



# **BSUH Connections**

*The Challenges and Opportunities*



**Brighton and Sussex  
University Hospitals**  
NHS Trust

## National NHS Concerns:

**The NHS is under a greater strain than ever before.** National exposures of failings in care such as highlighted in the Francis Report ([Francis, 2013](#)) and the Morecambe Bay Review ([Kirkup, 2015](#)) have **dented public confidence** and **challenged the workforce morale**. Maternity staff are finding it hard to keep pace with rising acuity, with long shifts and intensified pressures leading to increased levels of stress and burn out. Resilience is often low and staff are reducing their hours and sometimes leaving the profession within their first five years of practice. Community staff have the additional pressure of the isolating nature of their role, with significant travel and limited opportunity for the interaction necessary to develop and nurture their professional relationships.

Not only are such pressures leading to **high turnover rates** and **high reports of work-related stress and sickness** across the system ([NHS, 2015](#)), they are also **impacting negatively on patient support and safety**, as warned by the Care Quality Commission ([Campbell, 2012](#)). In the south-east, one in three maternity units have too few midwives and almost 25% in London are affected by shortages. Moreover, of the 141 hospital trusts that provide maternity care across England, one in seven do not have the recommended one midwife per 28 births.

The intense working environments associated with healthcare can trigger a breakdown in leadership, awareness, prioritisation and communication which has the potential to harm lives. **Human Factors**, adopted across the NHS, help to **optimise performance** and **mitigate human frailties**. Martin Bromiley, Clinical Human Factors Group, highlighted breakdowns in communication, team direction, culture and decision making as leading causes in patient safety incident, with mistrust and feelings of disrespect negatively impacting quality and professional relationships and team orientation.

Quality health care cannot be delivered by individuals alone but by multi-disciplinary professional teams. To ensure optimal patient safety, it is of utmost importance that healthcare teams communicate efficiently. **Failures in interprofessional teamwork can lead directly to compromised care as well as increased staff distress** ([Sutcliffe, Lewton & Rosenthal, 2004](#); [Weller, Boyd & Cumin, 2014](#)). Poor quality teamwork is a widespread NHS concern in need of a solution.

## Peer Support through Quality Connections:

There is extensive research demonstrating the psychological, emotional and physical importance of building quality relationships. We are social beings, therefore establishing strong mutual connections with others is vital and beneficial to all aspects of life.

From a psychological perspective, **strong relationships act as revitalisers, creating 'relational energy' which elevate engagement and boost motivation** ([Baker, 2016](#); [Dutton & Heaphy, 2003](#)). They also promote 'thriving' by increasing our life happiness and satisfaction, and broadly enhancing our psychological well-being (Brooke, Feeney & Collins, 2014). Indeed, Jane Dutton's high-quality connections theory highlights the critical **link between relationships and human flourishing**. Specifically, Dutton identifies the importance of *trust, respect, task enabling* and *overcoming corrosive connections*.

**Martin Seligman's PERMA model identifies five foundations of wellbeing; Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Achievement** ([Martin Seligman, 2011](#)). These important elements are not always distinct and can form **internal connections**. Indeed, having established the positive impact quality relationships have on our overall wellbeing, it is also worth acknowledging how the 'R' in PERMA interacts with other elements of the model, particularly 'P' and 'M'.

Firstly, building connections with colleagues can help **restore and sustain a positive effective balance**. High-quality social interactions can increase **positive emotions** (e.g., feelings of security, happiness and gratitude) and enhance our mood. They can also buffer the stresses and strains associated with work, increase our resilience and reduce the occurrence of negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, distress, frustration and loneliness). Due to the high levels of adversity across the broader NHS, the importance of establishing lasting relationships is particularly pertinent.

Significant research-based evidence demonstrates the **impact of emotional sharing on wellbeing**. Building a positive platform to share and discuss the negative feelings we may experience at work with a close network of colleagues, helps us overcome emotional distress, anxiety and depression ([Nils & Rimé, 2012](#); [Seppala & King, 2017](#)). Again, this is important for NHS workers to bear in mind, considering the challenges and pressures the system is currently facing. It is important for individuals to be able to share their feelings with their team to alleviate the levels of distress experienced before crisis point is reached and wellbeing is significantly affected. Similarly, it is important that staff feel able to communicate professional concerns that could hinder patient care and safety. Therefore, positive communication channels are critical for both worker and patient welfare.

Secondly, **quality support networks can help us develop a greater sense of purpose and meaning** at work. According to Gallup, meaning is more likely determined by who we are with- rather than what we are doing. Quality connections empower us to tackle and embrace challenge and motivate us to thrive in our role. Creating a greater team culture in the workplace can also help us to cultivate and achieve more meaningful goals ([Feeney & Collins, 2015](#)), bearing a positive impact on our performance and levels of engagement. Importantly, the hours of social interaction at work can distinguish our best days from our worst. When we finish the day feeling motivated and energised, it is likely that we've experienced at least 3-6 hours of quality interaction (Rath & Harter, 2010; [Amortegui, 2014](#)). Furthermore, having a 'best friend' at work has additional benefits. Research conducted by [Gallup](#), has shown that 37% of the people who said they had a best friend at work were more likely to report that "someone encourages their development" and 27% were more likely to report that "their opinions seemed to count and have meaning".

In addition to the psychological implications, developing quality relationships prove beneficial to our physiological health. Whilst research shows that obesity reduces longevity by 20%, alcohol by 30% and smoking by 50%, loneliness reduces it by a significant 70% ([Seppala & King, 2017](#)). Indeed, loneliness (defined as a subjective feeling of poor quality social connections) can shorten lifespan in a way similar to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Evidently, **the repercussions of loneliness and social isolation are momentous**. Burnout, increased risk of stroke and heart disease, depression and anxiety and weakened immune defenses are but a few examples of the negative impacts ([Steffens et al, 2016](#); [Valtorta et al,](#)



[2016; Murthy, 2017](#)). We spend a significant amount of time in the workplace and the relationships we have built outside of work are not always enough to fulfil our frequent need for quality interaction. This is particularly applicable to shift workers as the unsociable hours they are expected to work significantly increase their risk of experiencing social isolation and loneliness. **Thus, establishing a greater 'team' culture at work is certainly critical for improving wellbeing for all.**

By building and strengthening these foundational relationships, individuals would feel stronger and more energised, making it less challenging for them to 'bounce back' from difficult situations. A connected and resilient workforce is a more productive and safer workforce, therefore by strengthening wellbeing, we can ensure high quality patient care and optimal patient safety. In addition, resilient healthcare teams will be better able to **creatively manage the limited resources** of the NHS.

### **BSUH Connections Programme: Overcoming NHS concerns**

In November 2015, the Secretary of State for Health set out the Government's goal to reduce the number of stillbirths, neonatal deaths, maternal deaths and brain injuries that occur during or after birth by 20% by 2020 and by 50% by 203 ([HEE Maternity Safety Training](#)).

The Maternity Department at the Brighton and Sussex University Hospital NHS Trust were offered the opportunity to bid for the £80,000 of funding to support multi-disciplinary working, culture, communication and resilience at the Royal Sussex County Hospital, Brighton, and the Princess Royal Hospital, Haywards Heath. The Practice Education Facilitator (PEF) and the Practice Development Midwife (PDM) partnered with Bailey & French to **boost morale, introduce greater team collaboration and strengthen resilience.**

The Connections Programme aimed to cultivate a greater sense of 'team' and strengthen wellbeing for all. Developing peer coaching skills would be of particular benefit and help to build positive platforms to simplify and encourage team communication and strengthen those critical Human Factors.

### **Bailey & French's Approach:**

Bailey & French delivered a series of **3-hour Connections Workshops** made available to **350 people working across the BSUH Maternity Department**, including midwives, consultants, nursery nurses and support staff, over a period of four months. Having developed an understanding of the current situation and the future visions of the department, three key programme outcomes were determined:

- Provide insight into the theory of connections and relationships
- Develop confidence in quickly building trust and engagement with others
- Build awareness of personal support networks and how to maximise them

The workshops introduced the psychology of connections and relationships, explored the importance of **building trust**, how to **engage respectfully**, how to **overcome corrosive connections**, **mapping our support networks** and **co-coaching** with colleagues.

**Bailey & French take a strengths-based approach** by focusing on what's already 'right' with individuals, teams and organisations, rather than trying to 'fix' what's 'wrong'. Through encouraging dialogue and interaction, these workshops provided positive platforms for people to come up with their own ideas, solutions and ways forward and most importantly, **engage as a team**.

### How did the Connections Workshop Benefit the BSUH Maternity Department?

The Connections Programme had an immediate impact on attendees across various domains of their working life. Unsurprisingly, the quality of social relationships in the current department climate was presented as a common theme. The workshop **supported relationships and increased sense of belonging**:

*"Although we are very supportive of each other, I have learnt that we don't have time to get together as a team"*

*"It's been really lovely to have time to share"*

The session also allowed attendees to meet with others outside of their everyday circle. Many enjoyed the opportunity to open large group discussions and felt **empowered to take further action and cultivate more social connections at work**.

*"The aspect of the session that had the most impact on me was chatting to colleagues I hadn't met before"*

*"I am very task orientated and, as a result of the session, I plan to focus more on interacting with people"*

Attendees began to recognise that **trust and respect** form the foundation of positive workplace relationships. Jane Dutton's high-quality relationships research positively impacted and resonated with individuals. People were committed to develop **skills to foster trust and engage respectfully**:

*"As a result of the session, I aim to improve team working by building positive, trustworthy relationships"*

Not only should these actions increase team flourishing, establishing more effective, trusting teamwork will lead to significant gains in patient care and safety ([Weller, Boyd & Cumin](#)).

In addition to developing and strengthening meaningful workplace relationships, many recognised the **need to support fellow team members more effectively**. With the intense pressures experienced across the maternity department (and the more widespread NHS), listening and attending to co-worker's needs was often not prioritised. Following the session, many felt energised to change this, by ensuring they take the time to listen, respond to and value their colleagues. **They now understood the benefits and intended to take personal action**:

*"I am going to give people my full attention"*

*“I intend to stop and listen better, and make sure I really listen to people and respond appropriately”*

Prior to the session, many reported feeling “stressed”, “frazzled”, “overwhelmed” and “rushed”, however come the end, **feelings of adversity had largely been transformed into positive emotions**. Most reported feeling “positive”, “uplifted”, “empowered” and “inspired”. This demonstrates that improving workplace relationships can improve individual’s wellbeing more broadly:

*“At the end of the session I felt happy!”*

*“I felt warm and friendly and pleased with all the positive vibes in the room”*

Moreover, these positive emotions will help increase individuals’ life satisfaction and strengthen resilience, improving their ability to quickly bounce back from stressful events- a common occurrence across the department. **It was evident that the session had already started to strengthen resilience levels:**

*“At the end of the session I felt stronger and more thoughtful”*

Some feedback thought conversations were inappropriate and didn’t feel comfortable talking about their emotions or how they feel with people they didn’t know, questioning its relevance. Although this wasn’t shared feedback, and the majority of comments were positive, it is important to recognise that some may find the format and open conversations uncomfortable. Moving forward, opportunities for those attending to have touch points with facilitators before the sessions may help elevate concerns and give the option to ‘opt out’.

Research shows, that we do **bring our full selves to work** and wellbeing, which relationships is very much central to, is about the ‘whole person’ and so it’s important that we can confidently and without negative consequence talk more broadly about our emotions. **Sharing information and being vulnerable with each other** is key in building trust and is an underpinning mechanism to **psychological safety**, important to team performance and optimizing patient care.

### **Actions to support learning going forward**

Evidence-based research has demonstrated that by making one small change a day, we are 11 times more likely to succeed. Regularly completing micro, or ‘keystone’ actions help to refine our abilities and generate momentum which lead us to those breakthrough moments (Markman, 2017).

**Wellbeing micro-actions** were identified as a good way to help keep **learning front of mind** for the Maternity Department. Spending just a couple of minutes a day to reflect on different elements from the workshop would empower individuals to apply and embed the knowledge learned to their daily work, in ways that are right and individual to them.

These micro-actions consisted of **thought-inspiring questions** and **motivating activities**, focusing on key elements of relationships, wellbeing and resilience.

Example wellbeing micro-actions:

- **Positive Relationships**

*Thought-inspiring question – Who do I want to thank for helping me recently?*

*Activity – I'm going to think of a random act of kindness I can commit to doing over the next couple of days to show my appreciation...*

- **Trust**

*Thought inspiring question – How do I best demonstrate trust to my colleagues?*

*Activity – I'm going to schedule some time with colleagues outside of work, to give us an opportunity to get to know each other on a deeper, more personal level*

A great platform for communicating this was through email and '**Message of the week**' and **helped to continue to build on the positive** foundations of the Connections workshop and support learning into the future.