

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IN FURTHER EDUCATION SETTINGS

A GUIDE FOR FE MANAGERS AND LEADERS

WRITTEN BY EDUCATION SUPPORT

Introduction

Working in further education (FE), sharing your skills with learners and inspiring the next generation comes with a great sense of achievement.

On the flip side, like the wider education workforce, we know the wellbeing of FE staff is lower than that of the general public. A recent Ofsted report concluded that **FE lecturers were found to have high levels of anxiety and the lowest levels of positive wellbeing among educators**, with staff feeling the pressures of learner enrolment and retention on top of the other demands across the education sector.

Worryingly, the most recent [**Teacher Wellbeing Index**](#) highlights that **78%** of all education staff, including those working in FE, experienced mental health symptoms due to their work. And **59%** of staff have considered leaving the sector in the past academic year due to pressures on their mental health and wellbeing.

To counter this, there have been several initiatives to improve wellbeing of staff within the FE workforce, specifically with the overarching aim of ensuring psychological safe environments. But **what does psychological safety look like on the ground? And how effective is it?**

This guide aims to provide a foundation for FE managers and leaders to enhance organisational systems and support structures to help staff develop the skills required to cope with the demands of the job more effectively. It will provide a deeper understanding of psychologically safe environments alongside evidence-informed initiatives and insights from those working in the FE sector. It will also look at **why your mental wellbeing needs to be a priority and how cultural change has to start from the top.**

What is psychological safety?

Psychological safety is largely a product of an individual's relationships and their environment. Coined by Amy Edmondson of Harvard Business School and derived from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the concept highlights the **necessity of meeting employees' basic psychological and safety needs** before attempting to build in further staff focused initiatives such as coaching or team building days. Edmondson states that **psychological safety is "a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes and that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking"**. In order to create a healthy working environment where everyone has the opportunity to thrive, organisations should take measures to change the nature and quality of how conversations take place, with psychological safety at the forefront of achieving this.

Why do we need psychological safety in FE settings?

Developing and maintaining psychological safety is essential for all workplaces. But the case for ensuring psychological safety in FE settings is particularly strong. Here, FE staff are responsible for creating accessible and supportive learning environments for a particularly diverse learner cohort, with many from disadvantaged backgrounds. FE staff need to navigate this within a fast-paced, ever-changing sector; balancing high workloads, frequent policy change and high regulation, alongside meeting learners' and employers' needs.

An effective team values psychological safety as much as they do physical safety and performance standards. Creating a safe space and trusting positive relationships through the core component of psychological safety provides a crucial foundation for improving team dynamics, and in turn, makes a huge difference to the wellbeing of all members.



Okay, sounds good! But how will it look on a practical level?

There are a number of FE organisations that are leading the way in work towards psychologically safe environments. **Bridgend College in Wales, invests in wellbeing support for staff with initiatives including its menopause cafe and dedicated staff wellbeing spaces.** By creating physical spaces where staff can meet, and discuss issues, Bridgend are sending the message that it's safe to do so. This sense of safety is an essential building block for creating a psychologically safe culture.

Staff Wellbeing Advocates have undertaken Mental Health First Aid training to equip them with the tools to help specific situations and issues. These advocates have also been strategically distributed throughout the organisation to ensure familiar and supportive faces of wellbeing are readily available to all staff. **Bridgend College also achieved gold status in the Mind Workplace Wellbeing Index for 2021/22; the only education provider in the UK to achieve gold, and one of just three organisations in Wales.**

Kirklees College is another institution committed to promoting the importance of positive mental health and wellbeing. The college has introduced a four-week 'Moving into Mindfulness' course designed to support employees through understanding the principles of mindfulness, how the brain works and blending movement and mindfulness to reduce stress in everyday life.

The college has also partnered with Togetherall, an online community providing free, self-guided courses to support mental health. By building the mental health literacy of staff, Kirklees are doing the groundwork to enable staff to have conversations about mental health. One by one these conversations will reduce the stigma surrounding mental health, creating a safe environment for staff to seek support should they require it.

Building psychological safety

Psychological safety is an essential component of organisational culture for any education institution that wants to prioritise the mental health and wellbeing of its staff. But how easily can it be implemented, especially when FE settings vary considerably and work with a diverse cohort of learners.

Here we provide practical steps FE settings can take towards building psychological safety. Feel free to adapt and experiment with different approaches and remember what works for one setting may not work for another.

Practical tools and approaches

Mental Health and Wellbeing Charter

The consensus to evolve the scope and reach of mental health and wellbeing support in further education is clear; mental health is a priority for all. The Association of Colleges (AoC) has revised their mental health charter in 2024 to provide a framework for education providers to proactively engage with this priority area of work - a commitment alone is not enough, it's the actions that follow that are important.

The AoC charter supports education providers to develop their mental health and wellbeing practice, and to also evaluate and articulate impact. The good practice principles detailed have been developed by sector practitioners and leaders, reflecting leading practice and pedagogy in further education. The introduction of standards supports a national drive to improve the mental health and wellbeing of FE staff and students through establishing transparent accountability and consistent practice across the sector.

As well as embedding annual review into your organisation's business cycle, ensuring practice and services remain relevant to current need, a self assessment should inform the development of a mental health strategy, to address current and future mental health priorities.

Follow the AoC's 10 steps to embedding mental health and wellbeing in your organisation:

1. Nominate a senior leader to have responsibility for the mental health charter framework.
2. Consider creating a mental health working group to ensure a whole-organisational approach (reflecting input from senior leaders, curriculum team, student services, business support, estates management, staff and student voice).
3. Use the Charlie Waller Trust [C-MET tool](#) to complete a self assessment.
4. Reflect on the self assessment outcomes against the good practice principles detailed within the four themes, *leadership and ethos, student support, workplace wellbeing and evidence and impact*.

5. Report against the four themes and highlight where the organisation meets the core and enhanced standards, using the CMET assessment outcomes and reflections from the working group.
6. Build an annual self assessment into the organisational business cycle.
7. Following annual self assessment, produce a report for your board/corporation to demonstrate how the organisation is delivering against the charter standards, highlighting effective practice and areas for development. A wide range of surveys, voice mechanisms and evidence should inform this report.
8. A report should be made available for publication on the organisation's website.
9. Use the self assessment outcome and annual report to inform the creation or development of a mental health strategy, with oversight of a mental health policy for staff and a mental health policy for students.
10. A mental health strategy and related policies should outline how the organisation intends to work in collaboration with key partners in education, health and the local community.

Framework themes

Leadership and ethos: through authentic leadership, model and champion an inclusive culture that meets the needs of the college community. Embed a consistent and coordinated whole-college approach to mental health through effective governance and leadership that ensures wellbeing permeates all aspects of college life.

Support for students: foster a physical and psychologically safe and welcoming environment that promotes wellbeing, proactively supporting students' mental health throughout their learning journey.

Workplace wellbeing: nurture a culture that supports and invests in people and their wellbeing and create an exceptional working environment where colleagues feel valued, supported and can thrive.

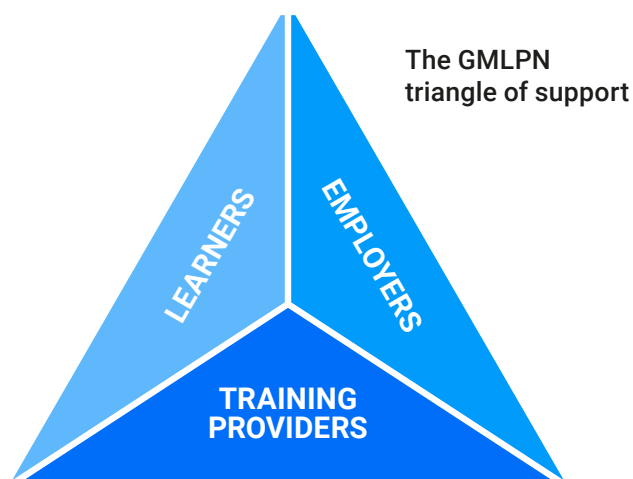
Evidence and impact: deliver and develop services, policies and strategy which are responsive to research and evidence of lived-experience and community need. Provide transparent accountability through consistent and effective mechanisms, regular evaluation and reporting, and have a partnership approach to college activity.

For further information, please visit the [AoC mental health charter webpage](#).



Greater Manchester Learning Provider Network Self-assessment Toolkit

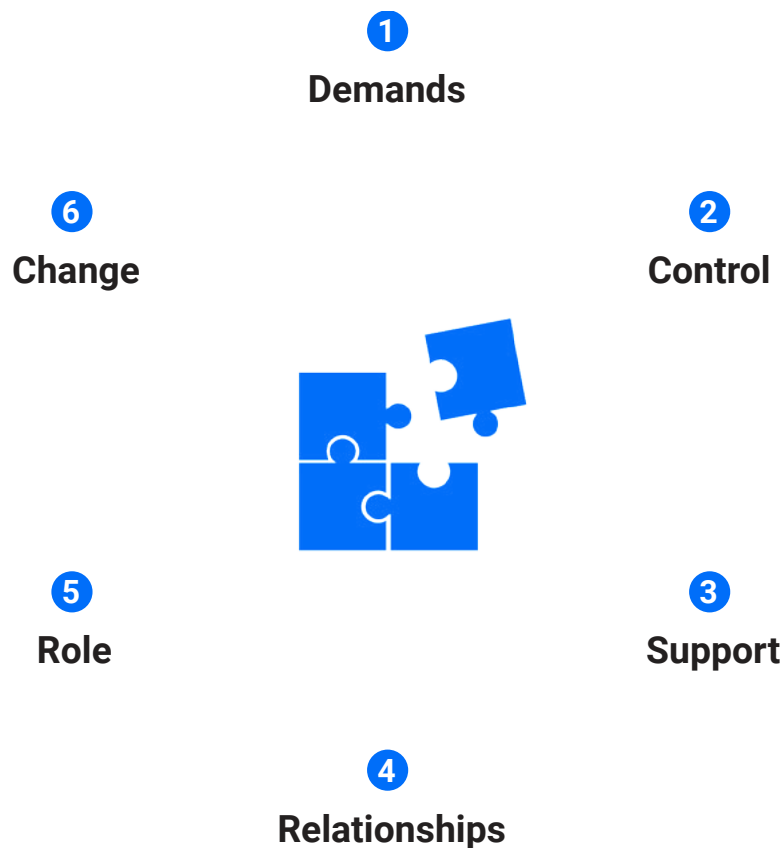
Greater Manchester Learning Provider Network (GMLPN) has developed a **self-assessment tool** and membership survey to find out the extent to which training providers have policies and procedures, as well as to support employers' and providers' staff who are in position to support trainees and apprentices. The aim of the project is to **establish a triangle of support between the apprentice/trainee, the training provider and the employer, so that mental health issues can be supported from all sides**. The toolkit gives training providers resources, signposting, effective practice case studies and space to reflect on their own practice.



Health & Safety Executive's Talking Toolkit

The Health and Safety Executive's **Talking Toolkit** has been specifically tailored for education to help foster psychologically safe workplaces through the premise of developing positive relationships through talk. It walks you through six specific conversations to have with staff, each on a different theme relating to workplace stress.

Working through these conversations should help you to build up a picture of the potential inhibiting factors towards staff wellbeing and nurture psychological safety.



Let's Chat Online Video Programme

A range of **short videos**, developed by expert educators, mental health practitioners and GPs.

These free videos can be used one to one, in groups or watched individually on demand (no sign-up required). Each video can be watched time and time again, with clear takeaways and conclusions to reflect upon personally and collectively.

Many FE providers are beginning to embrace mental health and wellbeing strategies, with a number of helpful resources being created for the benefit of FE staff. It is important FE providers are supported on this journey and encouraged to reflect on responsibility, accountability and sustainability of effective practice.



Trauma



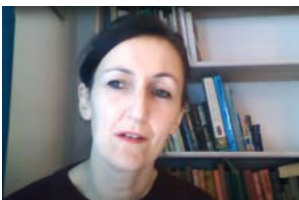
Anger



Eating disorder



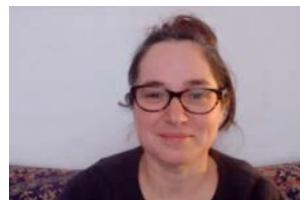
Addiction



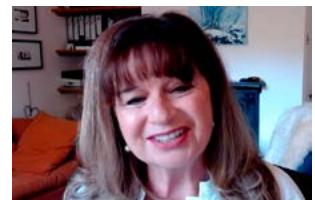
Self-harm



Relationships



Identity



Trust

Behaviour that builds psychological safety

Next, let's look at behaviour that builds psychological safety in FE settings. Building and maintaining a good culture is highly connected to the way we behave. There are some key behaviours that managers and leaders might want to consider:

Look after yourself

Most of us are familiar with the idea that in an emergency **'you need to put your own oxygen mask on first, before attempting to help those around you'**. The same is true for leadership and management: in order to support your colleagues you need to look after yourself.

Role-modelling good wellbeing behaviour also rubs off on your team. We will explore both of these concepts further on in this guide.

Actively show your staff you're engaged and interested

If your staff/team members don't feel you pay attention when they speak, or that you don't value their thoughts and opinions, they'll shut down. We know time is tight - but pay attention and listen actively. Ask questions to make sure you understand the ideas or opinions you're hearing. By doing this you are creating an environment where people feel that speaking up is encouraged.



Approach every conversation as a learning-point

You learn more from being wrong. Be sure to balance curiosity against interrogation: **curiosity builds knowledge but interrogation builds barriers.**

Let your team see you understand

When your people know you care enough to understand and consider their point of view they experience psychological safety. You can also show understanding with body language. Nod your head and lean forward to show engagement. Be aware of your facial expressions - if you look tired, bored, or unhappy, employees notice.

Build trust by avoiding blaming and shaming

To build and maintain psychological safety in FE settings, focus on solutions. Instead of “What happened and why?” ask “How can we make sure this goes better next time?” Notice the focus on the collaborative language: How can we make sure this goes smoothly next time? **‘We’ statements turn the responsibility into a group effort, rather than singling out an individual for a mistake.**

Be self-aware and demand it from staff too

People bring their whole self to work — their personalities, preferences, and styles. Build self-awareness by sharing how you work best, how you like to communicate, and how you like to be recognised. Encourage others to do the same.

Nip negativity in the bud

If you have a team member who speaks negatively about peers, talk to them about it. Be clear; let them know that you work together as a team and negativity will not be tolerated. **When you allow negativity to stand, it can become contagious and spread to others.**

Include your team in decision making

When making decisions, consult your team/whole staff. Ask for their input, thoughts, and feedback. Not only will this help them feel included in the decision-making process, but it will build psychological safety and lead to better outcomes. Once a decision is made, explain the reasoning behind your decision. How did their feedback factor into the decision? What other considerations were made? **Even if your staff don't agree, they'll appreciate the honesty and transparency behind how the decision was made.**

Recognise other points of view and be open to feedback

If you're a manager or senior leader it's your responsibility to make the final judgment call on a number of decisions. Your staff need to know that you are confident in this responsibility, but also that you're flexible in approach and open to their feedback. When employees feel psychologically safe, they feel empowered to give feedback—up, down, and across. **Invite your team to challenge your perspective. While this may be uncomfortable at first, healthy conflict leads to better decisions and greater accountability.** You might also lead by example by taking interpersonal risks and sharing failures. Try getting up at the next all staff meeting and talking about a time you took a risk and it didn't pay off.





Build positive workplace relationships

Positive relationships are key to emotional and psychological safety.

Coaching & mentoring will only work if staff members feel they are able to take risks and fail intelligently. If staff and environments do not feel safe, through a lack of trust or positive relationships, coaching is completely irrelevant. Take time to ensure the culture of your institution is one that allows leaders and staff members to show vulnerability by developing trusting relationships with your team.

But how can you develop trusting relationships?

Get to know your staff. There's nothing worse than arranging a wellbeing activity that actually none of your staff are interested in. In fact, this is one of the most common barriers to obtaining support for wellbeing along with lack of time due to a heavy workload, an inflexible schedule as well as lack of information about where to get it.

Working with learners can take an emotional toll on staff. Making sure staff dealing with difficult issues are well trained in programmes and strategies they are using and also have the facilities to hone these skills, if required.

Take account of the communication needs of your staff members - what do they need from you? What is too much? **Find time during the week for check-ins with staff, make sure you talk about outside of work subjects too, sharing personal information will make your staff more likely to reciprocate with their personal lives and stories.** Connecting with staff encourages a feeling of belonging, which in turn promotes a space they feel safe and comfortable in.

Other tips to consider:

- **Be more open** - say when you feel excited but challenged, nervous but eager, anxious but still confident etc
- **Frame pieces of work and workplace challenges**, honestly and encouragingly
- **Ensure people know and let them know you trust them**
- **Offer constructive responses** when people raise issues
- **Actively discourage habits which harm staff mental health** - working excessive hours, working on weekends / holidays, presenteeism
- **Act as role models by looking after your own wellbeing** – it will set the tone for how you want staff to work and look after themselves
- Education staff often report high levels of resilience and thrive in a collegiate environment - recognise this but **make sure they know it's ok to say if they're not ok**
- **Talk about mental health and wellbeing regularly**
- **Give credit and acknowledgement regularly**
- **Show appreciation (not just recognition) to colleagues.** Education Support have some [helpful resources](#) on how to show appreciation at work.

The importance of prioritising yourself

There are common myths that run through leadership and they can hinder prioritising your own wellbeing. Two of the most common myths include:

1. *In order to be a good and compassionate leader, I must give everything to my team. My needs come second.*
2. *If others know I am struggling, they will think I can't cope. I must not show vulnerability.*

The truth is, being a good leader or manager does not mean neglecting your own needs and not reaching out for support. If **you** role-model healthy ways of being then it will help set an example to your team. Change really does start from the top.

It is possible to be compassionate and have boundaries. Vulnerability is a crucial attribute for leadership, helping build trust and inspire teams. A leader talking about their experience with mental health and a time they reached out for support may inspire a team member to open up about their own struggles.

Getting started — try this: five minute Psychological Safety Audit

You could use this within your team, department or whole organisation - don't forget to ask everyone to contribute their thoughts and act on the suggestions and ideas that come out of the exercise!

- **If you make a mistake** in this team, will it be **held against you**?
- Are the members of this team **able to bring up problems and tough issues**?
- Do people on this team sometimes **reject others for being different**?
- **Is it safe to take a risk** on this team?
- **Is it difficult to ask** other members of this team for help?
- Would anyone on the team **deliberately act in a way that undermines efforts**?
- Working with members of this team, **are unique skills and talents valued and utilised**?



Further support

It's important to remember that we don't have to choose between prioritising the mental wellbeing of learners or FE staff. The two are interconnected.

Healthy FE staff are better able to provide high quality education and support for learners who have been through a difficult few years.

Education Support is the only UK charity dedicated to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of education staff in schools, colleges and universities. You don't need to be in crisis to talk with qualified counsellors about anything you are experiencing. You can call their **free and confidential** helpline **24/7** on **08000 562 561**. Or check out **educationsupport.org.uk** for free resources and tools to help you and your colleagues.



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