

Mental health crisis as challenging as economic crisis

Australia's SMEs have borne the brunt of the COVID-19 economic downturn and the resulting effect on the mental health of business owners, directors and staff – not to mention their families – has been enormous. Lifeline recently announced a record number of calls to its 24-hour crisis support and suicide prevention hotline and its chairman John Brogden says the fallout from a global recession “could cause a mental health pandemic that will last longer than the physical health pandemic”.

Governments and mental health bodies have bolstered and developed new resources for SMEs to help them navigate the challenges of mental health. Margo Lydon, CEO of workplace mental health organisation SuperFriend, told a virtual roundtable that now is “the most exciting time” she has seen in her 20 years of mental health advocacy.

“We have governments listening, we have business listening, we have every Australian listening,” she says. “Everyone’s mental health has been challenged at some point ... People who didn’t think they had a mental health challenge and had never experienced anything, have had time [because of the significant change] to question their own wellbeing including mental health.”

As reported in [Investment magazine](#), Lydon says Australia is one of the few countries taking genuine leadership to include mental health in its discussion about the pandemic while most countries refer to it as a health and economic crisis.



Bradd Morelli, National Managing Partner, Jirsch Sutherland

“However, it’s important we don’t lose momentum,” adds Bradd Morelli, Jirsch Sutherland’s National Managing Partner. “COVID-19 continues to impact our lives and our livelihoods and it’s vital we keep making mental health a priority – for ourselves, our colleagues and our loved ones. With stimulus measures from governments and banks being wound down, it’s likely to exacerbate mental health struggles.”

Recent data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics found that feelings of anxiety and depression because of COVID-19 were consistent nationwide, not just in Victoria. The survey

was conducted in mid-August, a time when daily new cases of the coronavirus in Victoria led to strong restrictions in the state and heightened caution across Australia.

However, SuperFriend research found many small businesses aren't taking any tangible action, despite a stronger national focus and additional funding. It revealed that more than half (55.1 per cent) aren't taking action and that the biggest hurdle to workplace mental health initiatives is "businesses facing more important issues / struggling to survive".

"Lost productivity due to mental ill-health is estimated to cost the Australian economy between \$10 billion and \$182 billion every year, but on the flip side, every dollar invested into workplace mental health is estimated to deliver a return on investment of 5:1," says Lydon.

Vital resource for SMEs

The Federal Government has launched [Ahead for Business](#), a digital hub developed for, and with, small business to help keep them mentally and physically healthy in these challenging times.

"With COVID-19's ongoing impact, especially the second wave shutdowns in Victoria and border closures around Australia, Ahead for Business is a much-needed mental health support for both small business owners and their families and friends concerned about their wellbeing," says Morelli.

Michaelia Cash, Minister for Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business, says it's crucial to provide access to trusted information during this difficult time: "We are seeing the enormous impact the COVID-19 pandemic is having, with many small businesses forced to close their doors and facing uncertainty about their future. Now more than ever, we are reminded how vital it is that we help small businesses manage their mental health."

Hosted by mental health organisation [Everymind](#), [Ahead for Business](#) offers advice on how to recognise the signs of mental ill health, how to manage stress and where to get support. The site is easy to navigate, offers tailored resources and has a strong focus on building strong and supportive social connections.

"The hub's 'first-hand' tips and strategies from small-business owners and experts such as advisers and coaches, workplace psychologists, mental health professionals and leadership experts via blogs and podcasts are highly relatable and appealing," says Morelli.

Ahead for Business also offers personalised mental health check-ups and wellbeing action plans, as well as access to peer support and case studies. As Everymind acting director Carmel Loughland says, "a healthy mind supports a healthy business".

That's a key reason why Jirsch Sutherland developed its [mental health and wellbeing program in 2019](#), with the firm recently receiving Gold recognition as a Mental Health First Aid Skilled Workplace from Mental Health First Aid Australia. "With many of our senior team members having undertaken the Mental Health First Aid Certificate, we have the tools to help people

experiencing mental health problems,” says Morelli.

“During these incredibly challenging times, we’re constantly looking out for signs of distress and mental ill health and continue to learn how to offer support to each other, our clients and referral network. This includes asking someone in distress ‘R U OK’, which can lead to a conversation that prompts them to seek mental health support and help.”