

Boise State University

ScholarWorks

IPS/BAS 495 Undergraduate Capstone Projects

Student Research

Spring 2023

Emotional Health and Wellness of Restaurant Workers

Jessi M. Strong

Boise State University

—

Emotional Health and Wellness of Restaurant Workers

Jessi M. Strong

Boise State University

Spring Semester, 2023

Author Note

For IPS Capstone, Interdisciplinary Professional Studies, Boise State University

Mentor: Dr. Margaret Sass, J.D., Ed.D.,

jessicastrong@u.boisestate.edu

Emotional Health and Wellness Website: <https://rwew.my.canva.site/>

Abstract

How might I address the problem of high stress and its impact on restaurant workers' mental and physical health? Working in a restaurant is one of the most stressful jobs in the world, and the health and safety of our restaurant workers need to be a priority in the industry. The tools and tricks I developed on the website will positively impact restaurant workers. I have compiled information that will be beneficial and fun for people in this industry and encourage them to prioritize their health. Providing them with the knowledge to pull themselves out of negative patterns will allow for better coping skills and focus on their mental health.

Keywords: Restaurant, Workers, Stress, Health and Wellness, Service Industry, Awareness, Mindfulness, Worker Satisfaction, Happiness

As my team locked the door to our restaurant and changed the music to match their mood, I looked around and reflected on how the night had gone. It was a busy Saturday night, and I could see the stress and exhaustion on their faces. The customers seemed extra impatient and took their frustrations out on their server. They were annoyed that they had to wait for a table or that their takeout order would take almost an hour. My kitchen team had long tickets laden with modifications from demanding customers. It was like customers had horse blinders and couldn't see all the other guests we were already helping. Because of this, my team felt like they were in the weeds all night and had a short fuse while working with each other in the kitchen.

My team is like family to me, and their well-being is always at the top of my priorities. I thought, how might I address the problem of high stress and its impact on restaurant workers' mental and physical health? I knew there had to be a better way to approach these questions; however, the research for our industry is lacking. With the uncovering of the abuse heaped on restaurant workers, our society realizes that we have created a system of undervaluing that must be fixed. These realizations inspired me to create a website that specifically addresses their health and wellness.

Working in a restaurant is one of the most stressful jobs in the world, and the health and safety of our restaurant workers need to be a priority in the industry. According to a 2015 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration study, the food service and hospitality industry has the highest rates of substance use disorders and third-highest rates of heavy-alcohol use in all employment sectors. (Bush & Lipari, 2015) The tools and tricks I developed on the website will positively impact restaurant workers by cultivating healthy

practices in dealing with stress instead of turning to unhealthy coping mechanisms such as drinking and drug use.

In addition to addressing the stress, I compiled information that will be both beneficial and fun for people in this industry and will encourage them to prioritize their health. Providing them with the knowledge to pull themselves out of negative patterns will allow for better coping skills and focus on their mental health. I approached this project by researching stress management, burnout in restaurant workers, mindfulness, and calming techniques. I also constantly communicated with my team, contacted other restaurant owners, and discussed how to approach the project with a certified therapist best.

Next, we will look at how I united my team to work together on my Emotional Health Website. Often, the servers' perspective versus the kitchen's perspective is very different when stressful situations happen. Combine that with how the owners view it, and the issue can be all over the place. Working together to ensure we all empathize and support each other was key. I also looked at how other high-stress industries, such as the medical field, approach helping alleviate their stressors by applying those tips in a way that made the most sense for the restaurant industry. This insight gave me access to many more solutions, allowing me to go beyond the either/or perspective, as those industries have more attention paid to the stress they are under.

Moving on to how Emotional Intelligence (EQ) helped shape my creation of the Emotional Health Website, which focuses on self-awareness and awareness of others. The research and solutions I completed are about how problems and others affect us and how to deal with the stress from those issues healthily. We often don't even realize where the main bigger problem stems from, and it snowballs into smaller areas until we reach a breaking point. It takes

incredible self-awareness and awareness of others to analyze where your stress comes from and how to employ the best tools to correct that anxiety.

Sometimes we use our self-awareness to bring down stress in ways we are unaware of why we employ that practice. For example, during my research, I was surprised to discover why we have what we call “walk-in” moments at my restaurant. The moment involves someone standing in the walk-in cooler until they cool off physically and mentally. It muffles the noise happening at the moment and brings down anxiety by being in a cold space. I have uncovered why it helps the body in my research. Exposure to cold causes a shift in your parasympathetic nervous system. This shift is because it cools the vagus nerve, the main nerve responsible for relaxing our body after experiencing much stress. You can apply a cold compress to your neck if you don’t have access to a large walk-in cooler. This practice is common in our industry and shows how EQ skills arrive at us in various ways.

Next, I needed to consider my audience and their EQ skills in examining how best to proceed with this project. Emotional Intelligence 2.0 writes, “Your hard-wired emotional reactions to anything come before you even have a chance to respond. Since it isn’t possible to leave your emotions out of the equation, managing yourself and your relationships means you first need to be aware of the full range of your feelings, both positive and negative.” (Bradberry et al., 2009) In a fast-paced restaurant environment, it is easy to let immediate reactions take over, so utilizing the skills in my website will allow employees to handle them effectively.

In examining how my project is valuable to others, we see its importance because it focuses on restaurant workers. This community is likelier to work in high-stress environments and deal with that stress harmfully. Chronic stress can lead to burnout, decreased immunity, depression, anxiety, high blood pressure, and more. It is labeled a “silent killer” as it amplifies

the symptoms associated with our society's top causes of death. Providing my team with EQ skills to recognize when their minds and bodies are experiencing high-stress levels and giving them steps to bring that stress down immediately is critical in taking care of their health.

Moreover, my website is also valuable to the owners and managers of restaurants because it can create happier, healthier, and more loyal employees. It can decrease high rates of employee turnover and burnout. Showing my team and the restaurant industry that people care about them can raise their job satisfaction levels. I have also witnessed that a happier team leads to more satisfied customers, thanks to mirror neurons which create mood contagion.

While mood contagion can come from anyone in your team, it spreads fastest when it comes from leaders. "Moods that start at the top tend to move the fastest because everyone watches the boss." (Goleman et al., *Primal leadership: The hidden driver of great performance*, pg. 36) Employing the EQ skill of self-management as a leader can help make your team calmer and experience more joy during their shifts. A great example of this is highlighted in one food industry magazine, "A dose of encouragement can help offset the stress of long hours. "I was working on the line at a bistro as a young gun with a chef who spoke positively to everyone," Deitz says. "We would get heavy in the weeds, and you thought that printer would never stop, but chef always spoke with positivity, and it gave the team the encouragement to get through." (Dawson, FFM)

Another key point in my project is using the creative skills I have learned in the IPS program, which allowed me to generate ideas that would not have come to me in the past. I gathered many different areas to research the best way to assemble my Emotional Wellness Website. I looked at books, academic journals, and the internet and talked to therapists with expertise in helping their clients deal with stress. I also started thinking of imaginative ways to

provide healthy habits for our team to release the pressure that is also fun. We installed a basketball hoop behind our restaurant, brought in a jump rope, and created a whiteboard area that asks them a different weekly question. Questions include their favorite band, favorite food, and where their dream vacation is. Everyone has enjoyed each other's answers, and there has been much discussion about the questions, creating an environment of open dialog about their lives.

It is so easy for everyone to get stuck in a "loop" of the day-to-day, especially in times of stress. While I have worked a lot with my team on workplace happiness, I never thought to incorporate "play" specifically into the shifts. We have always had a culture of art and drawing throughout the history of my restaurant, which our team loves, but looking at activities past that was never at the top of my mind. In seeing how much joy my team has had with the new "play breaks" and the decrease in the stress they feel after, I will continue encouraging them to find fun during their shifts.

In analyzing what my Capstone project accomplishes by dealing with the emotional and physical health of restaurant workers, we see that it is an area that needs much more attention. It is an important topic to focus on because it is a prevalent problem in the restaurant industry. Historically, it has not been acknowledged or approached with the best intentions or solutions. The industry has a track record of working their employees as hard as possible with little regard for the staff's feelings. We have even seen this "celebrated" in TV shows, where the chef in charge is screaming and berating staff non-stop. The emotional labor required of restaurant workers takes its toll if not addressed. An article in Forbes writes, "Emotional labor is the effort required to manage your emotions when interacting with other people as a requirement of doing your job. Emotional labor is a common aspect of restaurant work, especially in the front of house (FOH). During a busy shift, a rude, demanding guest can easily send a server over the edge. The

long-standing issue of customer mistreatment of servers and the rising expectation that FOH staff enforce COVID-19 safety procedures make burnout all but inevitable.” (King & Bottorff, 2022)

The potential accomplishment of this project is to humanize our industry and give our teams the appreciation they deserve. To give our restaurant workers the tools they need to deal with their stress and anxiety. Therefore, changing habits from unhealthy coping mechanisms like smoking, after-shift drinks, and drug use to creating areas to meditate, get a little physical activity, bring laughter to the environment, and support each other. To further spread the information and tools I have put together to help restaurant workers, I built a website that will be free and easily accessible to our industry worldwide.

Furthermore, my project is innovative in its approach, as traditional “solutions” in the restaurant industry have revolved around dulling the stress with drugs and alcohol. Not much attention was paid to the service industry people as a whole. This attention has changed some, as COVID brought to light many of the stressful and negative actions we must deal with in this line of work. The society mantra of “the customer is always right” has proven to be not accurate or acceptable. When it comes to abuse of service industry workers, we are thankfully starting to move past that and embrace the respect of those who take care of us. We still have a long way to go, but at least there is now attention to the issue brought to the arena.

Most of the approaches I saw in my research don’t dive deep enough into solutions to help our industry. There are some ideas, given chiefly about dealing with the mental aspect of job stress, but not many of them. They are mostly geared at why there is an issue, with little to create sound policies to deal with these problems. I went beyond that and looked at ways to approach dealing with stressors in a physical way. This activity helps release cortisol, bringing

healthy endorphins into play. In creating my Capstone, I discovered that the best approach to dealing with stress is a combination of mental and physical tools to bring cortisol down.

Measuring the impact of my Capstone project happened in multiple ways. One is the overall attitude of my team, being more supportive, excited, and happy. I also gave them all surveys to collect data on my project's impact on them. The majority rated a decrease in the stress they felt during and after a shift. They had an increase in their happiness and satisfaction at work since the start of the project. They gave a rating increase in communication with fellow team members and noted that this led to a strengthened feeling of being heard and valued. The new "play" activities I implemented to help reduce stress received the highest ratings from the entire team.

Ultimately the benefits I have seen from my capstone project is my team being more open about where their feelings of stress are coming from and how to deal with them constructively. It is so easy to get trapped in a loop of complaining about things that cause us to stress and anxiety but never cultivate tools to bring those reactions down. The other benefit is that it has brought them even closer together as a team. We have always been a tight-knit group, but feeling safe enough to be vulnerable in our feelings is a skill you have to work on together. The benefit has also extended to me as the owner and leader of my business. Creating this project and working with my team to build the website has reinforced that I put my team first, not to mention that my stress is something that I am also constantly working on. Reminding myself how to prioritize my emotional and physical health has been valuable.

The impact on my stakeholders from the work I put into this project has been inspiring. Both front and back of house members have been invested in my project as they know it is to make their time at work happier and healthier. This project has positively impacted my and the other co-owner's leadership work.

As this project ended, I reflected on how I felt when I cultivated the idea for this project and anticipated certain results. They included using the skills of leadership, critical thinking, analytical thinking, emotional intelligence, problem-solving, time management, and communication. As we can see from the information provided in this paper, they were all applied.

Along with the results noted above, my research on how to handle stress at work was enlightening but also what I expected. That expectation is due to everything I have learned in the IPS program, which allowed me to understand how this project would take shape. In what can be a sensitive area, my conversations with my team opened up even more areas for us to connect. It built a safe place to be vulnerable in how they felt, which is crucial to all great teams. Our customers benefit from our work, and soon the restaurant industry and its workers will benefit from our shared website.

This Emotional Wellness Website will be an ever-evolving project for me and my team. There are a couple of areas that I will approach differently as I move forward with this website. First, I will incorporate feedback outside of my restaurant. Including employees for restaurants that are smaller, larger, that have a focus on fine dining, or strictly takeout, for example, will be essential to take this to the next level. Second, I will build in more flexibility to the time management portions to accommodate emergencies, illnesses, or other events that might pop up. Therefore, constructing buffers that reduces what this project is about...stress!

In conclusion, society will constantly change, and we must continue analyzing and using our problem-solving skills to flow with those changes to protect our team's well-being. Make sure you provide ways for them to access ways to increase their mindfulness and take care of

their mental and physical health. Create those moments of play that every team needs. In short, and most importantly, don't forget to encourage their growth, health, and happiness!

References

- Bradberry, T., & Greaves, J. (2009). Chapter 5. In *Emotional intelligence 2.0* (pp. 61–62). essay, TalentSmart.
- Bush, D. M., & Lipari, R. N. (2015, April 16). *SUBSTANCE USE AND SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER BY INDUSTRY*. Substance use and substance use disorder by industry. Retrieved April 12, 2023, from https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/report_1959/ShortReport-1959.html
- Dawson, M. (n.d.). *How to cope with stressful restaurant work life*. Food Supplier & Distributor | Restaurant Supply. Retrieved March 26, 2023, from <https://www.usfoods.com/great-food/food-trends/how-to-cope-with-stressful-restaurant-work-life.html>
- Goleman, D., McKee, A., & Boyatzis, R. (2020, November 9). *Primal leadership: The hidden driver of great performance*. Harvard Business Review. Retrieved February 28, 2022, from <https://hbr.org/2001/12/primal-leadership-the-hidden-driver-of-great-performance>
- King, M., & Botorff, C. (2022, August 7). *Restaurant employee burnout: What it is and how to manage it*. Forbes. Retrieved April 3, 2023, from <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/business/restaurant-employee-burnout/>