

INSTITUTE FOR  
QUALITY OF LIFE

sodexo\*



**Wellbeing away**

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As an in-house 'think-tank', the Sodexo Institute for Quality of Life is inspired by Sodexo's deeply held conviction that improving Quality of Life leads to the progress of individuals and contributes to the performance of organisations. Its role is to gather and develop insight to help Sodexo understand better what are the levers of Quality of Life.

This report is inspired by the Sodexo Institute for Quality of Life Dialogue that took place in London on 29 April 2014 and whose participants were:

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### **Business in the Community**

Louise Aston, Workwell Director

### **Cardiff University**

Andy Smith, Professor of Psychology

### **Health and Safety Executive**

Steve Denton, H.M. Chief Inspector of Mines

### **King's College London**

Dr. Nicola Fear, Reader in Epidemiology  
Jennifer Raper, International Student Support

### **London School of Economics and Political Science**

Mark Atkinson, Head of Facilities

### **Oil and Gas UK**

Dr Alix Thom, Employment and Skills Issues Manager

### **Safe Union, Norway**

Kai Morten Anda, Sodexo Representative

### **Subsea 7**

Robin Davies, Vice President, HSEQ & Business Improvement

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### **University College London**

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## Introduction

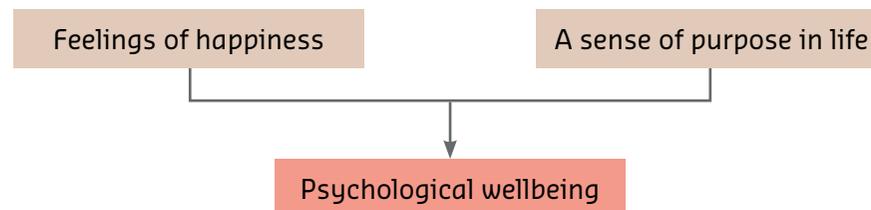
As individuals, our experience of psychological wellbeing seems highly personal but there are many models that try to explain and help to improve it. In this report, we set out what we've learned about psychological wellbeing away from home and family in **a simple five phase model from 'pre-departure planning' to 'being back'**. Our aim is to inform individuals and organisations so they can better understand the experience of being away and increase the chances of maintaining psychological wellbeing.

The Institute's interest is based on the fact that many populations are away from home and family in more or less challenging environments, for different lengths of time with varying levels of connectivity. Examples include students, armed forces personnel and remote site workers on offshore platforms or at mines. **Our simple wellbeing away model to support quality of life is founded on engagement with academics and professionals with knowledge and experience of these sectors.**

## The basics

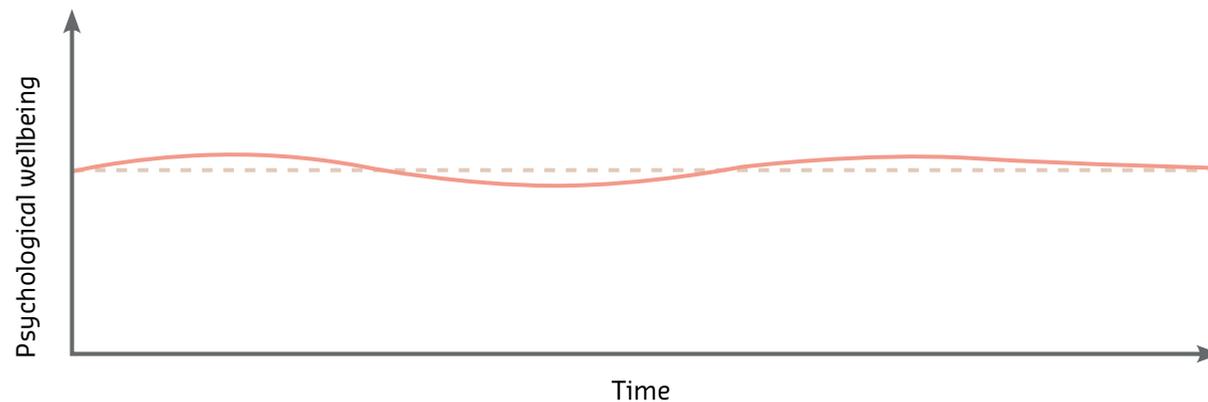
Psychological wellbeing is made up of two key elements

- 1) happy feelings about things we do and experience
- 2) a sense of purpose in our life<sup>(1)</sup>



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Our starting point for wellbeing away is psychological wellbeing 'set point' theory. This is the idea that **most people have relatively stable long-term psychological wellbeing in the absence of e.g. chronic ill-health, family breakdown or prolonged unemployment**. The theory is one way of explaining that, despite an excellent weekend, a great holiday, a promotion or a pay rise, on the whole, our overall psychological wellbeing rises and falls little over the long term.



--- Individual's psychological wellbeing set-point  
— Psychological wellbeing

Being away from home can involve a range of experiences and emotions, both positive and negative e.g. excitement, fulfilment, learning, a sense of opportunity or novelty, also apprehension, loneliness or uncertainty. Much of the experience of being away depends on external environmental and social factors such as transport, accommodation, the weather, colleagues, the activity involved.

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Individuals with appropriate support and services can also maintain their own psychological wellbeing away and our five phase model explains how:

## 1. Pre-departure planning

Increasingly easy access to low-cost modern communications technology means that voice and video contact away from home and family is often possible. The ability to give progress updates as we travel or make video calls once we've arrived means **there is a temptation to plan only superficially for psychological wellbeing away**. Expecting that technology will mitigate separation, we may fail to:

- discuss expectations
- say 'goodbye' properly and acknowledge that the coming separation is real
- set up support networks
- agree a main point of contact so the person away is not under pressure to allocate potentially little free time / communication resources to a large number of people for similar updates

The first three points can apply as easily to a parent away on a short business trip as to someone away for much longer. The last point applies especially to e.g. individuals in more difficult, longer-term absence, such as military personnel on deployment.

## 2. Being away

Even today, the reality of being away over distance and time remains as **technology offers only an artificial sense of connectedness**. Seeing someone on a screen is not the same as being together in a shared reality. Daily experiences at different ends of a phone or video call may be so very different that real-time connection is frustrating and counter-productive: sharing the challenges of a conflict zone and those of normal home life over a live video call connection is not easy. Less immediate communication that allows for time to think and process exchanges - such as a paper and pen letter - is an option that should not be dismissed. The assumption that technology-enabled instant communication is necessarily better quality or more meaningful is unhelpful.

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Sometimes, it can be best for all 'not to know'. News of something at home that an individual cannot manage remotely can immediately and gravely impact psychological wellbeing. The result can be distraction, disengagement, the inability to progress, and a threat to the performance of the organisation.

**The ability to unwind after work or study while away is also important:** inability to do so has been associated with a number of negative health outcomes. Work-related 'rumination' i.e. thinking about work-related issues and events, can have an impact on sleep and result in fatigue over time. On the contrary, a sense of being away from the work situation has been associated with positive well-being and low fatigue. This can be difficult while away from home as there is often less scope for diverse leisure activities e.g. on an offshore platform or at a military base abroad. The key is activity that is different to work or study: if the day's activity is dominated by screen-based work, free time dedicated to online social media connection is unlikely to help an individual unwind as compared to something very different, such as exercise.

### **3. Preparing to return**

With excitement front of mind, preparing to return home is easy to forget but this can have an adverse impact on psychological wellbeing. An individual or their perceptions may not be the same as when they left home, family and friends they return to may also have changed – even in a short period. Going home to continue 'as before' may not be possible and acknowledging this in advance is a way of managing expectations and the risk of disappointment.

**Some less intense work or study, or a change of activity before returning home, can help the transition** between a very different 'away' environment and the home.

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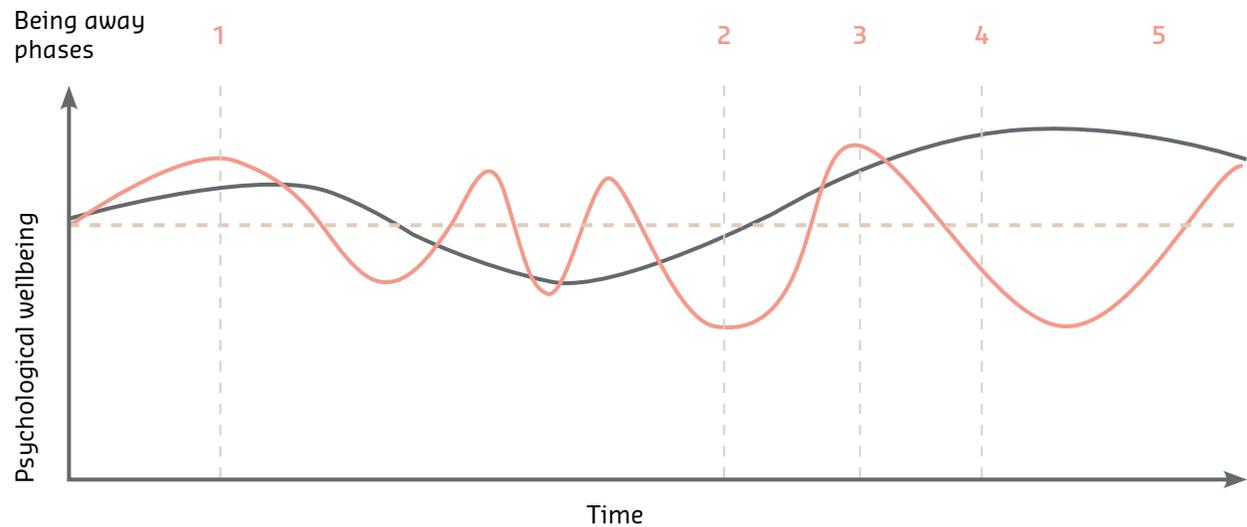
After a long period away, a 'welcome home' celebration can have a better impact on psychological wellbeing if it takes place once time to feel back has elapsed

#### 4. Returning

A period of 'decompression' or a staged return can help towards a 'soft landing' e.g. soldiers returning home from a conflict zone via a peaceful base where they can wash, relax and enjoy leisure time as a way of unwinding in a more normal environment before going home.

#### 5. Being back

Getting home can involve little more than a flight but it can take much longer to feel back at home psychologically. To mitigate this potential disconnection between being back and feeling back, **time for adjustment is important**. After a longer period away, a 'welcome home' celebration can have a better impact on psychological wellbeing if it takes place once time to feel back has elapsed.



- Individual's psychological wellbeing set-point
- Desirable gentle variations from psychological set-point
- ~ Undesirable intense variations from psychological set-point

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## Summary

- most individuals' psychological wellbeing is relatively stable over time
- being away from home and family can have an adverse impact on psychological wellbeing
- treating being away as a five-phase experience from pre-departure planning to being back is a simple model that applies to individuals away from home in different circumstances for different periods of time
- the five-phase model is a way to manage potential adverse impacts on psychological wellbeing while away

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# Reference

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1. Well-being; Robertson I. and Cooper C.; Palgrave MacMillan, 2011

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