

# Alienated, under pressure and target driven: Why we need to make friends at work

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*“Attachment is a deep and enduring emotional bond that connects one person to another across time and space”*  
(John Bowlby, *Attachment & Loss* 1969)

The book *Intelligent Kindness* describes workplace dysfunction when it interrogates the consequence of alienated, highly pressurised and target-driven workers. The book was concerned with the evasion of political, moral and ethical questions that cannot be answered by the use of targets and economic calculations alone – exposing the weakness of wellbeing ‘lite’.

As the social tide turns against workplace wellbeing and ‘[happiness initiatives](#)’, the penny has dropped that they are based on desire to improve production. One of the more insidious products of the wellbeing movement is precisely to shift blame onto those who do not respond to the [happiness agenda](#). The use of gardening leave or sending home the overly stressed worker suggests that recovery is in their hands and should be undertaken alone.

This workplace agenda implies that the workplace, or society, is essentially benign and no systemic enquiry as to what in the working conditions and organisational dynamics might have contributed to the stress in the first place. As in any relationship, the ‘mood’ of an organisations changes depending on how successful or threatened it might be, the quality of leadership, working conditions, and on the state of mind of the front line workers.

I don’t want to argue for or against wellbeing strategies at work but rather I want to pose a question about whether, from a psychoanalytic perspective, wellbeing isn’t in fact a compensation for something precious in the social fabric that has been lost.

Some years ago I remember meeting a young boy who had been abandoned by his mother. In her place he adopted a stray dog in the hope that his love for it would sustain him and protect him from the pain of loneliness and despair. The dog helped but could not fulfil what was required of it. I find myself wondering whether the plethora of self help and organisational wellbeing strategies have a similar purpose. This is not an argument for or against self help or the wellbeing strategies but rather to pose the question about what, like the boy's dog, they might be that they are a replacement for?

Wellbeing is not just an internal state of mind or a competence but it is also deeply connected to the individuals relatedness to and experience of the environment of which they are a member.

The danger implicit in the wellbeing ambition is the proposition that all individuals have both the capacity and responsibility for achieving it. Offering massage, meditation, and other wellbeing events conveys a positive message but does little to attend to the precarity of everyday employment and life. This positive view of distress or difficulty strips away the complexity associated with the ordinary daily experience of loss of confidence, insecurity, anxiety and leaves the individual feeling even more of a failure when they can not overcome them .

The UK has a [woeful history](#) of attending to mental distress. This is known but there is still an insatiable appetite for overhurried or simplistic solutions so perhaps we need a little more caution, a little more reflection on the kind of message these wellbeing strategies convey. For example the absolute conviction that dependancy is detrimental to growth, whilst it is known by us all that we deeply depend for our sense of security and happiness on others throughout our lives.

Within a psychoanalytic model, the sense of wellbeing is not simply a product of our early attachments but also a function of the security we derive from the sense that we live securely in a caring society. Being a citizen is a reciprocal experience in which care is given – via our taxation – to unknown others in the belief that such care will be forthcoming as and when we need it.

The welfare state, however flawed, attempted to provide a range of services demonstrating a commitment to promote social concern and care much in the same way a parent does for a child. In the late 70's, following the adoption of a radical model of neoliberalism, the consensus that supported this enterprise started to change and **the welfare state became the nanny state** – where the parental function became denigrated and replaced by a nanny. The decline of the welfare state is not simply about the decline in services, it was also the [systematic destruction](#) of the social project of care.

Back to the little boy, we are left with his question which never quite gets answered – where has my mother gone? One could imagine him struggling with two states of mind; firstly a determination to be self-reliant as if he had no confidence that he could either trust or learn from somebody else. Secondly a bewildered state of mind that oscillates between the fear of dependancy on the one hand and a lack of meaning and loneliness on the other.

However comforting a dog or a wellbeing strategy is – the attempt to reduce individual stress associated with the contemporary demands of the workplace and build a sense of belonging ultimately fails because it overlooks the damage and devastating loss caused by the abandoning mother. The nanny can only ever be a substitute for the mother, providing a consistent and reliable attachment.

It is both our society and the individuals within it who need this glue of concern and humane development that form the basis for our attachments, the glue that we seem intent on diluting.



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