

Mental Health Support for Small Business Owners and Team Leaders

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OVERVIEW

COVID-19 has had a rapid and sometimes devastating effect on the lives of individuals, which can be heightened by age, gender, and ethnicity¹. Dealing with the impact of COVID-19 has added significant stress and complexity to day-to-day activities. It is not surprising that many business owners struggle in dealing with the impact on their mental wellbeing brought about by this major challenge to life and work².

Organisations have had to adapt their business to survive. In many cases this has involved significant changes to working practices for employees, line managers and business owners. For SMEs this is particularly challenging as, whilst many business support organisations have provided information, advice and guidance to organisations to help with the large quantities of mental health information, the guidance provided through the crisis has focussed on the role of managers and line managers in supporting their workers. For example, the importance of developing compassionate management styles, flexible approaches to employees, and practical COVID-19 related operational interventions and solutions.

Less focus has been placed on providing mental health support for business owners and line managers. It is possible that this oversight may be due to an assumption that business owners and managers know how, when, and where to find help and support for themselves. Given the vital role of the business manager it is important to offer some tailored guidance and support for this group.

The virus is impacting everyone; being a business owner or manager does not protect mental health and wellbeing. This group of business leaders are affected in the same way as their employees³. Those in a management role may believe it is their duty to present a calm and positive demeanor to reassure anxious or worried employees when they internally struggle with their own mental health problems. Working to support employees, whilst keeping your business afloat financially and answering an increasing set of demands can create emotional labour⁴ and burnout.

According to Bupa's Global Executive Wellbeing Index⁵, during the pandemic 78% of SME managers reported experiencing poor mental health. 32% had delayed seeking help and 31% admitted they struggle with talking about their feelings.

So why are some business owners and managers reluctant to express concerns about their mental health and engage with professional help? The problem may be due to several irrational beliefs including:

- it is your job to run the business and you cannot be weak by asking for help
- if you ask for help you will be incompetent
- you do not want to burden your team as they are already under pressure
- you should put your feelings to one side as things will get better
- there is no one you can trust.

Research on the effects of COVID-19 on business owners

Research is continuing on the mental health effects of COVID-19 on business owners, see:

<https://necounselling.org.uk/news/supporting-research-into-the-impact-covid-19-has-had-on-business-owners-mental-health/>

<https://www.santander.co.uk/about-santander/media-centre/press-releases/covid-19-has-impacted-a-third-of-sme-business-owners>

<https://www.bupa.com/newsroom/news/wellbeing-index-self-medication>

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Aa1NQjueJWvaohCW3bewXnud7EkDQHT/view>

<https://business.leeds.ac.uk/cees/dir-record/research-blog/1758/the-importance-of-emotional-support-for-entrepreneurs-in-a-crisis>

This guidance is aimed at business owners, managers, and supervisors but many of the themes and approaches could equally apply to employees. There are five sections which look at recognising the problems, reviewing what is already in place, responding to the needs and refreshing and reviewing the approach. Finally, there is a self-help section and useful links to additional information.

1. RECOGNISE

The first stage is to recognise that although we can influence events, we have little control over many of the things that happen in our lives. COVID-19 is an unpredictable event that has far-reaching impact on society, changing the ways we interact and carry out business.

In this situation SME leaders may find it difficult to find anything positive, however there may be new opportunities for your business if you are able to accept the current reality and work with those things you can control⁶.

Support for the workforce

Identify the kinds of support your workforce would like and need to help them get through this challenging time. Remember to communicate and seek their views on what would be helpful to them. It may surprise you what would make a difference. Sometimes small gestures like giving them some of your time and asking for their opinions will make a major difference. Remember it is in their interest for the business to survive and be successful in the future.

How are you feeling? Building and running a business is not easy.

Be aware of the personal, psychological, and physical cost of managing a business. Recognise the weight of the burden you are carrying and your need to remain fit and healthy. Working excessive hours to keep the business going may seem the right thing to do but it can lead to burnout and poor decision making. By looking after your own wellbeing you will be in the best position to support your business, employees, and family. Ignoring your feelings and delaying or avoiding seeking support can make the situation worse. It can be difficult to say that you are not well, especially when you do not know what the reaction will be. Listen and reflect if concerns are raised suggesting you seek help and share your burden.

2. REVIEW

Reviewing your business allows you to identify opportunities and areas for improvement. Engaging employees at all levels in parts of this process can help communicate what the organisation is trying to achieve, be an effective way to generate business insights, and create a sense of ownership and buy-in to any changes.

What is going well?

Look at your people, systems and processes and identify which are working and delivering. Examine why some areas are performing despite the difficulties. Is there something you can learn from the areas of your business which are showing resilience? What are the features and mechanisms of success? Perhaps a sense of purpose or goal or maybe a capacity to work with uncertainty? Is this something that can be transferred?

What can be changed?

Not everything will survive; some highly valued beliefs, values or products may have reached the end of their usefulness. Can you look at everything you do and decide which things could be changed or even abandoned? Are you able to be honest with yourself when considering something you had developed, but is now underperforming?

Who or what could help?

You may find undertaking a root and branch review is difficult and perhaps would like some support. Who do you know that would be able to help you talk through your options? As the situation changes with COVID-19 so does the type and level of support to business. The following sites provide information on support available:

<https://www.fsb.org.uk/campaign/covid19.html>

<https://www.simplybusiness.co.uk/knowledge/articles/2021/01/coronavirus-support-for-small-business/>

<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/coronavirus-information-councils/covid-19-service-information/covid-19-business-support>

<https://www.acas.org.uk/coronavirus-mental-health/supporting-staff-mental-health>

<https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/well-being/supporting-mental-health-workplace-return>

<https://www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/toolkit/coronavirus-and-isolation-supporting-yourself-and-your-colleagues/>

3. RESPOND

There is an uncomfortable truth which is the future is unknowable. The prospect of responding to the unknowable makes most managers and business owners uncomfortable and anxious. However, engaging with the unknowable is possible providing there is an understanding of what is required.

The following seven principles are based on the work of Anthony Holmes⁷.

1. Seek multiple opinions before coming to a decision
2. Avoid simple answers and groundless optimism
3. Reduce time pressures: focus on the things that bring most benefit
4. Limit objectives
5. Maintain flexible options
6. Do not underestimate the nature and power of COVID-19
7. Maintain communication

As the situation changes the risk is to overreact. Pause, get the full facts, and continue to gather information as circumstances unfold, but avoid using your intuition alone before responding.

Below are some ideas for managing through the pandemic:

<https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/18-tips-managers-can-use-to-navigate-covid-s-rising-waters>

<https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/economy/covid-19/heart-of-resilient-leadership-responding-to-covid-19.html>

<https://www.apa.org/topics/covid-19/stress-management>

4. REVISE

Nothing stays stable for long, so it is important to be agile⁸ and to continually review and reassess ideas and decisions to ensure that things stay on track.

Meeting changing demands

Due to the uncontrollable nature of the pandemic, organisations need to deal with constant changes in what is expected of them. Sometimes the change can be overnight with businesses being closed or the introduction of new regulations or requirements. Each change may have a knock-on impact which takes energy and time to consider. Job roles, processes and policies may need to change, and be communicated effectively to employees. Explaining the need for the changes and involving employees in designing that change can help in this transition. Provide employees with essential training, and monitor the impact of any change on employees, the business, and your customers. Be prepared for further change but do not be afraid to change your mind.

Dealing with the unexpected

Even with the best planning and preparation unexpected events may occur which provide an opportunity or threat to your organisation. You may react automatically, feeling angry, flustered or helpless with the situation, therefore try to create space between what happens and how you react to it. Just because something was unexpected does not mean that the impact is necessarily bad or negative. Spend time considering unexpected events to see what silver linings the event may be hiding. You do not need to cope with events on your own; use the skills and knowledge of other employees or other businesses to help you generate alternative options and to develop a plan.

5. SELF-CARE

Practicing self-care will help reduce stress, avoid burning out and allow you to be able to give more to your business. Self-care is about what you do in work and outside work, and can include the following aspects of wellbeing.

- **Workplace or professional** - working at a consistent performance level
- **Physical** - keeping fit, healthy and energised
- **Psychological** - clearing your mind and engaging in a range of intellectual activities
- **Emotional** - exploring the full range of your emotions safely
- **Spiritual** - reflecting on a perspective beyond the day to day
- **Relationships** - developing a diverse range of healthy, supportive relationships

In the present situation business leaders and managers will employ different styles of coping to deal with situations, events and individuals. When faced with a difficult situation it is natural to feel anxious and stressed and be tempted to avoid tackling the problems. The use of passive coping strategies⁹ such as alcohol, avoiding making decisions or tackling problems will only temporarily relieve your feelings and can lead to increased distress. Active coping involves making plans, asking for support, engaging in problem solving and interrupting negative thinking. Active coping means that when difficulties arise you immerse yourself in the challenge, recognise that you have been successful in solving similar situations in the past and adopt similar strategies or skills. Be self-compassionate knowing you are giving your best.

If the pandemic is undermining the health and wellbeing of you or your employees, you may find undertaking a wellbeing assessment (using the HSE Management Standards or Public Health¹⁰ England's Workplace Health Needs Assessment Tool¹¹) could give you the insight you need and provide some of the tools that are available to address the issues. After the assessment you could consider adopting one of the many free workplace wellbeing frameworks and/or tools that can be accessed online. There are lots of different materials available so select those that reflect the current position of your workplace wellbeing strategy and that you can confidently implement as you can always continue to build on your success. To ensure ownership and adoption engage both the board and your employees in the process.

- HSE Management Standards:
<https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/>
- Public Health England Workplace Health Needs Assessment:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/workplace-health-needs-assessment>

The following websites talk about different techniques that you could consider using to support your mental wellbeing:

- <https://positivepsychology.com/category/positive-cbt/>
- https://www.psychologytools.com/assets/covid-19/guide_to_living_with_worry_and_anxiety_amidst_global_uncertainty_en-gb.pdf
- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/self-help-therapies/>
- <https://www.pfcounselling.org.uk/resource/self-help/>
- <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/online-mental-health/online-mental-health-tools/>

6. OTHER TECHNIQUES AND APPROACHES

There are many techniques and approaches based on cognitive behavioural therapy that may help support your mental wellbeing during this period.

Work life balance

The following approach provides you with visibility of your own work life balance, allows you to ensure that you timetable in things you enjoy and identifies what is getting in the way of your activities. Keep a detailed record of what you do, hour by hour, not just work related but also out of work, in a notebook or diary. Record and rate how important and enjoyable the activities are to you, this will provide you with a factual record of how you spend your time, your levels of satisfaction, and achievements.

Staying energised

If you want to get tasks completed quickly and effectively it is important to stay energised. Even starting a job can be challenging when we are lacking energy. There are lots of ways to boost your energy such as exercise, nutrition, singing out loud. Try doing something new or different each day or week that makes you feel happy.

Positive thinking

In the current situation it can be easy to get into the habit of automatically jumping to the worst possible conclusions. This unconscious thinking can influence how we feel, direct our behaviour without us realising, and impact our mental wellbeing. Being aware of these thoughts and replacing them with more positive, rational thinking can support your mental wellbeing. Try creating a list of your common triggers, your negative thoughts, and think of more optimistic substitutes.

Talking to your GP

For some business owners the advice and support within this guidance will not be enough to deal with their feelings. At this point it is worth considering if medication would be helpful to you to allow other therapies to be more effective. It is not always an easy decision to start taking medication; it is not a cure however it can be helpful in allowing other therapies to be effective.

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