

Creating a Mentally Healthy Small Business

Starting, growing and sustaining a small business can be a rewarding experience. However, it's not always an easy journey. Running a business is a bit like riding a rollercoaster; it's full of highs and lows. It's important to know how to cope when inevitable challenges arise.

At first it may not be obvious how the pressure of running a business will affect a person's mental health. Understanding this can help a business owner identify early on when additional assistance is needed to keep functioning at an optimum level.

What do we mean by mental health?

The term 'mental health' is frequently misunderstood. It is often used as a substitute for mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety conditions, schizophrenia and others. But according to the World Health Organisation, mental health is **"a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community"**.

What is mental health in the workplace?

When we talk about mental health in the workplace, we are looking at how the business environment affects us – either positively or negatively – as well as the effect our mental health has on our ability to do our jobs.

Thinking about creating a mentally healthy workplace is just as important as thinking about your approach to marketing or finance. What will you do to ensure you and your team develop a level of resilience that you can draw upon when needed? Taking a proactive approach to mental health in your workplace is a great investment for everyone who is involved in the business and everyone has a role to play, both in looking after their own mental health and creating a mentally health workplace.

There are two key areas you can address to ensure you have a mentally healthy workplace. They are:

- As the **business owner** - identifying your own mental health priorities; and
- If you **employ people** – creating a mentally healthy workspace for them.

The business owner – your mental health:

Many small businesses in Victoria are owned by sole-operators who work alone in the business. Alternatively, micro businesses have small, almost family-like teams. In both cases, it's important that the business owner is aware of their own mental health needs – the business needs them at the helm!

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Be proactive about your mental health

There are a number of things you can do to care for your mental health. This may include:

- **Make time to exercise each day:** For example, a simple daily lunch time walk can help maintain a positive outlook.
- **Practice mindfulness:** Mindfulness means being aware of your reactions/feelings/thoughts as you have them. This helps you choose how to manage matters as they arise. Mindfulness is a great tool to help lower stress and anxiety levels.
- **Adopt work/life boundaries:** Don't let work overtake your life. Set some boundaries to ensure you have time for both work and a social life. You might decide not to discuss work from 5pm Friday night to 8am Monday morning because weekends are for family time only.
- **Connect with others:** Find someone worthy of your stories – a confidant or mentor you can talk to about your business experiences. Make sure this person is supportive, a good listener and someone whose opinion you value.

Mental health red flags:

It's important to know the mental health indicators that may require attention. These include:

- **Physical signs:** For example, a constant knot in your stomach, tense neck and shoulders, feeling nauseous, heart palpitations or chest pains.
- **Changes in behaviour:** For example, being unable to sleep, crying regularly, feeling moody or often irritable, increase or loss of appetite.
- **Unclear thinking:** For example, not being able to make decisions, not understanding directions, not being able to focus, being inattentive.
- **Feeling sad or anxious regularly:** We all have bad days – they're a normal part of life. This flag needs attention if you begin to notice feeling like this regularly.
- **Disconnecting from others:** This may include not joining in social activities, choosing to spend time away from family and friends or stopping hobbies/sporting activities.
- **Feeling overwhelmed:** It is difficult to find solutions to problems, and in some instances it feels like they are insurmountable. Problem solving becomes difficult.

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Steps you can take:

Mental health challenges in business are quite common, and help is available. With good support it's possible to overcome them and continue to operate your small business. Here are some steps you can take:

- **Talk to someone.** Your doctor, a counsellor or even a trusted friend is a great first step in seeking out support. If this isn't available, the support services listed at the end of this information sheet have people who will be able to support you.
- Check out **online resources** available. Heads Up, for example, offers a range of material to help you manage your mental health at work.
- **Stay connected.** Participate in your local business network group, join online small business forums and maintain your social activities. You'll find you're not alone in your experience and can draw on the support of others.
- **Get physical.** This may be going for a walk every day, learning to meditate, changing your diet or drinking habits or finding time to separate yourself from the business.

Creating a mentally health workspace for others:

Normalising mental health in the workplace helps to reduce stigma and creates a space where it's safe to talk about, and address mental health challenges. People often work closely together in small business so it's important to create a workplace that respects individual experiences. Ways to do that include:

- **Talking about mental health at work:** Check out the Heads Up resources to see how you can develop a plan to address this topic in a safe and interesting way in the workplace. Lead by example. Your approach to your own mental health will help create a team approach to the topic.
- **Encourage staff to take their breaks.** A quick walk in the sunshine or a casual chat in the lunch room may be of benefit.
- **Provide access to mental health resources:** Share information and tips about managing mental health, and make sure local support service details are readily available. If needed, get advice on how to refer someone to professional help.
- **Embrace workplace campaigns:** Sign up and support campaigns like 'R U OK? Day' to get your team talking about workplace mental health.
- **Know your legal obligations:** Work Safe Victoria has online information about work related stress and it's well worth the read.

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How the Victorian Small Business Commission (VSBC) can help you:

Commercial and business disputes can be mentally, emotionally and financially draining to both you and your business.

If your business is in a dispute or if you feel that you may be heading towards one, contact the VSBC and talk to one of our staff (**13 VSBC / 13 8722**).

We can help you by advising you on your dispute, offering preliminary assistance and providing mediation, saving both parties the time, emotion and distraction of Tribunal and Court proceedings.

The process is simple: we invite both parties to discuss the issues they have and engage them in trying to resolve the dispute. If a confidential mediation is required, the VSBC will arrange a date and venue and will provide an experienced, independent mediator to facilitate an open discussion with the aim of achieving a resolution satisfactory to both parties.

Help is available:

Listed below are a few of the services available to help both you and your team:

Heads Up: This site has lots of resources and information about mental health in Australian workplaces. In particular, look for the section for small business owners.

Business In Mind: Located as part of the Heads Up website, Business In Mind is an online resource specifically designed to support business owners who may be experiencing mental health challenges. It provides a range of case study video vignettes using real small business owners and demonstrating that mental health challenges are common throughout the small business community.

Beyond Blue: Beyond Blue provides information and support to help everyone in Australia achieve their best possible mental health, whatever their age and wherever they live. **(Ph: 1300 22 4636)**

Mates in Construction: An industry specific mental health service provider that supports businesses in the construction sector. **(Ph: 1300 642 111)**

National Centre for Farmer Health: This site provides a wide variety of health, wellbeing and safety information, including a 'support page' for farmers experiencing tough times. **(Ph: 03 5551 8533)**



**Victorian
Small Business
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Help is available (con't):

The Ripple Effect: A resource for rural communities that addresses suicide in rural areas.
(Ph: 03 5551 8587)

Sane provides online information, support and connection for every Australian affected by complex mental illness through its website, peer-to-peer forums and helpline. SANE also has a range of factsheets on managing mental health in the workplace. (Ph: 1800 18 7263)

Australian Tax Office: The ATO recognises that owning and growing a small business can be difficult at times, and they have developed a web page with information to help support small business owners. The ATO also recognises that some people may feel nervous about making contact; however, they are able to assist you in a variety of ways. The website is well worth a visit.

Worksafe Victoria: WorkSafe Victoria provides information to Victorian businesses about their legal obligations for providing a safe workplace. You can access a range of information about workplace mental health and safety, including work-related stress and workplace bullying. (Ph: 1800 136 089)

Victorian workplace mental wellbeing collaboration: Tools and resources, including case studies to support workplaces in promoting positive mental wellbeing in the workplace.