

## 'Are you okay?' How a little question can make a big difference



Andrew Spring, Jirsch Sutherland Partner

### ***By Andrew Spring***

There is little doubt that life is busier than ever: even for kids; I mean when was the last time you heard them say, "I'm bored"? But this busyness can have negative consequences, not just for the individual, but also for family, friends and colleagues. And this is why it's important to not only start conversations about mental health, but to keep the conversation going.

A key issue of our lives is the constant juggling of work and family commitments that can cause stress but without us realising the extent. Jirsch Sutherland has been aware of the impact stress can have on its employees for a long time but last year decided to take an even closer look, particularly because we often deal with people in stressful situations.

While we have a mental health program in place, we decided to assess in more detail how our individual work/life balances were going. The signs of mental health can manifest in many ways and this often makes it difficult to identify if support is needed, either for ourselves or for others around us.

When Jirsch Sutherland took this closer look at staff stress levels, we realised something interesting: stress – both the positive and negative type – is often the result of our individual choices and decisions. And this also means that the stress we subject ourselves to is something we can control. We can decide whether we really need to add another activity to the weekend when we could be relaxing. Or it's in our hands whether we stay at work late into the night when finishing a project the next day is equally fine.

Taking a step to eliminate or slow the pace of the many activities we juggle can pay huge dividends for your mental health.

### **Starting the conversation**

Mental health is a topic that is getting a lot more traction in workplaces these days, and it's not before time. If I think of people in my family, such as my father and grandfather, I think of people who would never admit to feeling any type of stress or emotion. This is what defined those generations as being strong men. Talking about emotions is still considered "weak" by some who are used to hiding them behind a mask but it's important these conversations are not only started, but they continue.

Hiding our true emotions does not only affect ourselves, but also the people around us. Beyond Blue found one in six Australians experiences depression or anxiety or both, so it is quite possible that we are, or someone we know is, currently suffering from this condition.

The insolvency industry is one where we come into contact with many people experiencing high levels of stress. One situation I was involved with last year still resonates with me. I was asked to sort the affairs of a business where the sole director had taken his life. While dealing with this tragedy, I saw how his death had affected many people: his family, friends, colleagues, and employees. It was difficult to understand how this man hadn't drawn on the support from this clearly strong network. However, through my conversations with Beyond Blue, I learned that depression – the "black dog" – can cause people to have very irrational thoughts and behaviours.

I also learned that depression, like many mental illnesses, is a fluid state of mind and can be treated.

At Jirsch Sutherland, our purpose is to *preserve value in business and life*, recognising that at the heart of every business are people, not numbers. Last year, Jirsch Sutherland [turned to Beyond Blue](#) and accepted the challenge to do more to help clients suffering mental ill-health and to offer more support to those of our employees who are exposed to "second-hand" stress. With Beyond Blue's guidance we created a mental health program that includes a number of initiatives to help us better manage our stress levels and to better notice behaviours of those around us to see if they are showing signs of stress. These initiatives include walk-and-talk events, awareness seminars and in-house mental health training.

While having a public conversation about mental ill-health is great for awareness, it's important to recognise the symptoms of those you deal with on a daily basis and to know how you can act to make a difference. The signs of someone suffering from mental ill-health don't manifest like physical injuries do: they are not as obvious and as a result, neither are the remedies. But because of this, you also don't need to be a medical practitioner to make a difference. Just asking: "Are you OK?" can have a huge impact.

## On the front line

Recognising the signs of stress can be difficult. Therefore Mental Health First Aid Australia has initiated an action plan known as "AL-GEE" that comprises the following steps:

**A** – Approach the person, assess and assist with any crisis

**L** – Listen and communicate non-judgementally

**G** – Give support and information

**E** – Encourage the person to get the appropriate professional help

**E** – Encourage other supports

Our industry is on the front line of distressed businesses and while this is stressful for insolvency professionals, it also gives us a unique opportunity to offer support. Thanks to initiatives we've implemented with the help of Beyond Blue, I have learnt that the first person to notice behavioural changes in someone is not always a family member: it can be someone like an accountant or business adviser.

I would highly recommend all organisations implement mental health programs to support their staff and to help their staff support clients. If this happens, then tragedies, such as the one I mentioned earlier, have a greater chance of being avoided.

**For information on looking after your mental health during the coronavirus outbreak, [click here](#).**