can lead to an organisation which is better equipped to enhance the well-being of staff.

24. National Preventive Mechanism (2023). *Monitoring places of detention: 13th Annual Report of the United Kingdom's National Preventive Mechanism* 2021/22. NPM.
25. Newell, J. M., & MacNeil, G. A. (2010). Professional burnout, vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress, and compassion fatigue. *Best Practices in Mental Health, 6*(2), 57-68.
26. See footnote 25: Newell & MacNeil (2010).
27. Phillips, J., Westaby, C., & Fowler, A. (2020). *Emotional Labour in Probation: HMIP Academic Insights 2020/03.* HM Inspectorate of Probation.
28. Stichman, A., & Gordon, J. (2015). A preliminary investigation of the effect of correlational officers' bases of power on their fear and risk of victimization. *Journal of Crime and Justice, 38*(4), 543–558.
29. Walker, E. J., Egan, H. H., Jackson, C. A., Tonkin, M. (2018). Work–Life and Well-Being in U.K. Therapeutic Prison Officers: A Thematic Analysis. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 62*(14), 4528-4544.
30. World Health Organization (2022). *WHO guidelines on mental health at work. Geneva:* World Health Organization.
31. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2022). *Mental Wellbeing at Work: NICE Guideline.* NICE.

The evidence suggests six priority areas to focus on.

Recruitment practices: To prevent harm to officers' well-being, we could have more targeted recruitment and selection procedures, and identify those most likely to require support with their well-being. We can ask, 'how do we attract people with the right skills and characteristics to this job?' 'Can we do more to think about how we recruit the right people, those who are resilient and able to reflect on their practice and well-being?'. We can also think about how we can use the information we obtain through the recruitment and selection process to tailor support packages to individual staff members' needs.

Research has found that personality factors such as open mindedness, conscientiousness, extraversion, emotional stability as well as support for rehabilitation amongst officers are related to more positive outcomes including engagement with work.[32] Understanding who is best suited to prison work could be helpful for recruitment, for interview panels, selection, as well as for identifying staff who may need support to build certain skills.

Screening programmes have been implemented in other fields, for example the Police. In a study which is due to be published soon, an assessment approach was trialled across three police forces.[33] This assessment indicated that around 80 per cent of the workforce in these three areas were well, 15 per cent had some troubling symptoms and 5 per cent had clinical symptoms which required treatment. The programme referred the 15 per cent with troubling symptoms to see a therapist and onwards from there, either on to the NHS or to short-term support via the organisation. The top 5 per cent were directly referred to the NHS. This screening approach was found to be cost-effective; there was around a 190 per cent return of investment of the programme (that is, the cost of the programme was

> ...stop waiting for people to become unwell and start addressing the factors which are causing them to become stressed.

£83,000 and the return was £241,000 in terms of ability to work, and minimising sickness rates). It seems worth testing whether a similar programme could be applied and see such benefits across prisons too.

Culture and environment: Well-being is also impacted by culture and the working environment. The research evidence is clear that the culture of the prison has a significant impact on staff and prisoner well-being.[34] Culture is the atmosphere and environment we create around ourselves, the way things are done, the way we treat each other, relationships, the physical environment, and our everyday practices and behaviour. If staff work in better conditions and have the resources they need in turn the evidence indicates that we will see better well-being and decision making.

In a decent environment and positive culture, people feel valued, are treated fairly, are listened to and cared for, feel empowered, diversity is valued, people are focussed on learning, processes are enabling, and there is collaboration.[35] Improving the safety of the environment — reducing violence, aggression and drug use in prisons will have an impact on the actual and perceived threats faced by prison officers, which is linked to poorer mental health and well-being.[36] We also know that improving the physical environment will help-research shows that overcrowding, poor prison conditions, lack of naturalistic settings, and poor lighting and noise can result in a range of negative outcomes for both prisoners and staff.[37]

Research recently published, based on interviews with 63 members of the Prison Governor's Association[38] suggested that the culture among prison governors could be described as a Masculinity Contest Culture comprising four key components (1) Show No Weakness (avoiding displays of femininity, such as vulnerability and some emotions), (2) Strength and Stamina (valorising physical strength and stamina), (3) Put Work First (expectations to work long hours and

32. Lin Chua, H. (2024). *The impact of individual differences on work outcomes of prison officers in Singapore Prison Service.* [Paper Presentation, Division of Occupational Psychology Conference, Sheffield].
33. Tehrani, N. (2024). *Economic evaluation of a psychological surveillance and support programmes: what has been achieved?* [Paper Presentation, Division of Occupational Psychology Conference, Sheffield].
34. Bierie, D. M. (2012). The Impact of Prison Conditions on Staff Well-Being. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology,* 56, 81- 95.
35. Fitzalan Howard, F., Gibson, R., & Wakeling, H. (2023). *Understanding culture change. A case study of an English Prison.* HMPPS.
36. Forman-Dolan, J., Caggiano, C., Anillo, I., Kennedy, T. D. (2022). Burnout among Professionals Working in Corrections: A Two Stage Review. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health,* 19, 9954.
37. Bierie, D. M. (2012). Is Tougher Better? The Impact of Physical Prison Conditions on Inmate Violence. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology,* 56, 338-355.
38. See footnote 11: Nichols et al. (2024).

put work ahead of family and any other external obligations) and (4) Dog-Eat-Dog (a hypercompetitive environment pitting one person against another). This was linked to a perception that accessing well-being support could have a negative impact on reputation and potentially be career-destroying, that support services are tokenistic, as well as sickness presenteeism (coming to work even though unwell) and working excessively long hours. As well as having a detrimental impact on leaders themselves, this sort of culture very likely impacts on prison officers too. One way to combat this is to work on normalising help-seeking behaviours and emphasising care. We were recently involved in studying the mechanisms of change in a prison that had a significant positive culture shift.[39] There was a strong emphasis on care across the jail; care was integrated into the vision of the prison ('be kind'), and there was real investment in the provision of care services. The prison provided dedicated time and roles to boost the Care Team, and managers seemed to really care about all staff members, shown through small acts such as remembering a birthday, and saying hello. Through these acts, help-seeking became normalised rather than stigmatised. People need to feel valued and cared for.

Leadership behaviour: Across critical occupations, leaders that actively promote and support employee health by meeting basic needs, talking about well-being, modelling looking after their own well-being, participating in and making time for relevant training, who make well-being everyone's responsibility, as well as those who create cohesive teams who have a shared identity and look out for each other, tend to have staff with higher levels of resilience than those who do not.[40]

There is also strong evidence that how people feel treated by those in authority can have an important impact on staff well-being in prisons. We conducted large-scale research across prisons in England and Wales, which found that procedural justice matters for prison staff.[41] When staff feel treated in a fair and just way by leaders and managers, this is related to less stress, sickness, absence and job burnout, more commitment to the organisation, better life and job satisfaction, improved well-being, being less likely to want to leave the job, having more support for rehabilitation of prisoners and less fear of being victimised. Using the four principles of procedural justice; conveying trustworthy motives, giving staff a voice, treating people with respect and applying rules with transparency and neutrality, can make a difference to prison officers' well-being.

Support: How supported people feel at work is one of the strongest influences on workplace well-being and resilience for those in critical occupations.[42] Research with prison officers tell us that they value:

- Peer support, whether this is formal or informal.[43] Having a shared identity at work, feeling in it together and looking out for each other makes an important difference to the well-being of people who work in critical occupations generally.[44] For prison officers this can help to foster positive behaviour at work, reduce feelings of loneliness and provide access to social, emotional and practical support.[45]

- Studies from the U.S. and the U.K. indicate that having protected space in which to talk about the emotional and moral demands of the work with colleagues is valued by people working in prisons.[46] This can be in the form of supervision- having formal contact over time with either peers, line managers or clinical supervisors, which has been linked to less stress and anxiety and better job satisfaction, and can help people feel valued.[47]

> ...we can use the information we obtain through the recruitment and selection process to tailor support packages.

39. See footnote 35: Fitzalan Howard, Gibson, & Wakeling (2023).
40. See footnote 23: Adler, & Saboe (2017).
41. Wakeling, H.C., & Fitzalan Howard, F. (2022). Prison staff's perceptions of procedural justice in English and Welsh prisons: A quantitative study. T*he Howard Journal of Crime and Justice,* 1-18.
42. Brooks, S. K, Dunn, R., Amlot, R., Greenberg, N., & Rubin, G.J. (2016). Social and occupational factors associated with psychological distress and disorder among disaster responders: A systematic review. *BMC Psychology,* 4, 18.
43. Costa, V., Monteiro, S., Cunha, A. I., Pereira, H., & Esgalhado, G. (2024). Job stress and burnout among prison staff: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Criminal Psychology, 14(*2), 196-212.
44. Lambert, E., Altheimer, I., & Hogan, N. (2010). Exploring the relationship between social support and job burnout among correctional staff. *Criminal Justice and Behaviour, 37*(11), 1217–1236.
45. E.g. Rankin, K. E., & Treston, K. C. (2024). A test of job demands-resources theory: Organizational citizenship behavior in a carceral setting. *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 51*(4), 552-568.
46. Forsyth, J., Shaw, J., & Shepherd, A. (2022). The support and supervision needs of prison officers working within prison environments. An empty systematic review. *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology, 33*(4), 475–490.
47. Winship, G., Shaw, S., & Haigh, R. (2019). Group supervision for prison officers: An orthopedagogical approach to emotional management. T*he Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology, 30(*6), 1006–1020.

● Line management. Line managers can act as an important buffer to stress for people working in high threat environments.[48] Regular contact with a line manager who is compassionate, helps with job crafting (see job demands and control section), who understands people's strengths and capabilities and provides developmental feedback, can make a real difference.[49] Line managers should have the training and support they need to do this important job well and to help them model that well-being is a priority.[50] They also play an important role in creating conditions under which people are more likely to detach from work which is strongly related to recovery from work stressors.[51] Line managers can enable some flexibility in working, avoid asking people to think about work-related tasks in non-work time and limit overtime to protect time for non-work-related activity.[52]

● Job demands and control: Research indicates that in general, having a high workload but little control over how you manage that work, leads to reduced job satisfaction, poorer health outcomes, and contributes to emotional exhaustion and burnout.[53] Evidence suggests this applies to prison officers too.[54] Managing staff workloads is therefore an important preventative well-being strategy, which combines not only looking at the demands on people's time but also at the level of control they have over the way they manage their time and tasks. Research suggests that such job control helps mitigate the impact of high workloads on stress, and that feeling empowered and having autonomy in roles can help prevent harm and encourage psychological recovery from stress.[55]

One way to combat this is to work on normalising help-seeking behaviours and emphasising care.

While managing job demands can be achieved through effective line management, and relies at least in part on effective recruitment and retention practices, evidence suggests that increasing job control has the potential to be achieved through greater use of job crafting and prototyping. Job crafting is initiated by the employees themselves. It consists of actively modifying the way they go about doing their job by reconfiguring the way they approach tasks, allowing employees to adjust what they do to fit with/make the most of their personal knowledge, skills and abilities, and to their preferences and needs.[56] Examples of job crafting include an employee actively developing their skills and knowledge by engaging in professional development activities —giving themselves the chance to do well — asking for help and feedback about the job from their supervisor or manager and co-workers, proactively offering to work on tasks that interest them and when there is little to do, offering help to co-workers and asking for more responsibility from their manager or supervisor. This helps employees balance job demands and resources with personal abilities and needs, which can result in increased satisfaction, reduction in risk of burnout and an increase in performance and productivity.[57] A recent study of prison officers in Poland found that those who engaged in job crafting felt their work was more meaningful and engaging.[58]

Prototyping is a form of service design that involves exploring how tasks are performed and testing new ways of doing things to improve outcomes.[59] There is work underway in prisons to explore how prototyping can be used to improve outcomes and better streamline

48. Kay, D., Brown, C. Hatton, T., Stevenson, J. R., Seville, E., & Vargo, J. (2019). Business recovery from disaster: A research update for practitioners. *Australasian Journal of Disaster and Trauma Studies, 23*(2), 83-89.
49. Alfes, K., Truss, C., Soane, E. C., Rees, C., & Gatenby, M. (2013). The relationship between line manager behavior, perceived HRM practices and individual performance: Examining the mediating role of engagement. *Human Resource Management, 52,* 839–859.
50. See footnote 48: Kay et al. (2019).
51. Wendsche, J., & Lohmann-Haislah, A. (2017). A meta-analysis on antecedents and outcomes of detachment from work. *Frontiers in psychology, 7,* 2072.
52. Nagamine, M., Shigemura, J., Fujiwara, T., Waki, F., Tanichi, M., Saito, T., Toda, H., Yoshino, A., & Shimizu, K. (2018). The relationship between dispositional empathy, psychological distress, and posttraumatic stress responses among Japanese uniformed disaster workers: a cross-sectional study. *BMC Psychiatry, 18,* 328.
53. See footnote 16: Searle (2017).
54. E.g. Clements, A., & Kinman, G. (2021). Job demands, organizational justice, and emotional exhaustion in prison officers. *Criminal Justice Studies, 34,* 441-458.
55. Pijpker, R., Vaandrager, L., Veen, E., & Koelen, M. (2019). Combined interventions to reduce burnout complaints and promote return to work: A systematic review of effectiveness and mediators of change. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 17,* 55.
56. Wrzesniewski, A., & Dutton, J. E. (2001). Crafting a job: Revisioning employees as active crafters of their work. *Academy of Management Review, 26,* 179–201.
57. Rudolph, C. W., Katz, I. M, Lavigne, K. N., & Zacher, H. (2017). Job crafting: A meta-analysis of relationships with individual differences, job characteristics, and work outcomes. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 102,* 112-138.
58. Nowicka-Kostrzewska, J., & Ro?nowski, B. (2023). "Personality in prison uniform". The influence of personality on building work engagement, applying job crafting strategies and well-being among prison officers. C*urrent Issues in Personality Psychology, 11*(4), 283-296
59. Cucierien-Zapan, M., & Hammel, V. (2019). Designing good jobs: Participatory ethnography and prototyping in service-oriented work ecosystems. *Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference Proceedings,* 514-532.

processes and systems, harnessing the insights of and working with people who are doing the job. As well as leveraging the experience and knowledge of those working on the front line, prototyping can help give staff a voice, and should lead to an increased sense of agency at work, which has the potential to lead to greater perceptions of job control and reduce levels of stress.

2. Protect and promote well-being at work

Another proactive strategy, protecting and promoting well-being at work involves strengthening capacities to recognise and act on mental health conditions at work, particularly among those with management or supervision responsibilities.

To protect mental health, WHO recommends:[60]

- Manager training for mental health, which helps managers spot and respond to staff experiencing emotional distress; builds interpersonal skills like active listening and good communication; and leads to better understanding of how job stressors affect mental health and can be managed;
- Training for staff in mental health literacy and awareness, to improve knowledge and reduce stigma that can affect how people deal with mental health conditions at work; and
- Interventions for staff to build skills to manage stress and reduce mental health symptoms, including psychosocial interventions and opportunities for physical activity.

This can include interventions that target quality of sleep, which is vital for well-being and work performance. Recent research into factors affecting the quality of sleep of prison officers found that this was impacted by experience of aggression at work, and that those whose sleep suffered most were those with a tendency to be hypervigilant and to ruminate.[61] This suggests that, alongside work to reduce instances of aggression at work, promoting strategies which help officers manage these tendencies could be helpful in improving their quality of sleep. Recent research with Romanian prison officers found that psychological capital (which consists of hope, self-efficacy, resilience and optimism) can help protect staff from the effects of distress and negative relationships on well-being.[62] That is, officers with a high level of psychological capital were less burned out and had fewer physical and mental health complaints even in distressing circumstances. Helping staff to build these personal resources, therefore, can contribute — in tandem with organisational and system level interventions designed to improve working conditions — to protecting officer well-being.

Public and private prisons have a wide range of support services and individual-level interventions available to staff and managers including mental health allies, care teams, cognitive behavioural therapy for sleep issues, and one-to-one counselling through Occupational Health teams. One of the tasks, then, is to promote use of these services. We can take an evidence-based approach here by turning to behavioural science, which tells us that if we want people to engage in a behaviour that's good for their health, we need to make it as easy as possible for them to do that; we need to reduce any friction that might interfere with pursuing the desired course of action.[63]

There are a number of possible sources of friction, or obstacles that can get in the way of using the services and interventions on offer to those working in prisons. Some officers may not be aware of the services or of their eligibility for those services. For others, the sheer size of the offer might feel overwhelming. There may be practical barriers; some might want to access services but struggle to get the opportunity, or not have the time. Another potential issue is the stigma associated with accessing support. During a recent prison visit, we spoke to an officer who'd been over 30 years in service, and who was really open about his struggles with mental health. He spoke incredibly highly of the Care Team at that jail, but in the same breath, he also said that he would never go to them for support. It wasn't because he didn't think they were competent — quite the opposite — he thought they were really good at their jobs, but he said he knew the minute he went to see them, that everyone in the jail would know. He was a private and proud man, and he felt shame about needing help. That officer was not a one off. Research tells us that the culture in prisons, and the stigma associated with mental health issues, can get in the way of people getting the help they need.[64] If we

---

60. See footnote 30: World Health Organization (2022).
61. Kinman, G., & Clements, A. J. (2022). Prison officers' experiences of aggression: Implications for sleep and recovery. *Occupational Medicine (Oxford), 72*(9), 604-608.
62. Okros, N., Vîrg?, D., & Laz?r, T. (2022). Types of demands and well-being in correctional officers: The protective role of psychological capital. *Work (Reading, Mass.), 73*(1), 165-180.
63. Wendel, S. (2020). Designing for Behavior Change: *Applying Psychology and Behavioral Economics.* O'Reilly Media.
64. Ricciardelli, R., Haynes, S. H., Burdette, A., Keena, L., McCreary, D. R., Carleton, R. N., ... & Groll, D. (2021). Mental health, stigma, gender, and seeking treatment: Interpretations and experiences of prison employees. *Applied Psychology in Criminal Justice, 16*(1), 107-127.

---

want to protect and promote well-being, and encourage officers to use the range of services available, we need to work on addressing stigma, and normalising, reinforcing — even celebrating — looking after well-being and mental health, as the responsible and professional thing to do.

3. Support

The final set of strategies is centred on supporting those with mental health difficulties to thrive at work. This is both preventative, in preventing mental health from deteriorating, but also reactive by supporting people who develop mental health issues while at work.

WHO recommends three interventions to support people with mental health conditions to gain, sustain and participate in work:

- Reasonable accommodations at work, which involves adapting the work environment to the capacities, needs and preferences of staff with a mental health condition. This can include adaptations to work assignments or extra time to complete tasks, provision of flexible working hours, time off work to attend health appointments and regular meetings with supportive supervisors.
- Return-to-work programmes, which combine support to attend and participate in work (like reasonable accommodations or phased re-entry to work) with ongoing clinical support to reduce mental health symptoms and help individuals coming back to work after an absence related to a mental health condition.
- Supported employment initiatives, which help people with severe mental health conditions to gain or continue to work through provision of mental health and vocational support.[65]

...feeling empowered and having autonomy in roles can help prevent harm and encourage psychological recovery from stress.

A recent meta-analysis of well-being interventions for prison officers concluded that there just is not enough good research to tell us what works to reduce stress or manage mental health for frontline prison staff.[66] The same is true of interventions for people in some other critical occupations.[67] We need to do more work to build this evidence base. However, as we have heard, there are studies with prison officers which point to a few practices and psychological factors associated with resilience and better well-being, which give us some insight into the type of organisational support that can make a difference to well-being and mental health problems, including formal and informal support from peers and supervisors. In particular, effective line management can be an important source of support for prison officers. A recent large-scale study of the mental health of prison officers in the USA found that

> the competence of line managers and the support they offered acted as a buffer to the negative impacts of exposure to violence in the workplace.[68]

However, support for well-being at work is not just about attending to specific mental or physical health needs; it is about making sure people have what they need to be of value in their workplace, to have the right resources, the right knowledge and skills, the right ongoing support to learn and improve, through supervision/management and feedback.

The importance of mattering: Underpinning all of this, a sort of organising principle, if you will, is making sure that people know they matter. Mattering can be defined as the extent to which someone is acknowledged, relied upon and valued by others.[69] People working in prisons need to understand why their job matters, why the tasks assigned to them matter, and it's important that they know that their efforts are seen and valued, and that what they experience at work, matters. As human beings, having a sense of meaning and purpose is vital for our well-being, our resilience and better mental health.[70] Knowing that we play a role in our work

65. See footnote 30: World Health Organization (2022).
66. Evers, T. J., Ogloff, J. R. P., Trounson, J. S., & Pfeifer, J. E. (2020). Well-being interventions for correctional officers in a prison setting: A review and meta-analysis. *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 47*(1), 3-21
67. Turley, R., et al., (2020). Promoting the retention, mental health and well-being of child and family social workers: A systematic review of workforce interventions. *What Works for Children's Social Care; Cardiff University.*
68. Lerman, A. E., Harney, J., & Sadin, M. (2022). Prisons and mental health: Violence, organizational support, and the effects of correctional work. *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 49*(2), 181-199.
69. Piliavin, J. A., & Siegl, E. (2007). Health benefits of volunteering in the Wisconsin longitudinal Study. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 48,* 450–464.
70. Ryan, R. M., & Deci., E. L. (2001). On Happiness and Human Potentials: A Review of Research on Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well Being. *Annual Review of Psychology 52,* 131 66.

community, or having someone looking out for us, or looking to us for help, can provide us with a sense that we matter. A simple way of increasing a sense of mattering, is by recognising the realities and challenges of the working environment and the job, and by recognising and shining attention on particular behaviours or examples of good work by individuals or teams, which can increase resilience by validating people's hard work, and emphasising that their work is important, as well as encouraging people to reflect on the good that they're doing.

It is better not to impose support from the top down.[71] Evidence suggests we need to work with staff to design and deliver a range of support services that respond to and meet their needs — less doing to, and more doing with — working collaboratively to ensure that services are fit for purpose, feel relevant and credible and meet the diverse needs of prison officers.[72] How supported people feel matters; people need to feel the offer of support is authentic and that they could feasibly access that support if they needed to.

Encouraging voice and engagement from staff and getting staff involved in and contributing to decision making is important, and can reduce stress.[73] An in-depth study of prison culture change identified encouragement of voice and engagement from staff as a key mechanism of change.[74] We have also been involved in participatory action research at two prisons, HMPs Littlehey and Low Newton, where we worked with a group of motivated staff and prisoners to work towards improving the culture at the prisons. It struck us how valuable those involved felt that the project had been for them. When reflecting on their experiences, both project groups described the positive impact of having a voice and the collaborative working relationships that had developed within the groups on their well-being. What they had to say, and their experiences, mattered.

Concluding thoughts

The evidence tells us that prisons are challenging work environments, they contain lots of stressors, but they are also places where people do important and valuable work, and where staff can make a genuine difference. We know that being in a job that feels meaningful, provides a sense of purpose and belonging, and in which you can really see the difference you make, and the value you add, is linked to better well-being and increased resilience.

We can use an evidence-based approach to well-being and resilience. We can focus on what we can do to prevent harm, to protect staff by monitoring and improving conditions for well-being at work, to promote staff support services, and to support our staff to do a good job well through effective line management, development work, and working collaboratively to produce services that are accessible, practical and meet their needs.

Administrative level solutions for well-being and resilience, such as improving prison culture, ensuring good communication, providing recognition for officers doing a good job, and involving staff in decision-making, are just as important if not more so, than individual-level solutions.

And finally, if we want to make a difference to workplace well-being in prisons, we can commit to making sure every officer knows that they matter, and that the work that they do matters.

---

71. British Psychology Society Guidance (2020). *The psychological needs of healthcare staff as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic.* BPS.
72. See footnote 21, Clements et al. (2020).
73. See footnote 43: Costa et al. (2024).
74. See footnote 35: Fitzalan Howard, Gibson, & Wakeling (2023).