

Wellbeing Protective Factors: Work-life Balance

Why work-life balance matters

Work-life balance is a key wellbeing protective factor but can be especially challenging for shift workers. Fortunately, it's possible with the right strategies.



How work-life balance protects your mental wellbeing

Work can give us purpose, income, and connection. But without balance, it can also push us toward stress, burnout and poor mental health.

According to Safe Work Australia, work-related stress and mental health conditions can lead to more time off work and higher compensation paid compared with physical diseases and injuries.

Work-life balance is one of the key wellbeing protective factors. Just like sleep, exercise and healthy eating, creating healthy boundaries between your job and your personal life helps you stay in the green zone. It means having enough time for rest, relationships, and activities outside of work that recharge you.

For shift workers, maintaining balance is especially challenging. Irregular hours, fatigue and limited access to support services can make it harder to keep life on an even keel. But balance is possible with the right strategies.

Volunteers face their own unique challenges when it comes to work-life balance. Volunteering is deeply rewarding - but recognise that it takes time and effort. Make sure you focus on the things that help you stay in the green zone.

Make yourself the priority – maintaining balance means being mindful of your limits and ensuring you have time to recharge. It's about recognising the value of your contributions to the community while also prioritising your own wellbeing. Set boundaries, seek support, and make time for self-care.



Why work–life balance is a wellbeing protective factor



When your work and personal life are in balance, you're more likely to:

- Manage stress without tipping into burnout
- Maintain strong social connections
- Protect your sleep and physical health
- Stay motivated and engaged at work
- Feel more in control of your daily life

When you're working long hours, feeling stressed in your job and constantly exhausted and overwhelmed, you're more likely to spend less time on the other protective factors that can help you stay in the green zone.

Over time, constant stress can lead to burnout, making you more likely to develop a mental illness like anxiety or depression.

Challenges for shift workers

Shift work can make finding the balance, that works for you, harder. Night shifts and rotating rosters disrupt sleep cycles and social routines, while long hours can leave little time for family or self-care.

Common challenges include:

- Difficulty keeping regular sleep and meal routines
- Missing out on social events or family time
- Trouble committing to team sports or regular classes
- Fatigue: making it hard to enjoy downtime

Practical ways to improve work–life balance

1 Prioritise rest and recovery

Work-life balance isn't just about the amount you work; it's also about using the time you have off well. Protect your days off and use them for the things that help you stay in the green zone, like getting quality sleep, exercise, and other activities you enjoy, not just chores.

2 Stay connected

Shift work can be isolating. Make the effort to schedule catch-ups with friends or family, even if they're at unusual times. Social connection is a protective factor that helps buffer stress.

It's also important to build a circle of support that goes beyond just work colleagues. Surrounding yourself with a wider network can provide fresh perspectives and a sense of balance. Consider joining a walking or running club, yoga class, pottery group, cooking workshop, or art class to connect with others who share your interests and passions.



3 Use small pockets of time

Balance doesn't always mean big blocks of free time. Even 10–15 minutes for a walk, stretch, or quiet break can help reset your energy.

4 Set boundaries where you can

If possible, avoid checking work emails or messages outside of shifts.

5 Plan in advance

It may not always be possible, but if there's something important coming up, try to arrange for a shift swap or request leave to attend a special event.



6 Talk to your employer

If work demands are overwhelming, speak up. Talk to your manager about how you're feeling and what adjustments can be made to support you.

7 Seek support

You can talk to a Wellbeing Support Officer; a Wellbeing Peer; or a CISM Peer – they are available to all AT and DPFEM staff and volunteers. Support is more effective when sought early. Contact details are contained at the end of this article.



And don't forget:

MyPulse offers access to free and confidential mental and physical health screening services, where, depending on the outcome of your results, a MyPulse coach will work with you to deliver a tailored program (this is not therapy, rather, strategy and goal setting).

Work-life balance doesn't look the same for everyone, especially if you work shifts. What matters is finding routines and boundaries that give you space to rest, connect and recharge. These protective habits won't remove life's challenges, but they'll make it easier to stay in the green zone and bounce back when things get tough.



References:

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wellbeing@dpfem.tas.gov.au



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