**Happiness and wellbeing**

**Announcer:** This is a Queensland Department of Education podcast.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Happiness can be one of those nebulous terms that has different meanings to different people. It is however something we all strive for. This year, is the 10th anniversary of the United Nations International Day of Happiness. Hi, I'm Virginia Bowdidge from the Department’s Communications team. To mark the day and honor the sentiment, Leigh Tankey from Agnes Water State School joins me to talk about her work to help students find happiness through wellbeing.

Hi, Leigh. Thanks for joining me.

**Leigh Tankey:** Hi, Virginia. Thank you for having me. I'm very excited today to be talking about happiness and wellbeing.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Happiness is a tricky thing to define, and it can be hard to find every day. Can you tell us what happiness means to you as head of the wellbeing program at your school?

**Leigh Tankey:** For me, happiness is quite a broad term. It's almost too much to try and attain. If we are on the search for happiness, we can set ourselves up for failure if we have that expectation to just be happy. So you're right, it can be hard to find every day, but what's not hard to find every day are what we call our top 10 positive emotions. This is based on the work of Dr. Barbara Fredrickson, she's a positive psychologist. She recommends that we find small daily doses of things like awe and curiosity and pride and gratitude. And if we can foster that in our day, it will put us in a much better mindset. So we can look for things to be grateful for, even on those tricky days, and help see opportunity in everything that we face.

At Agnes Water school, we've been the Wheel of Wellbeing for about five years and as a result of that the Smiling Mind curriculum for about two years, just so that we can help our parents and our staff and our students look after their wellbeing.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** What's the Wheel of Wellbeing, and how does it work?

**Leigh Tankey:** It's a program that was developed in the UK in 2008. It’s built of six components that each contribute to our overall wellbeing. The Mental Health Commission formed a partnership with the Department of Education, and it gave us a framework so that in our school we can make sure all of our people are flourishing. And through the Wheel of Wellbeing is where we did first hear about and experience the Smiling Mind program.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** What's the six components of the Wheel?

**Leigh Tankey:** The Wheel is broken off into: moving our body, being active, is one great one way of improving wellbeing: our mind, keeping on learning, being open to new things; spirit, which is giving. We know that wonderful endorphins are released when we give to others, and often the person giving gets more than the person receiving, so that's a really important part. There's also taking notice of your place, being in nature and seeing the beauty that's there, and planet, caring for our planet, so looking at ways we can reduce our environmental impact is good for our wellbeing. And finally, there's people, connect. So that's connecting with other schools, our community, and each other so that we can develop some really positive relationships that help keep us healthy as well.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** How has the school community reacted to the introduction of Smiling Mind?

**Leigh Tankey:** Our parents are so open and supportive. When we first started talking about having meditation in our classrooms and using this curriculum, there were some concerns raised around what it actually is and what the validity is of including this within a school classroom. But since implementing, and the parents have seen the results, we've had overwhelming support. Because what the program is doing is it's caring for the emotional wellbeing and developing the resilience in our students and especially now, but always, is such an important element to raising children. So our parents are very grateful and very appreciative now that they have that understanding of what it is. Our classroom impact has been really, really positive, and the teachers and parents have embraced it because they have felt the benefits.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** What benefits have you felt in your classroom?

**Leigh Tankey:** If you talk to our teachers, they'll all say the same thing, that by participating in Smiling Mind and really explicitly teaching the curriculum, our classrooms feel safe and supportive. Our students are comfortable to be themselves and comfortable to share their feelings, both positive and negative. And what happens when they share that, they might be feeling nervous about something or they feel upset about something, they see that other children feel the same and it's not just them. And then the beauty is they get to learn, they get to practice the skills so that when they're having times where they are struggling, they've practiced what to do. So when it hits them, it's not such a hard task to make them feel better. Our teachers will also tell you that by doing a Smiling Mind meditation to straight after play, for example, the children are set up for learning. Before they discuss issues that might come up in the playground, they do a Smiling Mind. And so when they speak about it, they can speak about it with a solution focus and more objectively solve their problems.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** What benefits have you felt personally from the program?

**Leigh Tankey:** I feel so passionate about this work. I'm really grateful that I've had the support to be able to implement it with this team. It does get easier each year to implement the Wheel of Wellbeing because the staff feel the rewards and they feel the benefits of being in a workplace where we care about our wellbeing. We keep learning together. Another colleague and myself completed some training for Smiling Mind. And I recently had the chance to walk this talk. So I've been learning about it. I could talk to you all day about strategies to help you feel better and to have good wellbeing, but my family had been sick, and when they all went back to school and work and everything got back to normal, I then got sick. So I was feeling a bit low, feeling a bit sorry for myself. I had a person from school, a co-worker, text me and say, ‘remember to sit in the sunshine. Remember to meditate. Remember to nourish yourself with good foods’, all things that I knew and could tell someone else to do, but when you are down and you are struggling to see the good, those reminders really do help.

I had such reassurance from that. Because I did put those strategies in place, I did a meditation, I did feel better from that. And I realised that the Wheel of Wellbeing is part of the culture of our school now, and it's not something that's going to go away.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** What are the biggest changes you've seen at the school as a whole since the program was introduced.

**Leigh Tankey:** Implementing the Wheel of Wellbeing and Smiling Mind have given us permission now to have professional conversations about wellbeing, our teacher, our staff, our students, our parents. And it also gives us permission to have this on our radar during work time. Because I remember when it was thought that wellbeing was something you might do on a Saturday morning in your own time, this is not a luxury that we have in a workplace, but that thinking has changed so much that by making sure our workplaces have wellbeing front and centre, only good things can flow from that. So when we have professional development, wellbeing's part of that day, it's not, ‘let's wait until we celebrate mental health week to give our teachers a lovely wellbeing activity that will help them feel good’. It's something that happens every week. And one of the easiest ways we've done this is to start our staff meetings with a Smiling Mind meditation just for educators. So it's tailored for us. And so we get to, every single week, stop, stop rushing around, we get to sit before we start our work and have that mindfulness meditation time. It is something that teachers ask for and has been valued by people in the leadership team as well.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** When you first started meditating in your staff meetings, how was that received in initially?

**Leigh Tankey:** Initially some people expressed reluctance, and I completely understand. Because 10, 12 years ago if this was suggested to me in another school at a staff meeting, I would've found it to be an odd or unusual thing, but people were open-minded and they gave it a go. What was lovely was that I had the knowledge and the research to back up why, and that was from the Wheel of Wellbeing training. So, we were able to say, ‘yes, it's lovely to sit and have three to five minutes of breathing and being guided in a meditation. But did you know that science also tells us by focusing on this four-second breath we're actually activating different parts of our parasympathetic nervous system’, for example? So you are able to give that science around the why, and now it is something that is not even commented on, there's not even an issue with doing it. It's just what we do.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** And when new teachers come in, are they quite accepting?

**Leigh Tankey:** I sometimes get a little bit nervous because I'm quite protective of what we are doing. So I always make sure I go in on the front foot and let them know that this is what we are doing and this is why. And I always give out. So if you are not comfortable, we do the same with the students, but if you are not comfortable doing this, take it as just a chance to sit and catch your breath. But I've yet to find a person who we've done it with that doesn't embrace it and love it.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** That's great. What advice would you give other schools or teachers thinking of adopting this program?

**Leigh Tankey:** I think that every school or cluster of schools should have people trained in the Wheel of Wellbeing because it's the research and it's resources as well, so that the work is done for you. It means you can look after your school community without having to justify why we might be introducing, say, a popup yoga class for three weeks. We can use the Wheel of Wellbeing as, ‘well, this is what we know about being active, and this is why it's important for you, and that's why we're doing this’. And so I think that has just been such a wonderful way that we can continue to do this work.

In so far as the Smiling Mind program, I do believe this should be happening in every single classroom, and I think every school should have a person trained and work in the implementation, because while it is lovely and it feels good, and it's a nice thing to have, I think it is an absolute necessity right now. I think we are giving these children the skills to understand their emotions, to be aware, to understand how to cope and be resilient. We know this research that's emerging is telling us that this is working, but we have experienced it here. So, if I wanted this to happen in every school, what I would say and what the teachers at this school would say is, ‘just have a go’. Be nice to yourself when you're trying because it won't be perfect. Someone might roll around on the floor or it might not work, the technology might not work. But keep trying because it is so worthwhile, and you will be supported by the Smiling Mind team. But most importantly, you will be rewarded, and so will your students. I think that we just can't afford not to have this.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** It sounds like something we should all be doing.

**Leigh Tankey:** Yes, I agree. This is a tool that I use personally and professionally that I wish I had as a child. I wish because it would've let me see that the way I was feeling was okay, and these are some things we can do as a teacher. I wish I had it because I know I could have helped so many more students in our school.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Yeah. It's providing a life skill really, isn't it?

**Leigh Tankey:** That's right. I know sometimes we can have this picture-perfect image of the type of people that might meditate or the beautiful Instagram photos of people meditating, and it kind of fits into a stereotype, but it is not that, it is something that every single person can do. So when we think about the International Day of Happiness, we're not on the actual search for happiness itself, but more on the journey of cultivating gratitude and being curious and looking for the hope in every single day.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Thank you so much for your time, Leigh. It's wonderful to hear how enthusiastic you are about this.

**Leigh Tankey:** Thank you for this opportunity. I hope that people can hear this and get inspired to have a go, and please get in touch with the Smiling Mind people, or even myself, and I'm happy to share more.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Great. Thank you.

Speaker 1: You have been listening to a Queensland Department of Education podcast.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** The Department of Education acknowledges the traditional owners of the lands from across Queensland. We pay our respects to the elders past and present, for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture, and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.