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Thought Leadership:

Circle of Satisfaction: Mental Wellbeing, Life and Work Satisfaction and Driving in the Workplace

We're reminded this week to ask those around us: 'are you ok?' Focussed on suicide prevention, R U OK Day has become a vehicle for discussing mental health in our communities and workplaces. We now understand someone's mental state impacts many facets of their life. In this thought leadership piece, we explore how mental health affects daily driving, particularly at work.

Overview

People drive how they live. As individuals, in families, communities and, most importantly, the way we work in organisations.

Research around the link between mental health and driving shows that life and job satisfaction is an accurate indicator of driving and work performance, says respected road safety researcher Dr. Robert B. Isler, who has been researching road safety since the 1980s.

And a person's mental wellbeing has a direct impact on the ability to identify and react to hazards as well as on risk-taking behaviour. So the message for individuals from this thought leadership piece is 'are you ok...to drive'?

And for workplaces and business owners, what steps are you taking to ensure the mental wellbeing of your people? Because mental health is a major influence on how people drive, which impacts on driver safety, crash rates, severity of injury, and frequency of near misses and traffic infringements. This also has flow-on costs, including financial, emotional and otherwise, for businesses and the wider community.

Satisfaction and statistics

Driving is a surrogate measure of job performance and job satisfaction. Research has shown a strong correlation between high job and life satisfaction and lower levels of crashes and near misses, fewer speeding infringements and less risk-taking behaviour on our roads.

'I have been in road safety for a very long time and it always focusses on skills deficit, wanting to improve car handling skills, but there was very little research on what actually makes a good, safer driver,' Robert Isler said.

'It's not just improving skills. What we realised is it's very much dependent on mental health, and the way people can cope with problems and issues, for example at work.

'We found strong correlations between burnout measures and number of crashes, fines and near misses, and a very strong correlation between life and job satisfaction and decreased number of traffic related incidents.

'When people feel mentally unwell, they have problems focusing, and therefore it takes them longer to extract crucial safety information from the traffic environment, as their mind wanders, ruminating on non-traffic related issues.

'Their anxieties impact their sleeping patterns, causing fatigue during the day, and this again impacts on their driving performance, and particularly hazard perception.

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'When people have issues and problems at work, they take them into the car. Stress is one of the underlying issues of burnout. Short-term stress is sometimes a good thing, but if it's going on for a long time, then it can lead to burnout, to sapping energy, low mood, and this impacts performance at work.'

'On the other hand, when people are in a good space, experience flow feelings, or in short are enjoying their work, they are much safer drivers.'

Robert Isler notes that a mental health issue does not necessarily mean a clinically diagnosed condition, simply feeling low, stressed or burnt out can make driving a risky activity.

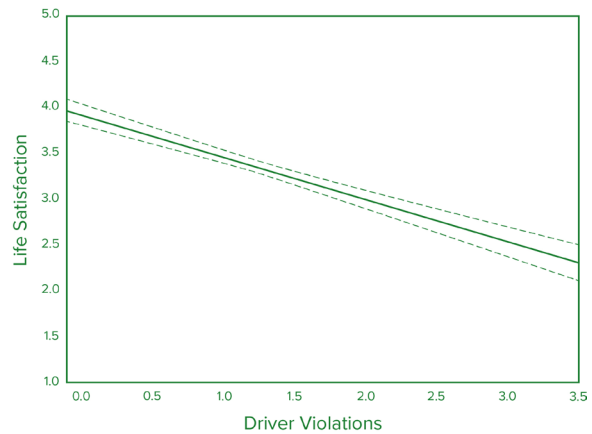
He also explains that people rate highly on life satisfaction when they experience positive emotions, meaning and engagement, have good relationships and a good sense of achievement.

'When all these factors are ticked off, we normally sleep well and look after ourselves by having a good diet, exercising regularly, and by being mindful. That's the pathway to well-being, job satisfaction and safe driving.'

Mental wellbeing and hazard perception

Robert Isler describes hazard perception as the 'hub of driver safety'. Hazard perception is directly related to crash risk because it affects the ability to manage risk.

Just like driving fatigued or under the influence of alcohol or drugs, drivers with a poor mental state take longer to identify hazards, giving them less time to react and avoid risks.



Risky driving, such as speeding, following too closely or overtaking dangerously, can be described as 'maladaptive coping strategies' for an underlying mental health issue. This can make drivers oblivious to the increased risk they are exposing themselves and other drivers to, possibly by having impaired compassion for themselves and others.

The message for employers

Robert Isler supports the increasing trend among business owners to expand health and safety to include employees' mental wellbeing, suggesting benefits for organisations flow into families and the community.

Happier, and therefore, safer drivers can also generate cost savings for businesses. Safer drivers are smoother drivers, reducing fuel use and costs associated with crashes.

One intervention companies can take is to ensure workers are 'mindful' when driving; in other words, focused on the task at hand: driving. Mindfulness maximises good driving behaviours. Organisations can promote this, for example, by creating a culture where workers are not expected to answer every call while driving or not calling employees if they know the employee is driving.

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'Anything that increases mental wellbeing of workers is a good thing,' he said. 'It's not only regarding their job satisfaction, job performance, it has a ripple effect on families and communities, driving, on all these different activities.'

'If people are unhappy at home, it affects families because they are stressed out and not well, then they take this to work. If people get sick and are not healthy, that has an effect on families, organisations, communities, everywhere.'

So, in summary, driving safely is connected to how we feel when we get into a vehicle. That's in turn connected to job and life satisfaction, which is influenced by how connected we are to family and the community. And that connects to work and driving performance.

It's a circle and cycle that, this week, can start with a simple question.

Dr. Robert B. Isler is Associate Professor at the University of Waikato and director of the University's Traffic and Road Safety research group. He is Head of Research at Fleetcoach, leader in online driver training, and has 30 years of research experience in Applied Cognitive Psychology of human factors/performance and road safety as well as in Positive Psychology principles and how to apply them to risky behaviour.