New research from the University of East Anglia (UEA) suggests that the process of dealing with emotional exhaustion can sometimes increase happiness.

The study examined when and how dealing with emotional exhaustion can enhance happiness in a work environment. The research was focused on the role of perceived supervisor support (PSS) - the workers' view of their manager's level of supportiveness, caring and appreciation for their efforts – in stimulating ways to cope with exhaustion.

The research was conducted by Carlos Ferreira Peralta of UEA 's Norwich Business School and Maria Francisca Saldanha of Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario, Canada. They found that perceiving low supervisor support stimulates the employee's engagement in developing an action plan which, when paired with what the researchers call instrumental social support - the activity of searching for advice, support or information from others - boosts happiness.

Low PSS enhanced the relationship between emotional exhaustion and planning activities; whereas searching for instrumental social support enhanced the relationship between planning and happiness.

This new study is thought to be one of the first to investigate how the negative relationship between emotional exhaustion and happiness can be reversed. Previous studies have highlighted the harmful consequences of emotional exhaustion, such as poorer performance and depression, and that PSS can prevent the emergence of emotional exhaustion.

However, little was known about how people could overcome emotional exhaustion and experience positive outcomes in its aftermath, and about the role of PSS once employees experience emotional exhaustion. The findings are published in the journal *Work & Stress* .

Dr Peralta, a lecturer in organisational behaviour, said: "Perceived supervisor support appears to be a double-edge sword, on the one hand preventing the emergence of emotional exhaustion but on the other hand diminishing the likelihood that employees will engage in planning to deal

with the emotional exhaustion they are experiencing.

"It is important to note that it is not emotional exhaustion per se, but rather how people cope with it, that is beneficial for individuals. Our findings suggest that the activities people engage in have a key role in building happiness from an internally stressful experience and that emotional exhaustion can have a silver lining."

Dr Peralta added: "This research contributes to a greater understanding of whether benefits can be gained by individuals as they cope with emotional exhaustion. The findings help clarify the role of social support in dealing with and becoming happy after emotional exhaustion."

The researchers suggest that managers would probably help their employees by being attentive to their experiences and could benefit from training that differentiates between the actions that can prevent employees' emotional exhaustion and those that can support employees' efforts to cope with emotional exhaustion.

"Providing support may prevent the emergence of emotional exhaustion in employees," said Dr Peralta. "However, when an employee is experiencing emotional exhaustion it might be useful to just provide support when and if requested. Otherwise, the employee may not engage or delay the engagement in coping activities that can enhance their happiness. This is particularly relevant as caring supervisors might be tempted to increase the support they provide when an employee is showing signals of emotional exhaustion."

The findings suggest that emotionally exhausted employees may benefit from an individually developed action plan enriched with instrumental social support, such as a focused and directed search for potentially useful information, in order to increase happiness after emotional exhaustion.

The researchers conducted three complementary studies involving a total of 500 employees in Portugal and the United States. They worked in multiple occupations including management, architecture and engineering, computer and mathematical, business and financial operations, as well as office and administration support, sales, education and healthcare. The studies used different measures of emotional exhaustion, happiness and PSS and the participants were asked to complete questionnaires.

'Can dealing with emotional exhaustion lead to enhanced happiness? The roles of planning and social support', Carlos Ferreira Peralta and Maria Francisca Saldanha, is published in the journal *Work & Stress* , Volume 32 part 2, 2017.