



## IssueBrief

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# Baby steps: Enhancing your well-being—and that of your clients—is easier than you think

**T**aking care of others day in and day out has always been stressful. The pandemic has made it, for many, overwhelming. Burnout and compassion fatigue affect so many case managers, disability management specialists, nurses, psychologists and other health professionals. They must juggle the challenges of looking after clients during the pandemic while addressing their own struggles.

“It is especially important for case managers and disability management specialists to take care of themselves in order not to burnout. Building your own well-being can give you more energy, resilience and creativity to better serve others,” says Teri Treiger, RN-BC, MA, CCM, FABQAURP, chair-elect, Commission for Case Manager Certification.

That’s because taking care of your well-being yields psychological, physical and intellectual benefits, says Beth Cabrera, Ph.D., TEDx speaker, founder of Cabrera Insights and author of *Beyond Happy: Women, Work, and Well-Being*.

One of the most immediate benefits is increased energy. “You’re going to be able to better take care of your clients because you feel like you have the energy to go that extra mile,” she promises.

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Another benefit is self-confidence, both in what we're currently doing and what we aspire to do—such as taking on a stretch assignment or asking for a promotion. "There are all sorts of things that we are going to be able to do *better* because we have greater self-confidence because we're taking care of our own well-being."

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Self-care also cultivates resilience. "We also know that people who are, in general, more positive, who are taking care of their well-being, bounce back much more quickly than those who are not. So, investing in your well-being and, in general, working to be thriving will equip you to face challenges and setbacks."

If the emotional benefits aren't enough, consider this: "It turns out that a happy brain is a smarter brain. We've seen that when people are in positive moods, they are better able to retrieve information from long-term memory. They can hold more information in working memory. Positivity also makes us

more creative by broadening our perspective," she says. "So, when we are positive and thriving that helps us to be actually smarter."

Then there are the physical health benefits. "When we are not thriving, when we are languishing, or we are stressed out that causes a lot of cortisol to course through our bodies, and if we have this chronic stress, that can be very bad for our cardiovascular system." People who are, in general, more positive, who are thriving, have lower blood pressure and lower heart rates which leads to fewer strokes, fewer heart attacks, fewer heart disease issues, she says.

## **So, what constitutes well-being?**

She identifies two dimensions of well-being: feeling good and doing good. Feeling good is our experience of positive emotions. Think of it as being happy. Doing good relates to our sense of meaning in life; the feeling that what we are doing matters.

"To really have high well-being, we also need a sense that our lives are meaningful. That our lives are worthwhile because we're making a difference. We're doing something with our lives that matters."

This is different from happiness. "A lot of times when we're trying to pursue something meaningful, something important, it generates negative emotions. If you think of some of the most important things you've achieved there was likely a little blood, sweat and tears that went along with it."

## **Strategies to cultivate well-being**

A few simple exercises can improve well-being for you, your clients and even your colleagues.

The first is to practice gratitude. "We can learn to be more grateful, to practice gratitude. To practice gratitude means we have to see what's good first." She recommends the "three good things" exercise: Before you go to bed, write down three good things that happened that day.

There's research to support this. Researchers asked a group of people to, every night for two weeks, write down three good things that happened that day. Then they asked them to come to the lab three months later. Using an fMRI, they found that the group that had done this exercise three months prior had significantly more activity in the area of the brain associated with gratitude and with

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positive emotions compared to those who had not done the exercise.

“When we do this exercise over time, we’re actually rewiring our brains to some extent. If every night, your brain knows you’re going to have to write down three good things, then it starts noticing and looking for good things during the day.”

Mindfulness—focusing on the present moment—is not human nature. “We are not naturally mindful. In fact, we have a naturally wandering mind,” she explains. “The ability to think about the future, to plan for the future, to strategize, to decide what we want to do and how to do that makes us uniquely human. It’s a wonderful thing, but it’s not necessarily the best thing for our mental well-being.”

Again, there’s research, this time from Harvard. Researchers sent text messages to people to determine if they were focused or wandering. Then they asked them to rate their happiness on a scale. “The overwhelming result is that people are significantly less happy when their minds are wandering.” In fact, the Harvard researchers writing up the study entitled their paper “A Wandering Mind is an Unhappy Mind.”<sup>1</sup>

To support mindfulness, it helps to calm down the amygdala—the emotional center of our brain which is often at odds with the pre-frontal cortex. “What’s interesting is

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that these are like two separate operating systems in our brain. Only one of them works at a time. So, when we’re doing that ruminating and that worrying and our mind is wandering—if those are causing negative emotions, we put the amygdala in charge rather than our thinking brain.”

When the amygdala is triggered, we react from emotion. “We need to find ways to get this under control, basically to calm ourselves down and to try to stop those negative trains of thought that can cause this.” She recommends deep breathing.

“You can actually activate that parasympathetic nervous system just by breathing deeply. And you start doing that and that’s putting the brakes on your fight or flight kind of response, slowing everything down.”

One exercise is a “16-second meditation” or “four by four”

breathing. It’s simple: Inhale for four seconds. Hold for four seconds. Exhale for four seconds. Hold for four seconds. “I like to use this especially with people who feel like meditation is too woo-woo or too difficult.”

## Hide the phone

Personal technology is dramatically interfering with our attention and our mindfulness, she says. “Your brain cannot multitask. In fact, all it does is switch between tasks.” This destroys your productivity, she says. “Research shows that productivity goes down by 40%, when you try to do two things at once.”

It also hurts your well-being, creating stress. “So anytime you try to make your brain do more than one thing at a time, your brain secretes cortisol, a stress hormone. You’re trying to ask your brain to do something it knows it’s going to do poorly, or it’s not capable of doing, and it actually causes you to have stress hormones coursing through your body.”

Minimizing those distractions is crucial, and one strategy is to keep your phone out of sight during conversations. Put it in another room or a drawer or your purse. She points to research from Sherry Turkle that shows the impact of having a phone on a desk when you’re having a conversation.<sup>2</sup> Turkle found that if the phone was in sight, the conversations stayed very superficial.

<sup>1</sup> Killingsworth, M. A. and Gilbert, D. T.: A Wandering Mind Is an Unhappy Mind. Science (2010)

<sup>2</sup> “How Smartphones Are Killing Conversation” [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how\\_smartphones\\_are\\_killing\\_conversation](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_smartphones_are_killing_conversation)



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"So anytime you're meeting with a client, don't have phones. And certainly don't have a phone there that you're looking at, or that has beeps when there's an incoming message, but even hiding it from sight can help you to have a much better conversation with your client."

## **A sense of meaning: Schedule it**

"One of the best ways to immediately feel like your life matters is to spend more time doing what you personally feel is important," Cabrera says. The problem is that most of the time, what we deem important—be it the gym, volunteering, reading, etc.—fails to rise to the level of urgent. "By the end of the day you may not have had time to get to those important but not urgent things."

So, there can be things you do for your own health such as exercising or going to the farmer's market to get healthy food that's a little further away than the grocery store.

How do you make sure you do those things? "There's a little easy trick that can help you to make sure you do spend time on those things that are of value to you. And that's by scheduling them on your calendar."

It sounds simple but, she explains, research shows that you are significantly more likely to do something if it's scheduled on your calendar than if it's just written down on a to-do list.

Schedule those things that are important. If an unavoidable conflict comes up, don't remove the visit to the gym or the time set aside to read: Just slide it somewhere else on the calendar. That's what Cabrera did as she was writing her book. "I wanted it to stay on my calendar because I knew writing that book was something extremely important to me and would give my life great meaning if I finished it."

Putting it in writing provides another bonus: You look back over the last month, over the last year, and you can point to those things you did that give your life meaning.

## **Doing good for others**

Research shows that one of the things that gives us the greatest sense of meaning in life *and*

increases our happiness is doing for others. "It's called a 'helper's high.'"

"So, this is something that can really help you have more meaning in your life and be happier. It also has been shown to help you be more successful."

The organizational psychologist, Adam Grant, identified three types of employees. The Givers tend to do more for other people than they received in return. Matchers took a "tit for tat" approach. Takers, the third group, take from others without giving back. The most successful employees, the employees who had the highest performance ratings, were givers.

When you do for others, she says, it makes you feel better; it gives you a sense of meaning; it makes you feel happier.

"As case managers and disability management specialists, your job is to be a giver. You're working in the caring profession, and all day, every day, you're doing things for others. But there are always more things you can do, small acts of kindness," she says. "Maybe you want to stop by Starbucks and get a pumpkin spice latte and take it to your client on Monday morning to do just a small, extra something, or maybe you want to just hold the door for the person that you see coming behind you."

Be a giver, she says, and ask, "What can I do today to make one person's life a little bit happier, a little bit better?" It doesn't have to be grandiose, she says. (See sidebar)

## A tonic for burnout

Board-certified case managers and disability management specialists have worked exceptionally hard during the pandemic, assisting their clients during a time of great uncertainty.

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"While the suggestion that some may need a pep talk may sound trite, many staff in the helping fields are finding that they need incentives to get up in the morning and to get to work with a positive attitude," Treiger says.

Even small changes in behavior can aid us in approaching difficult circumstances differently, she says. "Perhaps you or your colleagues are at risk for burnout; trying some of the approaches mentioned... may help you and your staff stave off exhaustion."

Cabrera agrees. "Think of these things as strategies that you can use to build your own well-being, to thrive, and even use to help your clients to thrive." ■



## A small act of kindness

Cabrera tells the story of a New York bus driver on a "terribly awful winter day." It's pouring rain, traffic is horrendous and everyone is miserable.

The bus driver watches this for a while and then gets on his little microphone to speak to everybody on the bus:

"You know, guys, I am so sorry about this day. It really sucks, you know, and unfortunately there's nothing I can do about this awful weather. And there's nothing I can do about this traffic. I really can't get you home any faster. You know, we are kind of all stuck here, but I did think of one thing that maybe I could do. The next time I come to a stop everyone who's getting off this bus, I'm going to hold my hand

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*I just want you to drop all of your worries into the palm of my hand.  
Don't take any of that home to your family, just leave it with me.  
That's the only thing I can think of doing to help you out today.*

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out. And I just want you to drop all of your worries into the palm of my hand. Don't take any of that home to your family, just leave it with me. That's the only thing I can think of doing to help you out today."

The mood shifts immediately. Passengers start talking to each other. At the very next bus stop, he holds out his hand and every person getting off the bus mimes that they're dropping their worries into his hand.

"Don't worry about leaving everything with me," he tells them. "My route ends at the Hudson, and I'm going to go out there to the river, and I'm going to throw all your worries and all of my worries into that damn river. So, we'll all go home and not burden anybody else with our worries."

It cost him nothing, but it made a powerful difference in the lives of his passengers that day, Cabrera says. ■

# About the Experts



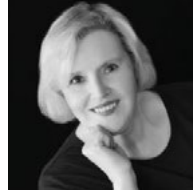
**Beth Cabrera, Ph.D.**  
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**Beth Cabrera** is the author of *Beyond Happy: Women, Work, and Well-Being*. As a writer, researcher and speaker, she helps individuals achieve greater success and well-being. Her leadership development programs focus on positive culture, strengths, meaning, mindfulness and workplace well-being.

After earning her Ph.D. in industrial/organizational psychology from the Georgia Institute of Technology, Dr. Cabrera joined the faculty of Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, a leading Spanish university. Upon returning to the U.S., she continued her academic career as a professor of management at Arizona State University, and then as a senior research fellow at Thunderbird School of Global Management.

In 2009, she founded Cabrera Insights, a leadership development company, to help individuals and leaders apply principles of positive psychology for enhanced engagement and performance. Her research, published in some of the top academic and professional journals, has received thousands of citations. Beth has served on numerous editorial boards and was the editor of *Management Research*. She has also served on the board of directors of several non-for-profit organizations.

Dr. Cabrera's course, *How to Build a Thriving Workplace: A Leader's Guide*, can be found at [thegreatcourses.com](http://thegreatcourses.com) and on [audible.com](http://audible.com).



**Teri Treiger, RN-BC, MA, CCM, FABQAURP**  
Chair-Elect, Commission for Case Manager  
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**Teri Treiger** is a thought leader inspiring Conscious Case Management® practice across the health care continuum. She earned her undergraduate degrees in nursing and healthcare administration from Labourer and Stonehill Colleges. She achieved her Masters of Organization Management at the University of Phoenix and is currently pursuing a Doctor of Education degree at Capella University. Teri worked as a clinical product manager developing care management and population health programs at McKesson. Teri oversaw the development and implementation of an uninsured care management program in collaboration with Baptist Health in Montgomery, AL.

Teri is a prolific author in journals and books related to the subject of case management and care coordination. In addition, she is an editor and featured columnist of Professional Case Management's *The Heartbeat of Case Management*. Previously, Teri served as a founding board member of the National Transitions of Care Coalition (NTOCC) and is a past National President of the Case Management Society of America (CMSA).

Teri is founder and principal at Ascent Care Management located in Quincy, MA, where she provides private case management, consulting, professional education, peer mentoring and publication services.



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