



FUEL IN, FUEL OUT



Mental Health Week is approaching from 10 – 17 October and the theme is “Strengthening Our Community - Live, Learn, Work, Play.” Our church communities can be a source of encouragement and building one another up in many different ways to strengthen each other’s lives.

We can extend this to those in our workplace, place of learning, friends, families and neighbours. We can be the care factor in someone else’s life. We can be the one that says ‘You are not alone.’ We can be the practical or emotional support for those in our communities. We can be the reason our community is strong. But where does our capacity come from? How can we be responsible for our own wellbeing? Is wellbeing something that happens to me, am I born with it, or is it something that I can influence? What is wellbeing anyway?!

Wellbeing, is our overall health. We are comfortable. We aren’t under-stimulated or distressed. We are adequately stimulated and able to cope. The physical, social, intellectual, emotional and spiritual aspects of our lives are balanced, overall. For example, when we are stressed, bored, disconnected and unwell our wellbeing is lacking. When we are stimulated, connected, physically healthy with optimal measures of stress, we enjoy wellbeing. We can use a bank account or a fuel tank as an analogy for our overall wellbeing, where the amount of money in the bank account or fuel in the fuel tank, indicates our level of overall wellbeing.

Some examples of wellbeing factors include interactions with people, physical and mental efforts, environment, emotions, physical health, workplace and academic pursuits and spirituality. Imagine each of these factors in terms of units of fuel. Some activities generate units of fuel, other activities consume units of fuel and some activities both generate and consume units of fuel. For example, fun activities, achieving goals, feeling valued, feeling capable, adequate sleep, managing illness, feeling connected, doing stimulating or rewarding work are all factors that put fuel in our tank. On the other hand, doing too much or too little, interpersonal conflicts, chronic unmanaged pain, poor nutrition, lack of exercise, isolation, violence, discrimination, uncertain work schedule or no work at all are factors that may deplete our fuel tank.

So, your workplace might consume 6 units of your mental energy, but it might be a highly satisfying job that pays well, so you also generate 7 units. You may have a mutually encouraging and supportive relationship with someone. You might contribute 3 units and you may also generate (or be given) 3 units. Perhaps you have an injury that is not being managed and is taking a toll on you emotionally, so it is using 6 units of fuel.

Life isn't as simplistic as units in and units out. I'm not suggesting that for every action there should be an equal and opposite reaction necessarily. Our lives aren't a series of give and take transactions. Our lives are experienced in ebbs and flows or seasons. We need to be still, listen to our minds and feel our bodies (What is my mind spending time on? What is causing me negative stress? How do I know I'm stressed? What do I need?). We can do a bit of an audit of our fuel tank to evaluate if overall we are maintaining our fuel levels. Expending more fuel than we generate results in 'not-so-well-being,' burnout, ill health, depletion and mental health issues. If we generate as much fuel as we expend, or even more, we have adequate fuel levels and may experience wellbeing to continue along our path.

Ask yourself, what relationships and activities relax you, give you enjoyment, strengthen you, teach you, connect you or rejuvenate you? Those are the 'fuel in' factors. The activities or relationships that take mental/physical/emotional effort, drain you or are in conflict with your values will consume fuel. Do you have more fuel going in or coming out? If you are running low, what can you do to top up the tank or reduce how much fuel is being used? Consider how you can increase rest, relaxation and recovery. What do you need? Can you reprioritise or make adjustments? What supports are available to you? Issues that are creating feelings of worry, sadness or anger may need to be addressed. Sometimes we can take action to change those issues. Other times, those issues can't be changed and we need to find a way to cope with them.

We have limitations and we need boundaries – and it's best to work within them. Stretching ourselves is healthy, but too far, for too long will cause an injury. Not enough stretching, for too long, can make us inflexible. Boundaries serve to protect us and relationships we have. If you think your fuel tank is not running optimally or has a leak, you could have a look at it yourself (be still, listen and feel, then adjust). Perhaps you may ask a friend who knows a bit about fuel tanks what they can see (seek support). If there still seems to be a fuel consumption issue, you can arrange a visit to the mechanic (seek a specialist). When our fuel tank is running efficiently, we have the capacity to give and contribute within our communities. When we learn how to generate fuel, we can enjoy health and wellbeing.

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