

Technical Report

Promoting well-being in the workplace: A call for scholars and policymakers. Seminar lectures at the University of Messina, April 2023

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On 21 April 2023, a study seminar entitled "Promoting well-being in the workplace" was held in a blended mode for students of the Bachelor of Science in Clinical and Preventive Psychological Sciences and Techniques, as well as the Master of Science in Clinical and Health Psychology in the Life Cycle of the Clinical and Experimental Medicine Department of the University of Messina. The event was organized and moderated by Dr. Amelia Rizzo, Ph.D., psychologist and cognitive-behavioral therapist, and lecturer in Social, Industrial, and Organizational Psychology at the University of Messina.

Professor Alessandro De Carlo, Associate Professor in Psychology of Work and Organizations at the University of Messina, has introduced the conference. Prof. De Carlo has addressed a challenging topic in his presentation: "Why promote health in the workplace?". It is important to note that psychology finds fertile ground in the work and business component. However, it is also often a source of discussion, debate, and, ultimately, stigmatization. Therefore, finding ways to promote wellness in this area is necessary.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defined well-being as "a momentary and dynamic state of equilibrium from the biological, psychological, and social points of view of the human being" in 1948. The concept of well-being has also been formally related to the health status of each individual. Health has been defined as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not simply the absence of disease." This definition of health is no longer static but dynamic, adaptive, and contextual. In 2011, The World Health Organization (WHO) redefined the concept of health as: "the ability to adapt and self-manage in the face of social, physical, and emotional challenges." This new perspective aligns with the nature of human beings, who survive by modulating their inner state as a response to different environmental stimuli and by rebalancing essential aspects of their lives to

accommodate new experiences. During the presentation, the importance of mental health was also emphasized. Mental health, as a topic, has been the object of recent interest by the general public and media alike, often highlighted in magazines and social media. However, there are still many obstacles in the workplace related to stigma and preconceptions about "mental health." Therefore, Prof. De Carlo proposes the promotion of well-being in the workplace as a preventive strategy that aims to improve the health and well-being of individuals in the workplace while indirectly reducing stigma.

Dr. Maria Grazia Maggio then gained the floor. Dr. Maggio is a psychologist, psychotherapist, expert in work-related stress and organizational well-being, and an Adjunct Lecturer in Work and Organizational Psychology at the Department of Clinical and experimental medicine, University of Messina. Dr. Maggio provided a wealth of information about the historical path and objectives "from group formation to the workgroup." She began by discussing the studies of Lewin and Bion and explained the definitions of "group," highlighting how a group elaborates its own "culture," including its structure, activities, and organization. She also noted how group activity is hindered, diverted, and sometimes facilitated by certain mental activities that share the attribute of strong emotional tendencies.

Dr. Maggio explained that while a group is a set of people with a "common perception of their unity," the workgroup is a limited set of people with an "awareness of their unity." Group members are interdependent, bound by a sense of belonging, with stated, accepted, shared values, norms, and roles committed to achieving a chosen and assigned goal. The analysis of work groups reveals negotiations of plans, methods, functions, ideas, decisions, people, skills, cultures, and communication styles. Four stages are necessary for the work group: designing the result, teaming up, developing collaborative relationships, and achieving the result. Leadership assumes relevance as the ability to guide and coordinate the group toward a common goal through empowerment. The leader, then, according to the proposed approach, must have the ability to understand the emergence of any conflicts, arrange for their prevention, negotiate between the parties with proper detachment, and offer alternatives to conflict resolution.

Dr. Pietro Crescenzo, Ph.D., a Research Fellow at the University of Bari and Adjunct Lecturer at the University of Siena, delivered an in-depth discussion on "Volunteer Burnout: Syndrome and Prevention." In Italy, volunteerism is recognized as an expression of participation, solidarity, and pluralism that promotes social value and function (article 1 of Law 266/91). The additional elements that characterize volunteerism are freedom and gratuity. However, volunteering can trigger burnout, a maladaptive response to chronic stress. In the health and helping professions, workers in constant contact with suffering may be impacted, especially if emotionally involved. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the risk of developing burnout syndrome among volunteers.

Dr. Crescenzo explained the three dimensions that characterize burnout syndrome: i) feelings of physical or emotional exhaustion; ii) increased mental distance from one's work or feelings of cynicism; iii) a sense of ineffectiveness and the diminishment of personal accomplishment, which are in turn associated with states of anxiety and depression. There are four stages of onset: idealistic enthusiasm, stagnation, frustration, and professional death. Causes of volunteer burnout can be organizational or individual, with implications that affect practitioners, users, and the community. Cognitive behavioral therapy, emotion-centered therapy, or co-treatment can be employed as solution strategies. Dr. Crescenzo emphasized the importance of teamwork and protection in preventing volunteer burnout. He highlighted the significance of using one's network positively, as the pathological risks involved in stress are essential. The first step to take, the greatest act of love toward oneself, is to ask for help [1,2].

Dr. Francesco Chirico, an occupational physician employed at the Italian State Police, Adjunct Professor of Occupational Medicine at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Rome, delivered the final presentation. Dr. Chirico serves as the Editor in Chief of the Journal of Health and Social Sciences and the Italian Journal of Psychology and Occupational Health. His talk focused on risk assessment and occupational health programs to address workplace violence.

Violence is a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon that differs between contexts and cultures. The International Labor Organization (ILO) defines violence in the workplace as "any action, incident or behavior that deviates from reasonable conduct in which a person is assaulted, threatened, harmed, injured in the course of or as a direct consequence of his or her work." The European Commission also defines violence: as "events in which people are abused, threatened, or assaulted in the circumstances related to their work, including the home-work commute, that involve explicit or implicit challenges to their safety, well-being, or health."

Dr. Chirico's analysis reveals that workplace violence (WV) can be internal to the workplace (such as bullying), external, physical, or psychological. It leads to situations that the employer must manage and control with the help of occupational health physicians and psychologists employed as employer's counselors. Various organizational and workplace settings experience this type of violence, such as healthcare, law enforcement, the social welfare sector, public administration, and transportation. Dr. Chirico highlights the need to focus the psychosocial risk assessment in the workplace on work-related stress and other psychosocial risk factors like WV, emotional demands, and events with a high potential for post-traumatic stress disorders. This is particularly relevant due to the interconnectedness among these different occupational psychosocial risk factors. Many studies in the healthcare sector showed that WV is associated with work-related stress, and their relationship is bidirectional. Occupational health programs could help collect health data to manage this phenomenon and inform the risk assessment process. Workplace health promotion programs for increasing workers' mental well-being could help address all the psychosocial risk factors [3,4].

Dr. Rizzo concludes with gratitude for the insights shared regarding the role of psychology in organizations. However, it is essential to acknowledge that much work remains to be done to enhance worker well-being, reduce stigma related to mental health, and prevent forms of personal malaise and social violence.

Following the speakers' presentations, extensive and diverse discussions ensued among the students. The provided answers were comprehensive and timely, leading to a moment of both personal and professional growth. The relevance of the topics discussed, which are anchored in today's reality, led to a largely constructive discussion.

Implications for Research and Policymakers

Promoting well-being in the workplace is becoming increasingly significant to scholars and policymakers. With the increasing number of people experiencing burnout, stress, and mental health problems at work, it is vital to address this issue through evidence-based policies and practices. Future perspectives for promoting well-being in the workplace require a multidisciplinary approach that involves collaboration between scholars and policymakers. One of the strategies is the development of interventions that improve employee mental and physical health, such as creating supportive work environments and fostering positive workplace cultures. Additionally, promoting work-life balance, flexible work arrangements, and investing in employee training and development can also contribute to the well-being of workers. Ensuring that employees have access to various resources and support networks catering to their needs is crucial. Finally, increasing awareness of the importance of well-being in the workplace can also encourage positive change in organizational practices and policies [5-7].

Psychologists play a central role in promoting well-being in the workplace in cooperation with occupational health physicians; their input is vital in developing evidence-based policies and practices. Research provides insights into the factors that impact the well-being of employees and the interventions that effectively promote mental health and reduce stress in the workplace. Psychologists can help identify employees' unique needs and then develop strategies at the occupational or individual level to address them. They can also provide training and support to managers and supervisors to create safe and supportive work environments in the framework of workplace health promotion programs. Furthermore, psychologists can contribute to developing programs to address specific issues such as stress management, conflict resolution, and building resilience. Occupational physicians and psychologists can assess the effectiveness of interventions

and provide recommendations for improvement. Finally, they can work with policymakers to promote the best policies and practices to improve employees' well-being. In general, the central role of psychologists in shaping and contributing to the well-being of workers in the occupational environment cannot be overstated, and their expertise is essential in developing and implementing effective strategies to create healthy and supportive work environments.

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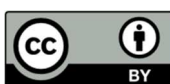
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