

# Mentally Healthy Workplaces and COVID-19: Emerging Issues



## Strategies to support wellbeing of decision makers through periods of sustained pressure

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National Mental Health Commission

**THE MENTALLY  
HEALTHY  
WORK  
PLACE ALLIANCE**

## Overview: supporting decision makers



Decision makers within organisations of all sizes have had to respond to rapidly changing circumstances during COVID-19, all while striving to ensure stability and continuity for those who rely on them.



Decision makers are not immune from the pressures created by COVID-19, and they may find looking after their own health and wellbeing a challenge.



Decision makers can be supported through periods of high stress by opportunities to connect with peers and access to guidance and professional development opportunities.

## Introduction

From implementing new ways of working through to managing anxiety and distress within teams, COVID-19 has profoundly challenged decision makers – the owners, executives and people managers – in organisations large and small. Throughout the pandemic, decision makers have had to make critical decisions quickly and under uncertain conditions. They have had to help organisations and businesses navigate a range of issues from implementing and adapting restrictions, responding to supply chain issues, worker shortages, peaks in demand and making difficult decisions that impact the livelihoods of others.

Their decisions have influences beyond the workplace, impacting shareholders, customers, suppliers and other stakeholders. And as such, people in these roles can experience pressure from many directions. This responsibility can also create a sense of isolation and disconnection from the supports available to others.

Decision makers are also human and can experience a range of challenges, stressors and concerns in their personal lives. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, they may have had worries about infection, concern for loved ones, social isolation and a range of other concerns.

This guide outlines some practical steps decision makers can take to support their wellbeing and mental health during periods of sustained pressure such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The mental health and wellbeing of decision makers is important because mentally healthy leaders are better leaders. They are more empathetic and caring, which helps them to gather the support of their people and motivate and engage their teams better. So, it is important that leaders try always to put their own oxygen mask on first.”

**Dr Zena Burgess**, CEO of the Australian Psychological Society



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“Leadership in the new hybrid world of work created by COVID-19 looks different to leadership in the past. Never has there been so much pressure on leaders, and in many cases, it is amplified by personal pressures brought about by the pandemic.”

**Simon Brown-Greaves**, CEO of the FBG Group, Organisational Psychologist and Member of the Australian Psychological Society.

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## About decision maker wellbeing

### Impacts of COVID-19 on decision makers

People working in roles with decision making responsibilities often face additional challenges and pressures. Decision makers must often juggle multiple priorities, including addressing time critical needs without losing sight of longer-term priorities. Many decision makers accept these pressures as a reality of these roles.

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified these pressures for many decision makers. They have had to make difficult economic, legal and moral choices. During periods of high uncertainty, these decisions had to be quick and based on limited information. Decision makers may have faced angry and distressed people and situations because of these decisions.

Like many people throughout the pandemic, decision makers may have had limited ability to participate in activities that they would usually do to recharge – such as exercise, travel or spending time with friends and family.

### Unprecedented array of challenges

Simon Brown-Greaves, an experienced Senior Executive Manager and Organisational Psychologist who advises businesses and organisations, says the many pressures arising from COVID-19 overlapped in ways that leaders may not have previously experienced.

“For senior leaders, there has been a forced transformation in many organisations, which occurred while dealing with the very survival of the business or enterprise. For many senior leaders these factors are, and continue to be, magnified with the added burden of the ‘loneliness at the top’,” says Mr Brown-Greaves.

“One intriguing factor has been the unexpected impact on leaders’ credibility. We have seen many organisational surveys where staff views about trust in leadership have been negatively affected. This has been particularly apparent as lockdowns and restrictions have persisted beyond anyone’s expectations,” he says.



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“Set a good example with your own self-care. Don’t let your stress lead to bad decisions. When things get on top of you, seek help early and share your concerns with someone you trust.”

**Dr Mary Obele**, Consultant Occupational and Environmental Physician and Fellow of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (AFOEM).

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“It is so important that decision makers take time for themselves so that they can maintain functioning at an optimal level and provide the needed support and role modelling to their teams. We should all be asking and encouraging each other where we can, to plan a break for ourselves for the benefit of our own mental and physical wellbeing, our friends and family and our workplaces.”

**Jennifer Low**, Director WHS & Health Policy, ACCL.

### Scale of the issue

According to the South Australian Leadership Academy, many managers reported an increase in stress by at least 20% during the pandemic.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, a report on small business mental health released in January 2021 highlighted that a third of small business owners experienced stress, anxiety or depression in the past year.<sup>2</sup>

Small business owners were also particularly concerned about their workloads and the impact work was having on the family.

“Not surprisingly, leaders and managers in sectors that were most volatile or had genuine survival risk, such as hospitality, travel and small business, had extreme challenges to all aspects of their leadership role,” says Mr Brown-Greaves .

“We also noted the pressures on public health services in particular – with a mandate to provide health services in the face of unimaginable workloads,” he says.



# How decision makers can respond

"We know that mental ill-health takes a significant toll, and that workplace stress and psychological distress are prohibitive to optimal performance," says Dr Zena Burgess, CEO of the Australian Psychological Society.

Therefore, strategies for health, safety and wellbeing are equally relevant to decision makers as they are to anyone else in the workplace.

Similarly, it is important that decision makers follow the same protocols for preventing infection and protecting mental health that are relevant to others in the workplace. Not only do these protocols help promote health and wellbeing, but they also provide good role modelling for other people within the workplace.

As a first step, it can be useful for decision makers to consult the companion guides in this series that explore fatigue and how COVID-19 has impacted sleep ([available here](#)).

## Supports for decision makers

The following supports can help reduce the sense of isolation that decision makers can experience, by creating connections and opportunities for help with tough challenges:

- professional development to build more skills or strategies for responding to tough situations.
- training to learn more about specific topics or refine an approach.
- networking to help connect with peers and learn from their experiences.
- leadership or management coaching to identify areas for growth and talk through challenges with a neutral party.
- connecting with professional mental health supports for a confidential space to explore concerns.
- accessing specialists, resources and tools that help with practical challenges.

## How decision makers can look after their wellbeing

- Maintain a healthy work-life balance, make time for family and friends and activities you enjoy. Exercise regularly to help boost your energy levels and improve stamina.
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle by eating healthily and getting enough sleep.
- Allow yourself to say 'no' so you don't over commit.
- Plan events ahead of time, so you know what's coming up.
- Find ways to relax and unwind, such as meditation, listening to music or incorporating breathing techniques into your daily routine.
- Get support when you need it – talk to someone and ask for help.
- Reflecting on positive achievements.

Source: Australian Government, Business ([read more here](#))

## Supports for small business owners

It is not just those working in large organisations who experience the pressure of being a decision maker. Some specific resources for small business owners include:

- My Business Health ([here](#))
- Heads Up Small Business Personal Wellbeing Plan ([here](#)).
- Financial counselling or support if tough decisions are related to financial distress. Free supports are available through the National Debt Helpline ([here](#)) and Financial Counselling Australia ([here](#)).
- Ahead for Business ([here](#))
- NewAccess for Small Business Owners ([here](#))
- Business.gov.au, Expertise and advice finder ([here](#))

Mr Brown-Greaves also suggests that decision makers look to their EAP providers, if they have them, as many have tailored content such as webinars and tip sheets.

“As always, the resources of the Australian Psychological Society ([here](#)), Beyond Blue ([here](#)) and HeadsUp ([here](#)) remain relevant and practical to leaders as well as staff,” he adds.

For decision makers across organisations large and small, SuperFriend advises it is important to keep the silver linings in mind. For instance, decision makers have learned a lot as they navigated the challenges of COVID-19, such as how to make faster and more complex decisions.

In addition, while it may not feel like it, the pressing issues presented by the pandemic will eventually subside. It is also important to remember that responding to this pressure is natural given the events of the past two years. The key issue for decision makers to consider is how they respond to these pressures and take steps to look after themselves ([read more here](#)).



# Where decision makers can get additional support



[Leading through COVID-19: manager toolkit](#)

[Black Dog Institute, Free workplace toolkit with strategies for enhancing awareness and capability to manage mental health in the workplace](#)

[SuperFriend, Resources for People Leaders during COVID-19](#)

[SuperFriend's "Looking after You" guide](#)

[Black Dog Institute, Self-Care Plan](#)

[Comcare, COVID-19 – Navigating a new normal \(webinar\)](#)

[SANE Australia, Mental illness & the workplace](#)

[Heads Up, Taking Care of yourself and staying well](#)

## **Small business**

[Beyond Blue, Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service Guide for Business Owners and Managers](#)

[The Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman, Plan for mentally healthy business \(small business\)](#)

[Australian Government, Business](#)

[Safe Work Australia, Small Business Planning Tool for COVID-19](#)

[The Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman, My Business Health portal](#)

[The Fair Work Ombudsman, Advice for small business](#)

[The Australian Taxation Office, Supporting your small business](#)

[The Australian Securities & Investments Commission, Small business](#)

[Australian Department of Health, Resources](#)

[Ahead for Business](#)

[Heads Up for small business](#)

[National Debt Helpline](#)

[Financial Counselling Australia](#)

[My Business Health](#)

[NewAccess for Small Business Owners](#)

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## References

- 1 Office of the Commissioner for Public Sector Employment, South Australian Leadership Academy. Leading through COVID-19: Manager toolkit. Available from SALA\_Leading-through-COVID-19-Manager-Toolkit\_v5.3.pdf (publicsector.sa.gov.au)
- 2 McNair yellowSquares. Australian Government, The Treasury. Small business and mental health: supporting small business when they are facing challenges. 2021, January. Available from <https://treasury.gov.au/publication/small-business-and-mental-health-supporting-small-business-when-they-are-facing>

## About this guide

This guide is part of the *Mentally Healthy Workplaces during COVID-19: Emerging Issues* series, created by the National Mental Health Commission and the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance.

The series explores key issues workplaces are facing due to the challenges created by COVID-19. Each guide provides a summary of the issue, expert guidance on actions organisations can take and links to further resources.

This guide has been developed in association with:

- **Dr Zena Burgess**, CEO of the Australian Psychological Society and a Non-Executive Director experienced across commercial and social enterprise organisations.
- **Simon Brown-Greaves**, CEO of the FBG Group, Organisational Psychologist and Member of the Australian Psychological Society.

### Read more

- The guides in this series include:
  - Helping people return to workplaces after extended periods working at home during COVID-19.
  - Strategies to support wellbeing of decision makers through periods of sustained pressure.
  - Identifying and managing fatigue and burnout during COVID-19.
  - The hidden impact of COVID-19 on sleep.
  - Creating mentally healthy hybrid teams in the recovery from COVID-19.
  - Responding to COVID-19 concerns in the workplace.
  - Supporting people experiencing post-COVID-19 syndrome.
- [Visit the Commission's website](#) to download the series.



## National Workplace Initiative

- The National Mental Health Commission and Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance are developing the National Workplace Initiative to create a national approach to mentally healthy workplaces.
- [Visit the Commission's website](#) to learn more about the National Workplace Initiative.

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