

The Psychologist Behind the Professional: Why Wellbeing, Belonging and Psychological Safety Matter in Psychology

(By Juliet Baker)

The Enthusiasm of a Newly Qualified Psychologist

When I first qualified as a psychologist, I was full of enthusiasm and excitement. After three years of studying for my bachelor's degree, I was finally ready to put my knowledge into practice. I wanted to make a difference, support people through their difficulties, and apply everything I had learned. I was willing to take on any opportunity that came my way, believing that hard work, commitment and passion would help me succeed.



However, clinical experience soon taught me that professional life is not always as straightforward as we imagine. While my academic training had prepared me with theoretical knowledge and essential psychological principles, it had not fully prepared me for the emotional and interpersonal challenges of the workplace. My first job was not the positive beginning I had hoped for. Rather than feeling encouraged and supported, I gradually found myself in an environment where I struggled to fit in.

When the Workplace Undermines Confidence

One of the first things that made me feel different was my Georgian accent. Colleagues would make sarcastic comments about how interesting my accent was. What might have appeared to be harmless humour to some became an uncomfortable and recurring negative experience for me.

Over time, these comments were accompanied by other behaviours that gradually affected my confidence and sense of belonging. I began to question myself in ways I had never done before. The enthusiasm I had brought into my new career slowly disappeared, and my confidence seemed to leave through the window.

The impact extended beyond my personal feelings. It began to affect my professional performance, including how I managed my patient caseload. I was no longer the energetic, confident and passionate person who had entered the profession determined to make a difference. This experience taught me an important lesson: **even a knowledgeable and capable person can struggle to perform at their best when they feel undermined, excluded or psychologically unsafe.**

In psychology, we understand that our environment influences our thoughts, emotions and behaviour. Yet professionals working within healthcare are not always protected from the very workplace experiences that can affect their wellbeing. I eventually realised that remaining in that environment was not sustainable. I was concerned that, if things continued, my performance would deteriorate further and I could eventually lose my job. I made the difficult decision to seek employment elsewhere.

The Power of a Supportive Environment

My next workplace was a completely different experience. It was more cosmopolitan, welcoming and inclusive. From my first day, I felt at ease and accepted for who I was. There was no need to spend my energy worrying about how I sounded, whether I fitted in or how my colleagues might perceive me. Instead, I could concentrate on my responsibilities, develop my skills and contribute meaningfully to the team.

Gradually, I began to recognise the person I had been before my confidence was affected. My enthusiasm returned, and so did my sense of professional purpose. Most importantly, the difference was reflected in my clinical practice. I felt more confident in my interactions with patients, more comfortable in my role and better able to provide the care needed.

This experience reinforced my belief that workplace culture is not simply an organisational issue. It can have a direct influence on staff wellbeing, professional confidence and the quality of patient care. A supportive workplace does not eliminate the challenges of clinical practice, but it gives professionals a stronger foundation from which to manage them.

Psychology Begins Outside the Workplace

Over the years, I have come to believe that being a psychologist involves much more than what happens during working hours. For me, psychology begins with what I do outside work. Before I can effectively support someone else, I must take responsibility for my own wellbeing. This does not mean that I must always feel happy, energetic or emotionally balanced. Rather, it means recognising my needs, maintaining healthy boundaries and making time for the activities that help me feel connected to life beyond my professional identity.

One of the things I enjoy most is going for social walks. More recently, I started a dog-walking community with fellow local dog owners in the area where I live. What began as a simple way to enjoy walks and meet people has gradually developed into a group of eight, and we are still growing. Once a week, we combine our walk with a coffee morning. Those who have time to spare after the walk gather at a local café for a cup of coffee before heading home.

These meetings have become something many of us look forward to. Our conversations range from holiday plans to recommending reliable gardeners and sharing useful local services. There is no formal agenda, no professional expectation and no pressure to solve anyone's problems. We simply enjoy each other's company. I value these moments because they remind me that wellbeing is often supported by ordinary, meaningful experiences: fresh air, movement, laughter, friendship and a sense of community.

Interestingly, some of my colleagues have started creating similar dog-walking groups in their own local communities. It is encouraging to see how a simple initiative can inspire others to prioritise connection and wellbeing. For me, looking after my personal wellbeing is not separate

from my professional responsibilities. It is part of the foundation that enables me to provide compassionate and effective care to my patients.

Addressing Toxicity and Building Trust

My own experiences have also shaped how I approach teamwork and professional relationships. Over the years, I have become more confident in recognising and addressing interpersonal toxicity. This includes challenging microaggressions, discouraging disrespectful behaviour and promoting clear expectations about how colleagues should treat one another.

Small acts of exclusion or repeated sarcastic comments can have a cumulative effect, even when those responsible dismiss them as jokes. Leaders and colleagues must therefore be willing to look beyond intention and consider the impact of their behaviour.

Creating a healthier workplace requires clear boundaries, consistent action and a shared understanding that bullying, discrimination and other harmful behaviours are unacceptable. A zero-tolerance approach should not mean avoiding difficult conversations or treating every disagreement as misconduct. Instead, it means responding fairly, proportionately and consistently when behaviour undermines another person's dignity or psychological safety.

I have found that addressing these issues constructively can strengthen trust within teams. When people know that concerns will be taken seriously, they are more likely to communicate openly, collaborate effectively and concentrate on the work that matters.

Modelling Vulnerability and Practising Candour

Another lesson I have learned is the importance of leaders modelling vulnerability. Leadership does not require having all the answers. In fact, some of the strongest leaders are those who can acknowledge when they are wrong, ask for feedback and admit when they need support. When leaders demonstrate these qualities, they give others permission to do the same. Team members become more comfortable sharing ideas, raising

concerns and discussing mistakes without automatically fearing humiliation or retaliation.

For me, openness and candour are essential to building psychologically safe teams. In healthcare, where decisions can have significant consequences, people must feel able to speak up when something does not seem right. This requires more than encouraging staff to be honest. Leaders must demonstrate that honesty is welcomed, listened to and acted upon. They must also be prepared to receive uncomfortable feedback without becoming defensive. Modelling vulnerability does not undermine professional authority. It demonstrates self-awareness, accountability and a willingness to learn.

A Healthier Workplace Means Better Care

Looking back, I recognise how profoundly my early workplace experience affected me. I also recognise how much changed when I moved into an environment where I felt accepted and supported. These experiences have shaped my understanding of psychology, leadership and patient care. They have taught me that professional competence cannot be separated entirely from personal wellbeing, and that the culture surrounding healthcare professionals is valuable too.

We cannot always control the environments in which we begin our careers, but we can influence the environments we help create. By prioritising our wellbeing, challenging toxic behaviours, fostering inclusion and modelling vulnerability, we can build teams in which people feel safe to learn, contribute and grow.

Ultimately, the psychologist behind the professional is still a human being. We have our own emotions, insecurities, relationships and needs. Acknowledging this is not a weakness; it is part of understanding ourselves and others. **When we look after the people who provide care, we strengthen their capacity to care for others.** And when we create workplaces where people feel respected, valued and safe to be themselves, we give both professionals and patients a better opportunity to thrive.