

Taking care of the carers

Embedding wellbeing in the heart of the mental healthcare ecosystem

The 'care paradox'

Who will take care of the carers?

When Plato set out to imagine what an ideal community would look like, he ran into the following conundrum: 'if we appoint a part of the community to be the guards and custodians of the rest of the community, who will be left to guard the custodians themselves?' The same logic can be applied to the **wellbeing of mental health workers**. Many praise the vital contribution of mental health workers, particularly after the pandemic has forced governments and businesses to realise just how crucial (yet fragile) mental health is to the functioning of our economies and societies.

But what is often forgotten is that mental health workers too are real people with their own emotional and life challenges and who, as such, also need to be supported in their wellbeing. Their wellbeing is often taken for granted. There is a tacit assumption that, because mental health carers are trained in helping others with their struggles, they should somehow be less susceptible or even impermeable to downturns in their own wellbeing.



Why mental healthcare workers need care – debunking the ‘hero’ model.

This assumption is misguided. More than this, mental health carers can be even more susceptible to experiencing wellbeing challenges compared to workers in other sectors.

First, the very **nature of their job** means that mental healthcare workers are frequently exposed to psychological and emotional distress, which can take a significant toll on their wellbeing. The financial strain confronting many community-based organisations adds further pressure to these challenges, placing frontline workers at an even greater risk of burnout.

Second, carers tend (often unconsciously) to assume the role of a **‘hero’** who must sacrifice their own wellbeing for the wellbeing of others. It is as if they do not have a **right** to prioritise their wellbeing and feel **guilty** if they do so¹.

Third, the **work culture** of mental health care often (unintentionally) reinforces this expectation, making it difficult for team members to communicate their wellbeing needs to colleagues, leaders and, importantly, to their **donors**.

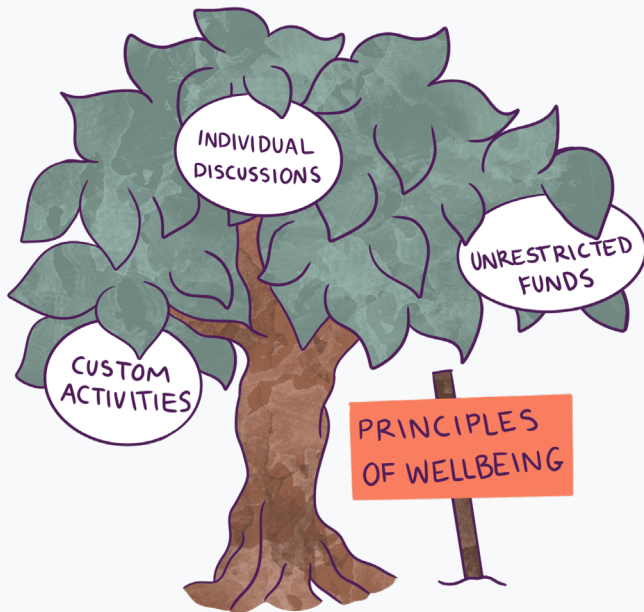


As we are always told on airplanes, it is only after you put your own oxygen mask on that you can turn to help others. The same is true of mental health care: **If carers aren't able to support their own mental health in the first place, how can they possibly deliver effective and sustainable care to others?**

This realisation prompted us to make an immediate and concerted commitment to explicitly supporting the wellbeing of our grantees by creating **‘Ember Wellbeing Fund’**, a dedicated pot of money specifically aimed at promoting wellbeing activities and resources for the teams behind the mental health projects we work with.

¹Sevens Guntzel, J. & Murphy Johnson, N. 2020. Wellbeing Inspires Wellbeing: How Changemakers' Inner Wellbeing Influences Their Work [Report]. Retrieved from bit.ly/TWPReport2020, pp. 56-69.

How does Ember's Wellbeing Fund work?



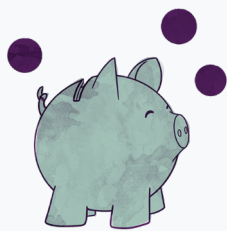
At the beginning of our partnership, we give our investees a small pot of **unrestricted funds** to be used towards the wellbeing of their teams. Instead of dictating how grantees should use their funds, we encourage them to invest in the activities they feel most help their wellbeing.

This fosters a **culture of wellbeing** among our partner organisations and deepens the **bond of trust** we share with them.

Following that, we engage in **individual** discussions with our grantees. In these conversations, we **attentively listen** to their daily hurdles. Together, we then devise a **customised** set of activities or support measures aimed at enhancing the wellbeing of their organisations.

By providing this support, we aim to cultivate a network of mental health organisations deeply rooted in the principles of **wellbeing**, and therefore equipped to make a positive impact on the individuals and communities they serve in a way that is **sustainable**.

What makes Ember's approach unique?



Unrestricted funds.

While it is understandable that funders want to measure impact and monitor how their funds are being used, organisations are often burdened with the onerous requirements of funding applications and reporting activities. These place additional stress on their already strained teams and make it difficult for them to apply for the funding they need. This is why all wellbeing funds we provide are unrestricted, and organisations receive them without having to apply for them and with minimal reporting requirements.



Tailored approach.

Wellbeing is a multifaceted concept, and every organisation has its unique set of challenges that cannot be addressed through a standardised, top-down solution. Acknowledging this, we have committed to offering wellbeing support that is thoughtfully customised to align with the specific needs of each individual organisation. Our support ranges from therapeutic interventions to confidence-building workshops and financial aid for team building, ensuring we address the varied aspects of organisational wellbeing effectively and considerately.



Trust & confidentiality.

Participants may hesitate to engage in counselling sessions or wellbeing group activities, fearing that their disclosures could affect their working partnership with their funder. For this reason, all sessions and activities remain strictly confidential, with a guarantee that their content will be kept separate from any work with Ember.

What impact has the wellbeing fund had on participants and their work?

All organisations that have participated in our programme have reported enhancements in both their team members' personal wellbeing and in the wellbeing of the organisation as a whole.

Participants reported improvements related to the following 3 areas in particular:

01

Increased Appreciation for Wellbeing's Importance and Capacity for Self-Care

Attendees have spoken about how the programme has heightened their recognition of wellbeing's value and their ability to look after themselves. One team member observed:

"We were so focused on trying to see how we respond to wellbeing initiatives that we had forgotten about our own wellbeing. And that's one of the things we are grateful to Ember for [...]. That realisation was really, really eye opening."

Participants have talked about how this has influenced the way in which they go about their day-to-day work, giving them a renewed joy in their interactions with the community.

02

Enhanced Group Wellbeing through Personal Recognition

The space provided for team members to express their authentic selves and discuss personal values during wellbeing activities has been particularly important, and teams have emphasised the significance of being seen as unique individuals. One participant reflected:

"I don't think we've had a session where we have known each other in that way before [...]. We work together, we eat together, we go to the field together [...] but to have the chance to come together as a team to share and open up, that's one thing that we have been able to achieve thanks to Ember and the wellbeing fund."

This unanimous feedback points to the potential for profound impact of acknowledging team members as individuals beyond their work roles.

03

Carers as Receivers of Care

Several participants have conveyed a sense of comfort and positivity in realising that there are individuals who are considerate of their wellbeing, actively endeavouring to support and nurture it. They have underscored the emotional value of feeling cared for and the reassurance that accompanies the understanding that their wellness is a priority for others. As one of the participants succinctly put it:

"It was the first time that someone from outside thought about our care [...]. It was a surprise: 'Wow, someone is thinking of us and this is for us'."

The collective experience of our participants suggests that the programme's approach to personal recognition and the promotion of self-care not only benefits individual wellbeing, but also enhances the communal and organisational capacity to serve. It's not just about feeling better on an individual level (which is important); it's also about how this sense of wellbeing ripples through the whole group and touches the way team members work together. It's as if by caring for ourselves, we are unlocking a deeper ability to care for those around us, nurturing a community that is both caring and strong.

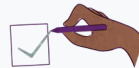
Come join us...

The success of our programme has shown us the massive impact that wellbeing initiatives can have not only on workers themselves, but also on the cohesiveness and resilience of mental health organisations and, consequently, on the impact they are going to have on the ground.



We believe that dialogue around the mental health of mental health professionals must therefore become part of the mainstream discourse in this sector. It must become baked into the very way mental health initiatives are funded, consulted, and evaluated.

Simple steps that funders could take to begin moving in this direction may include:



Checking in with organisations to ask about their wellbeing and the struggles they are facing and if there is anything as donor that they can do to help.



Allocating funds in their budget to be used for the wellbeing of their grantees.



Leaving organisations free to decide how to best use their funds, which increases trust in the donor-grantee relationship, and also empowers organisations to make decisions about wellbeing, which in itself contributes to creating a **wellbeing culture**.



Genuinely encouraging grantees to use their funds to take care of their wellbeing, accepting that this might involve them taking time off work to do so.



Reducing reporting burdens, being mindful that, while accountability is important, every additional request means more stress for organisations that are already overstretched.

If we take this innovative step forward, there are huge rewards to be reaped not only for the people and organisations we support, but also for the communities that we support through them.

Come join us to turn this vision into reality...

