



THE
WELLBEING
LAB 2019 – 2021
WORKPLACE
REPORT

THE STATE OF WELLBEING IN AUSTRALIAN WORKPLACES

THEWELLBEINGLAB

A MICHELLEMCQUAID PROGRAM

AHRI⁷
Australian HR Institute

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ABOUT THIS STUDY

The Wellbeing Lab Workplace Survey was first conducted in September 2018 with a sample of 1,002 randomly selected full-time workers representative of the Australian workforce and repeated in November 2019 with 1,007 completing the survey. The survey was a variant of The PERMAH Wellbeing Survey (www.permahsurvey.com) developed by **Dr. Peggy Kern** from the University of Melbourne to better understand the factors that support and undermine workplace wellbeing.

In mid-March 2020 – as the global COVID-19 pandemic began to challenge workplaces – we created an additional set of questions to gauge the impact of these changes and asked another randomly selected sample of 1,019 full-time workers representative of the Australian workforce the updated questions (352 of whom had participated in November 2019). As the year continued to bring uncertainty and volatility, with hundreds of deaths, more than one million jobs lost and the greatest economic downturn since the Great Depression, in early August 2020 we surveyed 1,400 full-time workers representative of the Australian workforce using the same questions (401 of whom had previously participated). At the time, workers located in Victoria were under Stage 4 lockdown restrictions, while workers in the rest of Australia were not.

By May 2021, public health restrictions had been relaxed, workplaces were encouraged to re-open all work premises, and the economy had rebounded from recession and was outperforming growth expectations. In the middle of May – just prior to Victoria’s fourth lockdown – we surveyed 1,034 full-time workers representative of the Australian workforce (157 of whom had previously participated). The demographics of the sample included:

GENDER	
Men	485
Women	548

AGE GROUPS	
24 – 34 years	320
35 – 44 years	314
45 – 54 years	218
55 – 65 years	139
66 – 99 years	43

ETHNICITY	
Asian	97
Indigenous	31
White/Caucasian	821
People of Color	85

LOCATIONS	
Victoria	260
New South Wales	326
Queensland	208
Western Australia	91
South Australia	105
Australian Capital Territory	21
Northern Territory	6
Tasmania	17

COMPANY TYPE	
Privately funded organisation	508
Publicly funded organisation	167
Government organisation	219
Not for profit organisation	78
Other	62

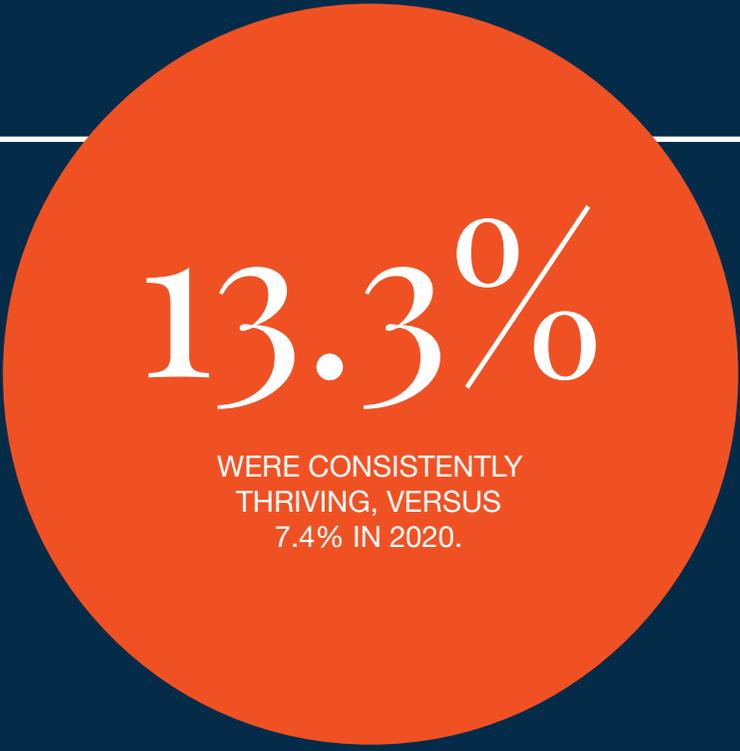
JOB ROLES	
Responsible for leading a team	448
Not responsible for leading a team	586

Industries were representative of Australian workplaces including agriculture, banking & finance, community & social services, construction, education, government & public administration, healthcare & medical, technology & telecommunications, manufacturing, mining, retail, science, tourism, and transportation & warehousing.

If you would like more information about this report or additional findings by gender, age, location, job role or industry (not reported), please contact chelle@thewellbeinglab.com.

CURRENT STATE: WELLBEING IN AUSTRALIAN WORKPLACES

As we have noted in previous reports, in its simplest form wellbeing is the ability to feel good and function effectively as we navigate the inevitable highs and lows of work and life. Studies – including ours – find that how we feel (physically, mentally and socially) and how we perform at work have a mutually reinforcing cycle. Work provides opportunities for ongoing learning and development, meaningful achievement, and connection with others, which nourish our wellbeing. And when we feel physically, mentally and socially well, we are able to bring more energy, focus and motivation to work and thus are more productive. Thriving occurs when we consistently feel and function well as we work. We might assume that thriving would only occur in good times. However, our findings have consistently demonstrated that it is possible to thrive despite struggle. Sustaining our levels of wellbeing at work is less dependent on the situation and more dependent on our abilities to effectively navigate both the good times and successes and the struggles and challenges that occur.



13.3%

WERE CONSISTENTLY
THRIVING, VERSUS
7.4% IN 2020.

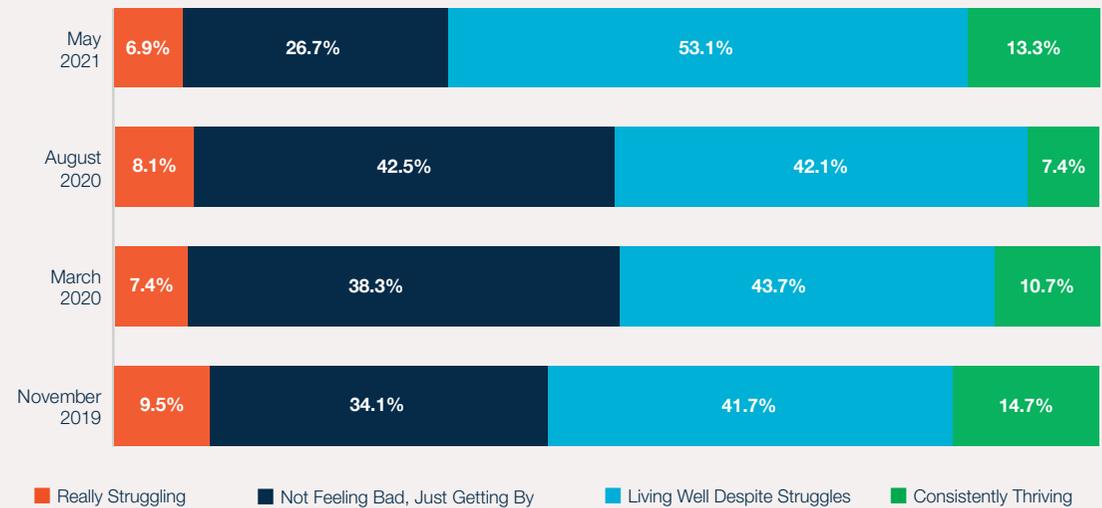
THRIVING ≠ PROBLEM FREE

Wellbeing ranges from languishing (low levels of wellbeing) to thriving (high levels of wellbeing). Across eight different surveys with thousands of Australian, American and Canadian workers, we have replicated the findings that workers who were *consistently thriving* and those who were *living well despite struggles* were statistically more likely to report higher levels of individual, team and organisational performance. The 2021 data replicates this finding.

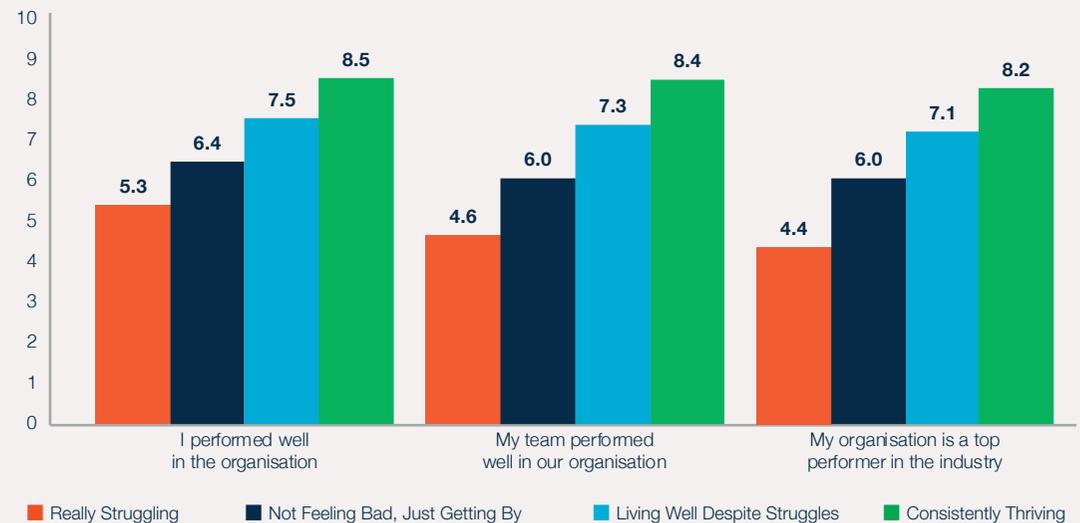
The Australian November 2019 (pre-COVID-19) to May 2021 (COVID-19 predominantly contained in Australian workplaces) data demonstrates that even when navigating a global pandemic and a significant economic downturn, it is possible for workers to thrive despite struggle, and it is possible *not* to experience wellbeing even in the absence of struggle.

Notably, as circumstances changed the number of workers who were *consistently thriving*, halved from 14.7% to 7.4% but has now returned to 13.3%. Meanwhile, the number of workers who were *living well despite struggles* has steadily increased from 37.4% to 53.1%, and the number of workers who were *not feeling bad, just getting by* has significantly declined, suggesting that despite the struggles of the past 15 months Australian workers are currently emerging with higher levels of resilience.

2019–2021 STATE OF WELLBEING (TOTAL %)



2021 STATES OF WELLBEING FOR PERFORMANCE (MEANS)



AH-HA:

Many Australian workers are reporting a significant increase in their levels of resilience, which is positively impacting workplace outcomes.

THE WELLBEING AMPLIFIERS

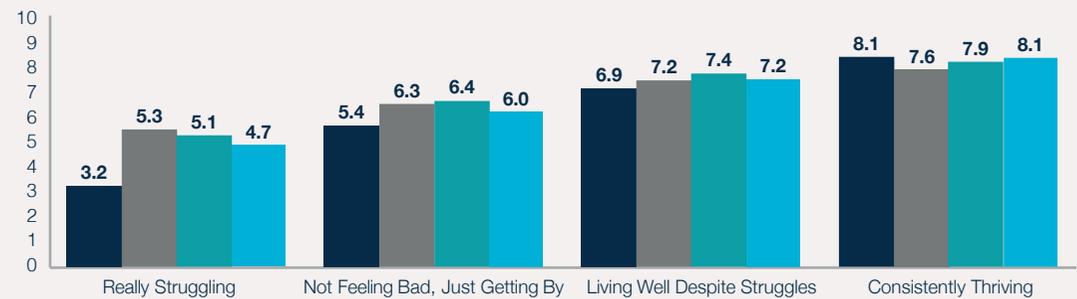
We have consistently found in our workplace studies that people who were *consistently thriving* or *living well despite struggles* report statistically higher levels of wellbeing **A**bility, wellbeing **M**otivation, and **P**sychological safety – we call these the wellbeing AMPLIFIERS. And this sample of Australian workers was no different.

Notably, after a significant decline in their levels of wellbeing ability, wellbeing motivation and psychological safety, Australian workers who were *consistently thriving* have returned to their pre-COVID-19 means.

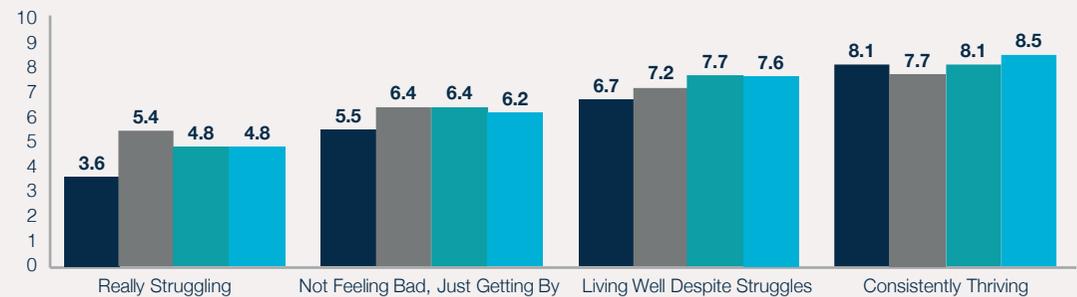
While Australian workers who were *living well despite struggles* sustained their levels of psychological safety – i.e., the belief they are safe to bring up problems and talk about mistakes in their teams – but were now more likely to report a decline in their levels of wellbeing ability and wellbeing motivation.

Worryingly, workers who were *not feeling bad, just getting by* and those who were *really struggling* reported significant declines in their levels of wellbeing ability, wellbeing motivation and psychological safety.

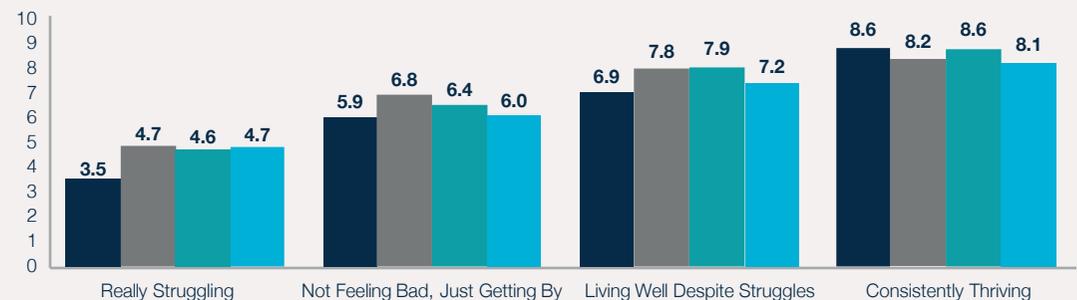
2019–2021 STATE OF WELLBEING BY WELLBEING ABILITY (MEANS)



2019–2021 STATE OF WELLBEING BY WELLBEING MOTIVATION (MEANS)



2019–2021 STATE OF WELLBEING BY PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY (MEANS)



■ May 2021 ■ August 2020 ■ March 2020 ■ November 2019

AH-HA:

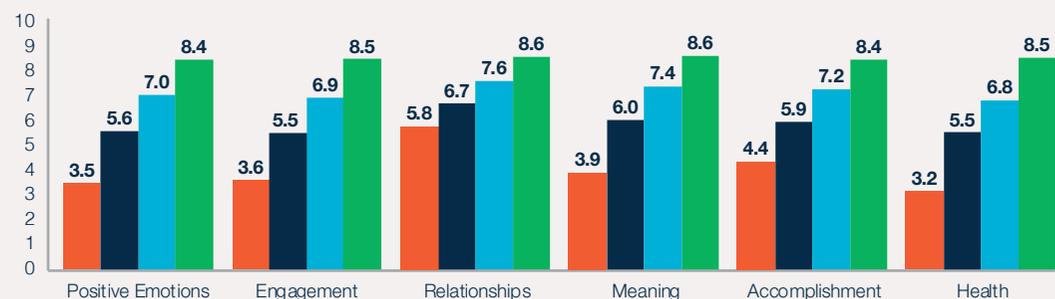
Many Australian workers are struggling to sustain their levels of wellbeing motivation and psychological safety to amplify their wellbeing.

WELLBEING IS MULTI-FACETED

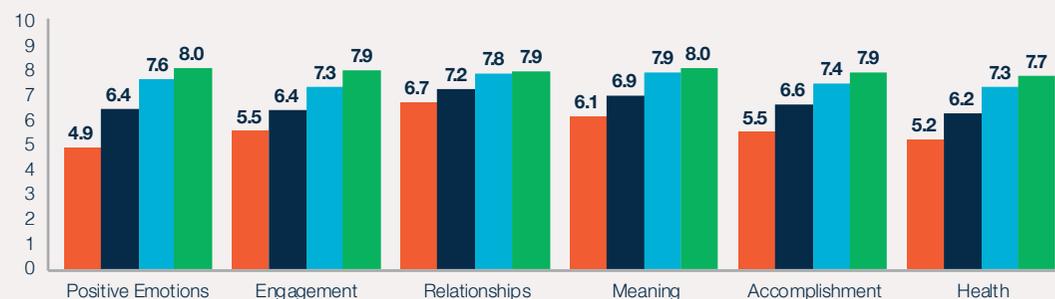
One way to understand, measure and act on evidence-based approaches for improving wellbeing is by drawing on Professor Martin Seligman’s PERMAH Framework, which points to six dimensions of feeling and functioning: Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment and Health. Different domains might be more important for different people, but feeling poorly in one often results in feeling poorly in other areas as well.

For example, Australian workers who were *consistently thriving* were more likely to have experienced a decline in Relationships and Health during the COVID-19 challenges, but most had now returned to their pre-COVID-19 levels. While Australian workers who were *living well despite struggles* were statistically more likely to have sustained their PERMAH levels during the COVID-19 challenges, but now were more likely to report lower levels of Positive Emotions, Meaning and Physical Health. Most worryingly, although workers who were *not feeling bad, just getting by* and those who were *really struggling* were statistically more likely to have sustained their PERMAH levels during the COVID-19 challenges – and in some factors like Meaning and Physical Health even done better – now they were more likely to report significantly lower levels of each of the PERMAH wellbeing factors.

2021 STATE OF WELLBEING BY PERMAH WELLBEING FACTORS (MEANS)



2020 STATE OF WELLBEING BY PERMAH WELLBEING FACTORS (MEANS)



2019 STATE OF WELLBEING BY PERMAH WELLBEING FACTORS (MEANS)



Really Struggling Not Feeling Bad, Just Getting By Living Well Despite Struggles Consistently Thriving

AH-HA:

Many Australian workers are experiencing a significant decline in their levels of Positive Emotions, Meaning and Health. They appear tired.

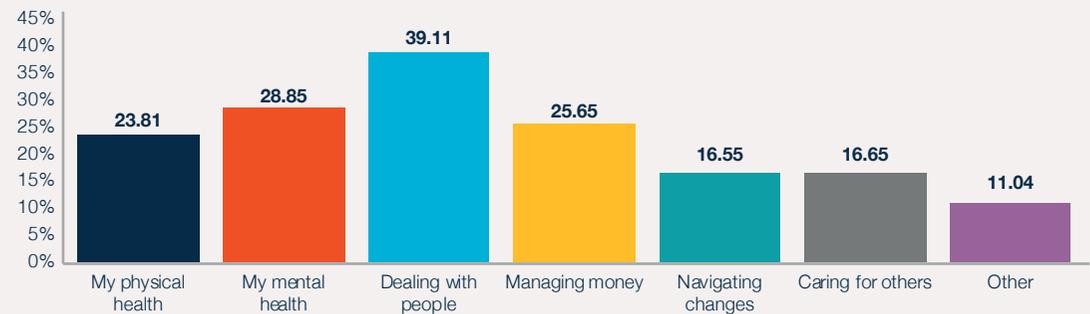
BIGGEST CAUSES OF STRUGGLE

Overall, the 2021 data gathered suggests that people’s levels of struggle were beginning to ease (57.9% compared to 66.4%), but had not quite returned to pre-COVID-19 levels (56.8%). Feeling anxious is a natural reaction to uncertainty and can be an important motivator for taking helpful action. It becomes more important to consider what people are worried about, and the extent to which that anxiety is adaptive versus maladaptive.

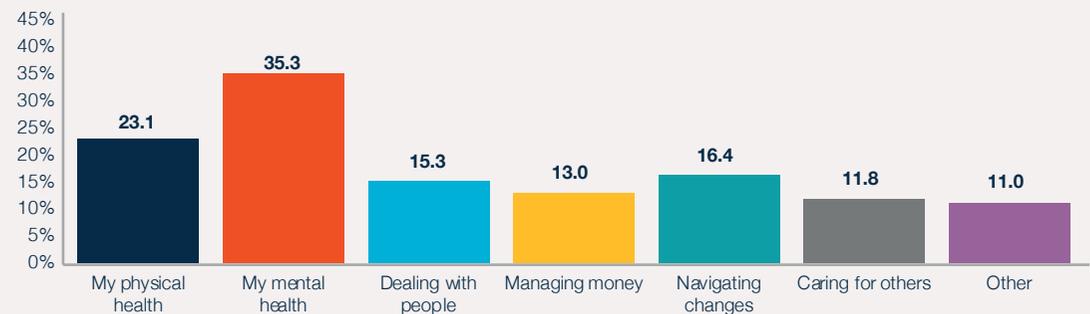
Notably, as more Australian workers have begun to return to their work premises, *Dealing With People* has become the leading cause of struggle with 39.1% – double what workers have reported at any other time in the data. While *Mental Health* remains a leading cause of struggle for 28.8% Australian workers – particularly those who were **not feeling bad, just getting by** and those who were *really struggling* – it is reassuring to see that it has declined from the August 2020 high of 35.3%.

For some workers their struggles reflect the reality they are navigating. For example, Australian workers earning less than \$50,000 per annum identified *Managing Money*, in addition to *Dealing With People*, as their greatest struggles. Among these workers, however, those who were **not feeling bad, just getting by** and those who were *really struggling* were more likely to also see their struggle as permanent and/or pervasive, suggesting that the beliefs workers hold about their struggles also impact their wellbeing.

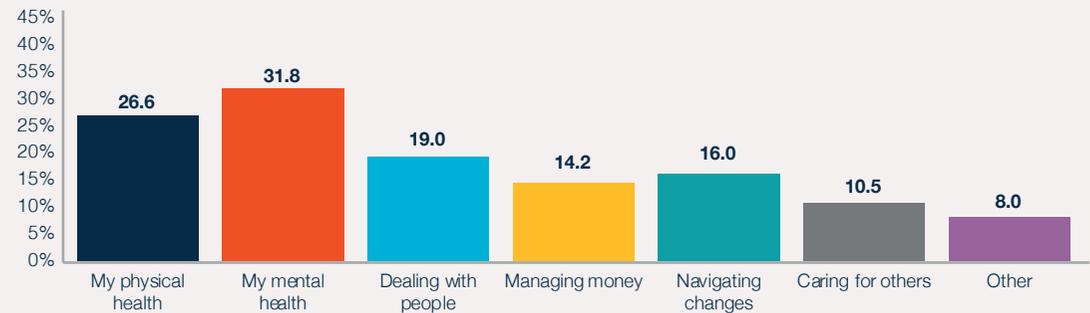
2021 BIGGEST CAUSES OF STRUGGLES AT WORK (% FREQUENCY)



2020 BIGGEST CAUSES OF STRUGGLES AT WORK (% FREQUENCY)



2019 BIGGEST CAUSES OF STRUGGLES AT WORK (% FREQUENCY)



AH-HA:

Mental health remains a struggle for many Australian workers, but dealing with people has become the biggest challenge workers are facing.

REACHING OUT FOR HELP

Almost two in five Australian workers – up from one in five workers in 2020 – indicated they would never tell anyone they were struggling with their wellbeing, with workers who were *really struggling* less likely than other workers to seek help. Unfortunately, workers who spoke to no one were statistically more likely to report lower levels of wellbeing ability, wellbeing motivation and psychological safety.

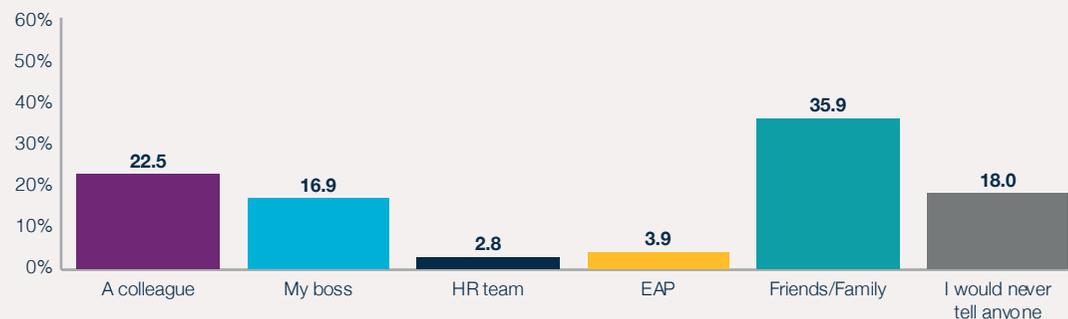
The majority of Australian workers (52.1% – the most we have seen since we began gathering the data) are seeking help when they are struggling with their wellbeing at work by turning to their friends and family. However, when it comes to improving workers’ levels of wellbeing ability, wellbeing motivation and psychological safety, reaching out to family and friends was only slightly better than speaking to no one.

In contrast, bosses were the most effective option for amplifying people’s confidence to care for their wellbeing at work, but only 8.6% of Australian workers (the fewest we have ever seen) reported turning to their boss. This reflects a significant decline in the levels of trust Australian workers reported for management (from an average of 6.4 in August 2020 to 5.3 in May 2021) to make sensible decisions that effect their future.

2021 PERSON I REACH OUT TO WHEN STRUGGLING TO CARE FOR MY WELLBEING AT WORK (TOTAL %)



2020 PERSON I REACH OUT TO WHEN STRUGGLING TO CARE FOR MY WELLBEING AT WORK (TOTAL %)



2019 PERSON I REACH OUT TO WHEN STRUGGLING TO CARE FOR MY WELLBEING AT WORK (TOTAL %)



AH-HA:

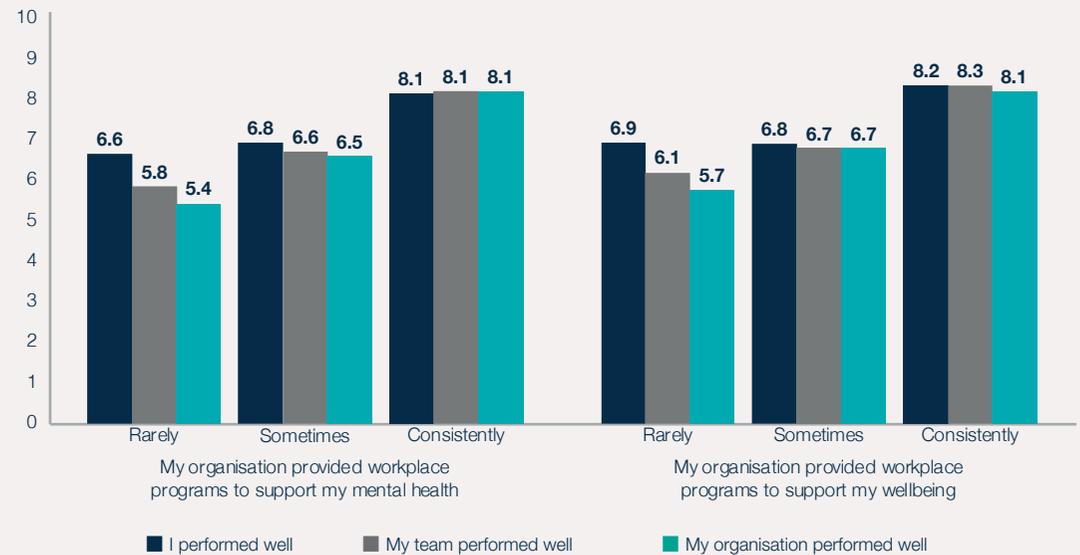
Australian workers have less trust in their bosses when it comes to talking to them about caring for their wellbeing at work.

WORKPLACE WELLBEING SUPPORT

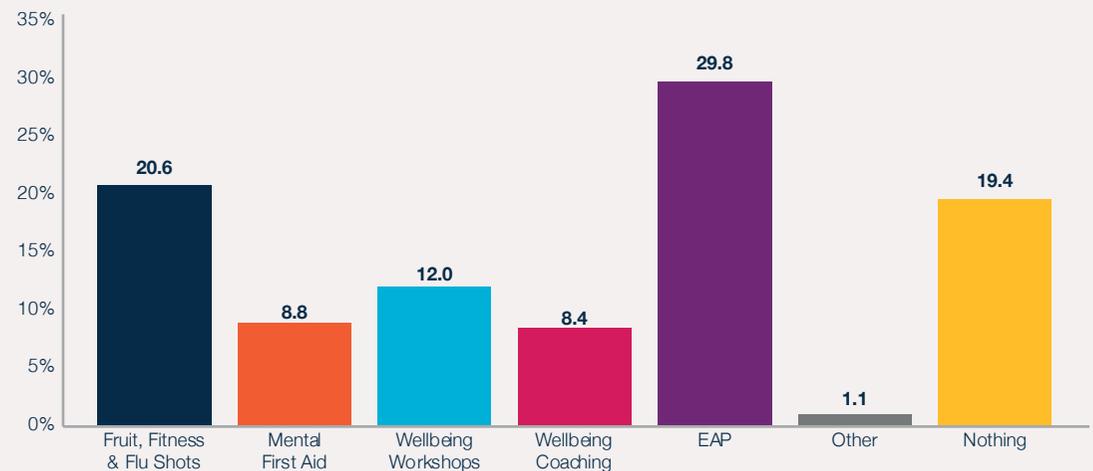
31.4% of Australian workers reported that their organisation *consistently* provided workplace programs to support their mental health, while 23.7% of Australian workers reported their organisation *consistently* provided programs to support their wellbeing. Notably, organisations that were *consistently* providing workplace programs to support both mental health **and** wellbeing statistically were more likely to have higher levels of organisational commitment and performance. However, workplaces who were just providing workplace wellbeing programs *consistently* were more likely to have higher levels of job satisfaction, and similar levels of organisational commitment and team performance.

Despite COVID-19 escalating wellbeing challenges for many workers and bringing changes in workplace legislation, when it comes to caring for worker wellbeing there have been no significant changes in the forms of wellbeing support provided by workplaces. While *EAPs* remained the most common form of wellbeing workplace support provided in Australian workplaces, statistically when it comes to improving worker's levels of wellbeing ability, wellbeing motivation and psychological safety, it remained the least effective and was only slightly better than doing nothing.

2021 WORKPLACE PROVIDED MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING SUPPORT BY PERFORMANCE (MEANS)



2021 WELLBEING WORKPLACE SUPPORT PROVIDED (TOTAL %)



AH-HA:

The consistent provision of mental health and wellbeing workplace support – beyond just EAP – is improving wellbeing and performance outcomes.

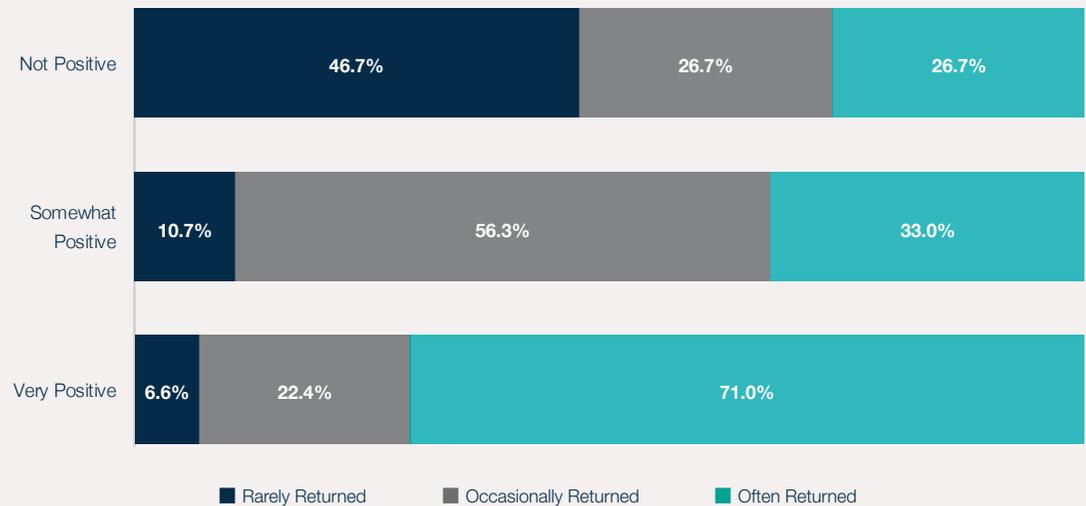
THE FUTURE OF WORK

Gartner's HR Survey reported in March 2020 that 88% of Australian workplaces had encouraged or required their workers to work from home due to COVID-19, representing the largest and fastest change to working conditions ever encountered. 82.1% of Australian workers continued to report they were satisfied with their current working from home arrangements – down from the 88.2% in August 2020.

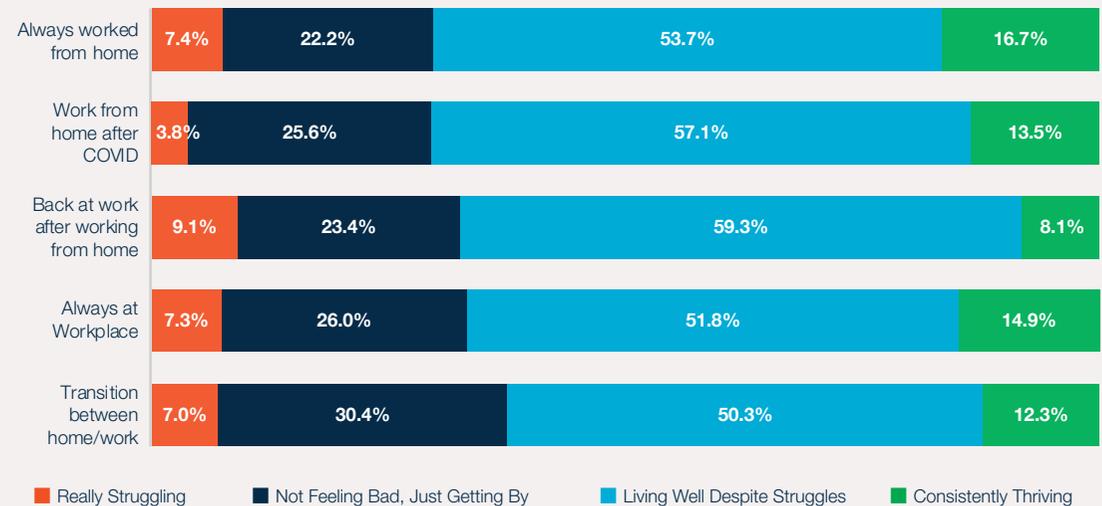
As Australian workplaces begin to navigate the return to work premises, only 42.4% of workers felt positive about returning – up slightly from the 38.8% in August 2020. However, those who have often been returning to their workplace continued to be significantly more likely to feel positive about this change (48.1%, up from 42.1% of workers in August 2020).

Notably, while transitions can be challenging when it comes to caring for our wellbeing, Australian workers reported fairly similar levels of wellbeing, regardless of where they were currently working. However, those transitioning between work and home were statistically more likely to be **not feeling bad, just getting by** and may need additional wellbeing support to navigate this new way of working when it comes to caring for their wellbeing.

FEELING POSITIVE ABOUT RETURNING TO WORK BASED ON FREQUENCY OF WORK VISITS (TOTAL %)



STATE OF WELLBEING BY WORK LOCATION (TOTAL %)



AH-HA:

Australian workers who are working from home are happy with their current working arrangements and it is not harming their wellbeing.

SUMMARY

A significant number of Australian workers (53.1%) reported they were *living well despite struggles* and were demonstrating notable levels of resilience as Australian workplaces began to prepare for the “new normal” in early May 2021 (prior to the latest Victorian COVID-19 lockdown). Building this resilience, however, appears to have left many Australian workers struggling to sustain their levels of wellbeing motivation, feeling less psychologically safe to talk about the struggles they may now be experiencing, and with significantly lower levels of positive emotions, meaning and physical health. They appear exhausted.

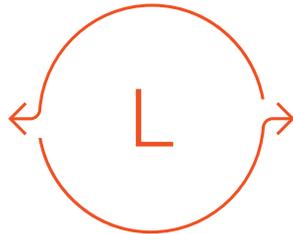
As the amount of time workers spend with others has increased, dealing with people has become the biggest struggle for 39.1% of Australian workers. Perhaps as a result, significantly fewer workers are turning to others in their workplace for support when they are struggling to care for their wellbeing preferring to turn to family and friends (52.1%). And although, their boss remains the best person to help improve workers’ levels of wellbeing ability, wellbeing motivation and psychological safety, a significant decline of worker’s reporting levels of management trust may explain why fewer workers than ever are reaching out to their bosses for help.

As workplaces transition to the “new normal,” organisations that provided both mental health and wellbeing workplace support for their workers – and did not rely on EAP alone – were significantly more likely to have workers who were thriving and performing well. Most Australian workers (82.1%) who have had to work from home due to COVID-19 are satisfied with their current arrangements. However, those who had often been returning to their work premises were the most likely to feel positive about the changes to come for the future of work.



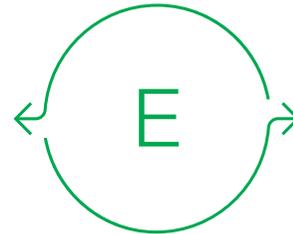
HOW CAN YOU HELP WORKERS THRIVE AS THEY RETURN TO WORK?

What we've seen throughout the years of our research is that wellbeing habits, attitudes and actions spread through a complicated web of social connections around us at the levels of Me, We, and Us. When it comes to caring for wellbeing in your workplace, we recommend rallying diverse leaders and energizers across your organisation to create a shared vision and strategy to help them to LEAD the way on wellbeing:



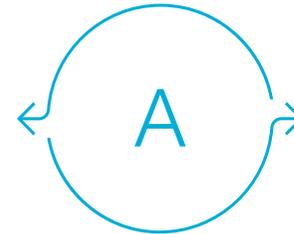
LITERACY

Having a shared language about caring for wellbeing enables people to have conversations that can positively shape people's thoughts, feelings, and actions about their wellbeing.



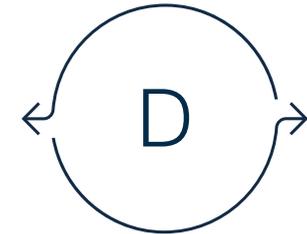
EVALUATION

Having high-quality, meaningful, and timely data gives leaders, teams, and your entire workplace insights to make more intelligent decisions and effective wellbeing investments. This doesn't mean your workplace's wellbeing scores always need to go up, but you do need to easily and regularly gauge the impact of your efforts together so you can keep learning how to better care for wellbeing.



ACTIVATION

There is no one magic wellbeing strategy that will help every person in your workplace to be well. Instead, people need the freedom to playfully experiment and activate individual and collective wellbeing behaviors that align with their interests, values, resources, and desired outcomes.



DETERMINATION

Caring for wellbeing is never one-and-done! In order to improve our abilities and sustain our motivation, we need to create a psychologically safe space to talk with others about what's working well, where we're struggling, and what we're learning when it comes to caring for our wellbeing.

You may wish to consider these LEAD Factors as different "lenses" or "approaches" as you think about how to help people in your workplace to care for their wellbeing. Keep in mind that you may wish to use one, some, or all of these factors, depending on your unique context.

WANT MORE?



TAKE THE FREE PERMAH WELLBEING SURVEY

Measure your wellbeing and see how you're doing when it comes to your levels of thriving and struggle, and your abilities and motivation to care for your wellbeing, at www.permahsurvey.com. You can even create a free personal wellbeing plan, drawing on more than 200 evidence-based wellbeing actions. You can also use this tool for teams or entire workplaces.



BOOK A WORKPLACE WELLBEING STRATEGY BRIEFING

Take a deeper dive into the workplace wellbeing research, accelerate your HR or Leadership team's understanding of how to improve workplace wellbeing, and assess how your workplace is currently performing. Drawing on an appreciative human-centered design process tailored to meet the needs of your team, this briefing is designed to give you the confidence, support, and actions you need to improve wellbeing across your workplace. **Click here to book your session.**



GRAB OUR AMPLIFYING WELLBEING & RESILIENCE SERIES

Put the latest research and practices for improving wellbeing at your people's fingertips. 91% of participants in our workplace wellbeing training programs are confident they can apply the knowledge and skills they learned, and 98% recommend our programs to others. Tailored for the needs of your workplace, upskilling internal wellbeing champions – whether it's leaders, your HR team, or staff – is an affordable and effective way to care for your people's wellbeing. **Just click here to learn more about the series.**



JOIN OUR CERTIFICATE IN CREATING WELLBEING

Unlock the power of caring for wellbeing in your community, workplace, or school. Based on Professor Martin Seligman's PERMAH theory of wellbeing, the program includes live training classes and coaching calls with our globally sought-after coaches to put the latest wellbeing research and tools at your fingertips so you can become accredited to help others thrive, even in times of struggle.

Just click here to learn more about the certificate.

ABOUT THE WELLBEING LAB RESEARCHERS



DR. PEGGY KERN

Dr. Peggy Kern is an associate professor at the Centre for Positive Psychology at the University of Melbourne's Graduate School of Education. Her research draws on a variety of methodologies to examine questions around who thrives in life and why, including understanding and measuring healthy functioning, identifying individual and social factors impacting life trajectories, and systems-informed approaches to wellbeing. She has published three books and more than 100 peer-reviewed articles and chapters. You can find out more about Peggy's work at www.peggykern.org.



DR. MICHELLE MCQUAID

Dr. Michelle McQuaid is a best-selling author, workplace wellbeing teacher, and playful change activator. An honorary fellow at the University of Melbourne's Graduate School of Education, in addition to hosting the highly acclaimed weekly podcast, *Making Positive Psychology Work*, which features leading researchers and practitioners from around the world, Michelle blogs for *Psychology Today*, *The Huffington Post* and *Thrive*, and her work has been featured in *Forbes*, *The Harvard Business Review*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Boss Magazine*, *The Age* and more. You can find more of Michelle's work at www.michellemcquaid.com.



JESSICA TAYLOR

Jessica Taylor is an educator, possibilitizer, presenter, and researcher who helps schools, communities, and organizations place wellbeing at the heart of their vision and practice. Jessica is the Michelle McQuaid Research Leader, and a member of the Systems Informed Positive Psychology (SIPP) and Wellbeing Literacy research team, and a teaching specialist at the University of Melbourne's Centre for Wellbeing Science. Jessica loves co-creating spaces that support individuals and communities to build awareness of the interdependent nature of wellbeing, generating wellbeing approaches that create thriving social systems. Her latest publication looks at wellbeing and resilience education during COVID. You can find more about Jessica's work at <https://www.linkedin.com/in/jessica-taylor-012430ab/>



DANIELLE JACOBS

Danielle Jacobs is a registered psychologist and wellbeing specialist, speaker, trainer, and coach. Danielle uses evidence-based organizational scholarship and positive psychology practices within businesses across Australia to help their people flourish, improve their mental and physical health, and achieve peak performance at the individual, team, and organizational levels. She also led the Australasian delivery of the world-renowned and high impact Potentiallife leadership development program (the brainchild of Dr. Tal Ben Shahr), is a Certified and Licensed Tiny Habits® Coach, and an affiliate member of the APS College of Organisational Psychologists. You can find more about Danielle's work at www.daniellejacobs.com.au.

ABOUT ADDITIONAL RESEARCHERS



DR. LINDSEY GODWIN

A professor, practitioner, and possibilitizer, Dr. Lindsey Godwin has a passion for helping individuals and organizations leverage their potential through strength-based change. She holds the Robert P. Stiller Endowed Chair of Management in the Stiller School of Business at Champlain College (Vermont, USA), where she serves as the Academic Director of the David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry (AI). An international speaker, consultant and facilitator, her work has been published in a variety of journals and books and she is currently a managing editor for the AI Practitioner Journal. You can find out more about Lindsey's work at: www.lindseygodwin.com



DR. MEG WARREN

Dr. Meg A. Warren, a positive psychologist and diversity and inclusion scholar, is an Assistant Professor at Western Washington University. She is the Founding President of the Work & Organizations Division of IPPA, Co-Founder of the Western Positive Psychology Association, and Co-Editor of the International Journal of Wellbeing. Her award-winning research uses a positive psychology approach to study how individuals from relatively privileged groups can serve as allies to marginalized outgroups. To access publications and resources on her work, please visit www.megwarren.com.



DR. SCOTT DONALDSON

Dr Scott Donaldson is a Postdoctoral Scholar in Evaluation, Statistics, and Measurement at the University of California, San Diego School of Medicine, Moores Cancer Center. Scott received his PhD in Psychology with a concentration in Evaluation and Applied Research Methods and a co-concentration in Positive Organizational Psychology from Claremont Graduate University. He received an MS in Organizational Psychology from the University of Southern California, and his BA in Psychology from the University of California, Los Angeles. His research focuses on the design, measurement, and evaluation of individual, workplace, and community-based wellbeing interventions. You can find out more about Scott's work at: www.scottdonaldsonphd.com



DONALD E. FREDERICK (PH.D.)

Donald is a data science consultant, technologist, and entrepreneur focused on the future of technology, work, and flourishing. He completed his postdoctoral research on the psychology of work and flourishing at The Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University's Institute for Quantitative Social Science. He holds a Ph.D. in Psychology from The University of Chicago. He also holds master's degrees in computer science and divinity, also from Chicago. You can find out more on his website <https://neurofoo.com>.