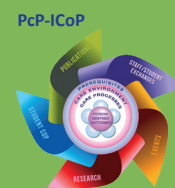


International Practice Development Journal

Online journal of FoNS in association with the IPDC and PcP-ICoP (ISSN 2046-9292)



CRITICAL REFLECTION

Implementing workplace wellness in healthcare settings: lessons learned from the SEED wellness team reflective journaling

Ruth Everingham* and Padmini Pai

*Corresponding author: Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District, NSW, Australia
Email: padmini.pai@health.nsw.gov.au

Submitted for publication: 8th September 2022
Accepted for publication: 29th November 2022
Published: 24th May 2023
<https://doi.org/10.19043/ipdj.131.008>

Abstract

Background: This article shares the reflection journey of a newly formed workplace wellness team, whose members documented their experience throughout an eight-week project using reflective journaling. Reflection was seen as a valuable tool for developing greater self-awareness and insight into team dynamics. Sharing reflections among the team also served to strengthen bonds and provided a chance to discuss challenges that were faced.

Aim: To demonstrate the importance of promoting and prioritising the practice of reflection amid the high workload intensity of a busy healthcare environment.

Conclusion: A diverse group of healthcare workers was able to identify the value of dedicated worktime for reflection while meeting the demands of project targets and tight time frames.

Implications for practice:

- Personal and team reflective practice offers teambuilding opportunities for newly formed teams along with time for confidence building, self-improvement and connecting with others
- Timely documentation of these reflections can give immediate insight into challenges individuals or the entire team may be experiencing, thus allowing prompt response and adjustments, in addition to creating a record for personal and team learnings over time
- To ensure engagement in, and sustainability of, wellness-oriented reflective practice, both bottom-up and top-down commitment is required

Keywords: Reflective practice, reflective journaling, healthcare workers, workplace wellness, mental health and wellbeing, burnout

Introduction

Acknowledging an urgent need to address wellness among healthcare staff, given the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District (ISLHD) has been working to expand the locally created SEED (Stability, Encompassing, Endurance and Direction) Wellness Programme (see Mackay et al., 2021 and Pai et al., 2022). Initially arising from the need to address the psychological impact of bushfires on affected ISLHD staff, SEED is a workplace wellness model composed of eight core practices:

1. Responsive and compassionate leading
2. Co-designing wellness activities with staff
3. Listening to understand
4. Creating a safe and healing space
5. Connecting with others
6. Collective caring
7. Diversifying and localising wellness activities
8. Striving for sustainability

These practices are reflected in different staff-led initiatives that have been implemented across the local health district, including: Coffee Buddies, where staff have a planned break during work time to personally connect; Wellness Wednesdays, with various sessions that offer a safe space to share stories, practise deep listening and support one another; and the Quiet Room, where staff can spend a moment of reflection (Olcoñ et al., 2022).

Following earlier success for SEED's wellbeing initiatives, further investment and support was given by the local health district and the NSW Ministry of Health to expand the programme, which involved formation of a SEED team. The recruitment process was finalised at the beginning of May 2022, with the newly formed team comprising eight staff seconded from various disciplines and sites across the district. This team began its journey during a two-day orientation held at a local hospital, which used SEED wellness practices to develop knowledge of the programme and promote teambuilding and cohesion. The team had an eight-week timeline to develop a toolkit that could be used to embed and scale SEED across the district, based on an in-depth evaluation of leadership and staff experiences of SEED initiatives over the previous two years.

During the team orientation, the team members committed to regular reflective journaling to capture their experiences and perceptions as they were becoming immersed in SEED while simultaneously working towards the completion of team targets.

Reflective practice

Reflective journaling is known to be an effective tool for engaging in self-reflection, developing critical thinking, self-understanding, and fostering 'thinking that changes practice, and is not merely a rote or routine experience' (Schuessler et al., 2012, p 96). While reflective journaling may initially be difficult to do because of time and work constraints, with time and practice practitioners tend to improve their reflective skills (Koshy et al., 2017). In healthcare settings, reflection has been described as a valuable tool that can result in deeper learning, a better understanding of new concepts, and improved professional practice (Mantzourani et al., 2019; Préfontaine et al., 2022). With healthcare continuously evolving, reflective practice allows practitioners to learn from these ongoing changes, developing their critical thinking and transferability of skills for future practice (Mantzourani et al., 2019).

Throughout the eight-week project, the SEED team members were given the opportunity during working hours to reflect on the programme's procedures, impacts and outcomes, and on their own emotions, achievements and learnings. The team was asked to document these reflections using the stream of consciousness method. This is a free-flowing, non-structured way of writing that aims to capture the writer's thought process and reactions. The purpose of using this technique is to record the most significant aspects of an individual's personal experiences and thoughts before they disappear, allowing individuals to reflect retrospectively and introspectively (Myers, 2001).

Reflections were either completed at the end of each day or as a summary at the end of the week. This process was not monitored by the team lead; instead team members took individual responsibility for completing the task. Although the SEED team mostly worked remotely, team members came together once a week and often shared their reflections. This appeared to keep them accountable for completing their reflections and provided an opportunity to share any anxieties or challenges.

A consensus agreement was made by the team that reflections would be collated by external researchers, who had also been involved in the team orientation. As trust had already been established, the team members felt confident their reflections would be treated with respect and confidentiality. The reflections were thematically analysed using [NVivo software](#) and were presented to the team with identities removed from all personal reflections. At this meeting, which took place in person, members had the opportunity to discuss the findings and provide honest feedback to the researchers. The SEED team members felt the findings captured their overall mood, and the successes and challenges they had faced. The team expressed gratitude for the timely results and for the benefits gained in participating.

What did we learn through the reflection process?

Five key themes representing the team's perceptions and experiences while immersed in their new SEED roles were identified:

1. Building connections within the team
2. The joys of working in a wellness-oriented role
3. Personal and professional growth
4. Personal challenges
5. Systemic constraints to expanding wellness interventions

Building connections within the team

Purposeful strategies were implemented by the SEED programme lead from day one of the programme to foster trust and rapport among the new team members. This strategy was acknowledged by the team members, with one noting that it was '*...strange to have a connection like this in short time period with a work colleague*' and another adding that '*I feel we really connected from the get-go*'. This engagement and forming of connections resulted in a collaborative approach to tasks and a sense of belonging in the team. Opportunities for further team bonding occurred when members shared their reflections with each other, either informally or during team huddles. Another person summed up these sentiments:

'It's interesting that this space of safety can be created relatively quickly through authenticity, sharing yourself and kindness' (Team member).

The joys of working in a wellness-oriented role

Working in the SEED roles was described with excitement and enthusiasm, and it brought the team a sense of joy and opportunity for fun, especially when the members were able to use their creative and relational skills. As reflected on by one team member, '*Absolutely loving this space and enjoying using my creative skills to get these things done*'. Linked to this, there was a sense of pride of being part of SEED, for example, '*NSW Health Awards today. Super proud of SEED for being a finalist*'. Team members gained satisfaction through trying something new and looking at things with curiosity.

Personal and professional growth

Team members described a variety of new professional skills gained while working for SEED, including managing and coordinating task groups, interviewing techniques, developing a toolkit, speaking in front of a group, strengthening creative skills and professional reflective writing. On a personal level, they felt they were constantly stepping out of their comfort zone, for example by learning how to prioritise people over tasks and '*trusting the process*':

'For today the theme continues with stretching your comfort zone. It's so much easier for me to sit comfortably within this zone but SEED dares you to be different. I guess where it is also different is it inspires you to place your foot outside your zone but makes this place feel like it is one of safety' (Team member).

Team members also reflected on seeing things from a new perspective, balancing simple with complex, change with stability and the known with the unknown. Not only did they find reflection an effective method for processing their thoughts but also a way of acknowledging their accomplishments:

'It has helped me to plan ahead, make adjustments where needed, and importantly given me the space and time to consider other people's perspectives and take stock of the connections and relationships that are being created and strengthened' (Team member).

Personal challenges

The challenges experienced in adapting to their SEED roles included trying to be in control and keeping a structured approach versus 'letting go', being flexible and responding to change quickly, which the roles often required. There was reflection on feelings of self-doubt and uncertainty in a constantly changing environment where team members were challenged to respond to needs in the moment. They aimed for a focus on people and making time for reflection but the job demands and tasks would often take over their day completely.

'When you are busy trying to make task deadlines you can very easily forget to stop even for a moment to put people first. The challenge of putting people first is that people are messy and that takes time! Once again, we return to balance' (Team member).

The reflective journaling made the team members more mindful of these tensions and more intentional about making reflection a daily practice. When the process of daily journaling was compromised, the team made the following adjustments: writing at the end of the week as opposed to daily; having a daily mental check-in with self; and adding a reflective component to team meetings.

Systemic constraints to expanding wellness interventions

The structural or systemic challenges the team experienced while working on expanding SEED included unrealistic workloads in healthcare, leaving staff little time to invest in personal and collective wellness, short time frames for SEED work, and switching between SEED and non-SEED roles. One team member described the impact of these constraints in the following way:

'The "circuit breaker" took place this week – many of my colleagues contact me for supervision and were very stressed. It felt ironic I was doing this "privileged" work focusing on staff wellness when they were really stressed and without much of the supports they needed' (Team member).

Implications for practice

We believe these reflections can guide the future expansion of the SEED programme and similar workplace wellness models. When bringing together a new team to collaborate on an unfamiliar project, allowing time for personal and team reflection is valued and provides opportunities for confidence building, self-improvement and connection with others. This can enhance the likelihood of meeting project targets, especially in tight time frames. Documenting these reflections in the form of a journal, for example, allows a record for personal and team learnings to be kept over time and can give important insight into challenges individuals or the entire team may be experiencing. This then provides an opportunity for prompt response and adjustments, which can support the progress of the project.

We believe that initial time devoted to activities that created psychological safety through connection and building of trust in a non-judgemental environment supported staff to feel safe to share and to listen to others. Team reflections benefited from having a trusted external person to identify emerging themes but this process could be facilitated internally if teams did not wish to share their reflections

with others. Where time for reflection is limited, teams may wish to record one main reflection for a week or discuss reflections in a team huddle, which are then recorded by a designated person.

While team members took personal responsibility to complete the reflections, it was noted that encouragement and support from the team leader to value the time spent was also an important component to enhance sustainability of the practice.

Conclusion

As healthcare settings around the world struggle with staff burnout and shortages after Covid-19, investment in workplace wellness for healthcare workers is more important than ever. The newly created SEED Wellness Team in the Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District was given the opportunity to engage in personal and team reflective practice to help staff become immersed in wellness-oriented practice, adjust to their new roles, enhance teambuilding and offer feedback to each other and the programme leader. This yielded important lessons for individual team members, the team and the SEED Wellness Programme as a whole. As our experience showed, there is no wellness without reflection.

References

- Koshy, K., Limb, C., Gundogan, B., Whitehurst, K. and Jafree, D. (2017) Reflective practice in health care and how to reflect effectively. *International Journal Surgery Oncology*. Vol. 2. No. 6. pp e20. <http://doi.org/10.1097/IJ9.000000000000020>.
- Mackay, M., Pai, P., Emslie, S., Knezevic, A. and Mackay, J. (2021) SEED Programme: The development of a programme that has enabled the learning and growth of staff in the response to a community crisis. *Health Education in Practice*. Vol. 4. No. 1. pp 76-84. <https://doi.org/10.33966/hepi.4.1.14691>.
- Mantzourani, E., Desselle, S., Le, J., Lonie, J. and Lucas, C. (2019) The role of reflective practice in healthcare professions: next steps for pharmacy education and practice. *Research in Social and Administrative Pharmacy*. Vol. 15. No. 12. pp 1476-1479. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sapharm.2019.03.011>.
- Myers, J. (2001) Self-evaluations of the 'stream of thought' in journal writing. *System*. Vol. 29. No. 4. pp 481-488. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0346-251X\(01\)00037-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0346-251X(01)00037-9).
- Olcoń, K., Allan, J., Fox, M., Everingham, R., Pai, P., Keevers, L., Mackay, M., Degeling, C., Cutmore, S-A., Finlay, S. and Falzon, K. (2022) A narrative inquiry into the practices of healthcare workers' wellness programme: the SEED Experience in New South Wales, Australia. *International Journal Environmental Research and Public Health*. Vol. 19. No. 20. Article 13204. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192013204>.
- Pai, P., Olcoń, K., Allan, J., Knezevic, A., Mackay, M., Keevers, L., Fox, M. and Hadley, A.M. (2022) The SEED Wellness Model: a workplace approach to address wellbeing needs of healthcare staff during crisis and beyond. *Frontiers in Health Services: Mental Health Services*. Vol. 2. <https://doi.org/10.3389/frhs.2022.844305>.
- Préfontaine, C., Gaboury, I., Corriveau, H., Beauchamp, J., Lemire, C. and April, M-J. (2022) Assessment tools for reflection in healthcare learners: a scoping review. *Medical Teacher*. Vol. 44. No. 4. pp 394-400. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159x.2021.1998400>.
- Schuessler, J., Wilder, B. and Byrd, L. (2012) Reflective journaling and development of cultural humility in students. *Nursing Education Perspectives*. Vol. 33. No. 2. pp 96-99. Retrieved from: tinyurl.com/NEP-reflective. (Last accessed 29th November 2022).

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the contributions of Dr Katarzyna Olcoń, Dr Julaine Allan, Karla Barreca, Angela Stojcevska and SEED Team members: Christopher Marjoribanks, Paula Lavis, Karen McDonald, Catherine Rogers, Tara Moreton and Leanne Cummins.

Ruth Everingham (BAppSc Occupational Therapy), SEED Facilitator, Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District, NSW, Australia.

Padmini Pai (PhD Social Work, MPhil Psychiatric Social Work), SEED Programme Lead, Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District, NSW, Australia.