

Small Business Guides
to Mentally Healthy Workplaces

Promote



Australian Government
National Mental Health Commission

A practical guide for small business owners and sole traders to recognise and promote the positive aspects of work that contribute to good mental health.

About

Small businesses are the backbone of the Australian economy. Creating mentally healthy small businesses helps individuals, businesses, communities, and the economy. Your small business can play an important role in promoting mental health by providing opportunities for people to connect, learn and make a positive contribution. Work can also be a source of comfort and support during times of mental ill-health or stress. However, without planning and consideration, work also has the potential to result in negative outcomes such as stress, burnout or injury.

The pressures of running a business, finding work-life balance, and adapting to external changes can be challenging. Finding effective ways to look after mental health in your business is important for keeping things running smoothly. Looking after mental health means investing in yourself and the people working with you to support customers, fulfill orders, respond quickly and represent your business.

This series has been specifically designed to help people in small businesses create a mentally healthy workplace. The guides are based on the [Blueprint for Mentally Healthy Workplaces](http://www.haveyoursay.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/blueprint-for-mentally-healthy-workplaces) (www.haveyoursay.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/blueprint-for-mentally-healthy-workplaces) as part of the National Workplace Initiative.



This resource focuses on one of the 3 pillars of the Blueprint for mentally healthy workplaces – Promote: promoting mental health by recognising and enhancing the positive aspects of work.

Two other resources in this series focus on responding to mental ill-health and protecting mental health in the workplace.

Key takeaways

- Putting strategies in place to promote workplace wellbeing will help you and your team be more productive and engaged and strengthen your capacity to face challenges in the workplace.
- There are many ways to enhance the wellbeing of yourself and your team while at work, for example, improving workplace culture, building social connections, and improving job design.
- There are also things that individuals can do to promote their own mental health both at work and outside of work.

[Click here](#) to read the other resources in the Small Business series

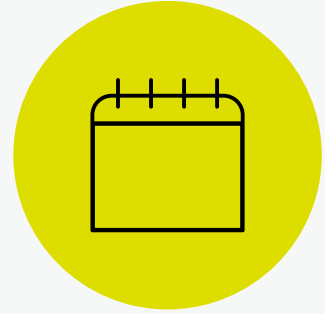
Benefits of a mentally healthy workplace



Thriving workers and owners



Increased productivity



Decreased unplanned leave



Decreased occupational injuries and illnesses



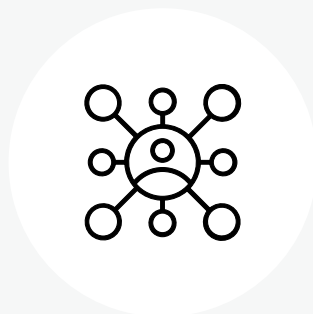
Decreased workers' compensation claims



Increased engagement and job satisfaction



Decreased turnover and re-hiring costs



Increased employee loyalty



The return on investment of a mentally healthy workplace is \$2.30 for every \$1 invested*

*<https://www.pwc.com.au/publications/pdf/beyondblue-workplace-roi-may14.pdf>

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Using this guide

Some content in this resource may be more relevant to small businesses with employees than people who are sole traders. However, most of this information is relevant and helpful to all small business owners. These icons can show you which content is most relevant for you.



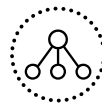
Very relevant to sole traders



Somewhat relevant to sole traders



Very relevant to employers



Somewhat relevant to employers

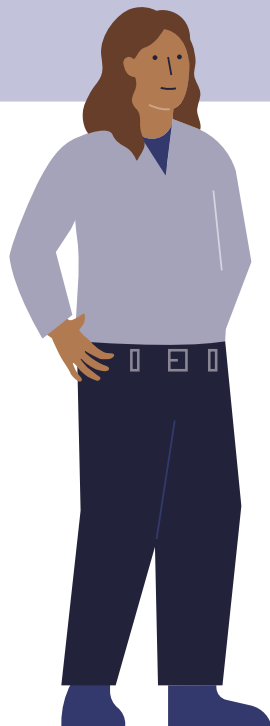
Quick tips

Meet Sarah and Ryan. Their stories will be used throughout the guide to show you how sole traders and small businesses may put information in these guides into action.

Meet Sarah



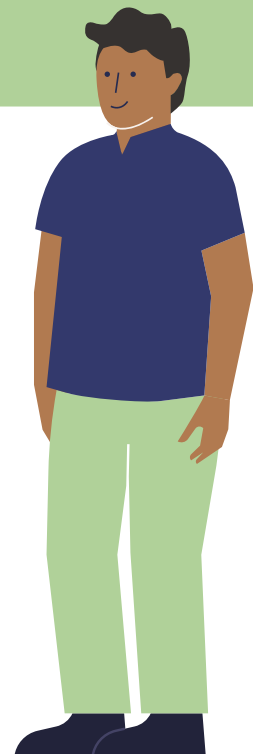
Sarah is a sole trader and has owned her cleaning business since 2009. Sarah takes responsibility for every aspect of the business, from scheduling, organising payments, doing the cleaning, and managing the finances. She works any day of the week to fit in with her clients' schedules. For example, she cleans a small office space on Saturdays so she does not disrupt their team. She has recently branched into sorting and organising people's homes and enjoys posting before and after pictures on social media. Now that her kids are a bit older, she no longer needs to work around school hours, and has been working longer hours for the past year.



Meet Ryan



Ryan runs a small café in the city and employs 7 staff, many of whom are university students who work casually. Ryan has owned the café for the past 6 years, and there have been many ups and downs, particularly during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Ryan loves interacting with customers, especially the regulars, and enjoys baking fresh treats to sell at the counter. However, he also finds it very difficult to do the rostering, with many of his staff wanting days off for exams, parties, or family events – it seems like there is something every week. Ryan does not think the café would function without him there and has barely missed a day since opening.



Key words and phrases

Small business owner

For this guide, a small business owner is someone who is the title holder of a business and employs fewer than 20 people. This includes sole traders who have no employees.

Mental health

A positive concept and more than just the absence of illness. In this guide, the term mental health is used to refer to a state of wellbeing where a person can realise their own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to contribute to their community. ([World Health Organisation](#)).

Mental ill-health

A term that encompasses both mental illness and changes in emotion or behaviour that can impact a person's cognitive, emotional, or social abilities but not to the extent that it meets the criteria for a mental illness diagnosis. These changes can result from life stressors and often resolve with time or when the individual's situation changes. These changes may develop into a mental illness if they persist or increase in severity.

Mental illness

A disorder diagnosed by a health professional that significantly interferes with a person's cognitive, emotional and/or social abilities. Mental illness can vary in both severity and duration. The term mental illness is used to refer to a wide spectrum of diagnosable conditions that affect how a person feels, thinks, behaves, and interacts with other people.

Stigma

Negative attitudes or discrimination against someone based on a distinguishing characteristic such as a mental illness.

Our approach to language has adhered to the conventions outlined in the [Life in Mind National Communications Charter](#), where applicable.

Pillar 3:



Small business owners may have more control and flexibility in their work than other people. This allows people to line up work with their abilities, strengths and interests, making it easier to stay engaged at work. In fact, many of the positive aspects of running a business, and working in general, enhance our wellbeing. Positive work environments can also provide us with a sense of purpose and fulfilment. This resource focuses on enhancing the positive aspects of work to promote mental health.

The Promote pillar covers:

- Ways to promote mental health across the business
- Individual approaches for enhancing mental health.



1

Promoting mental health across the business



Section 1:
Promoting mental health across the business

Benefits of promoting mental health across the business



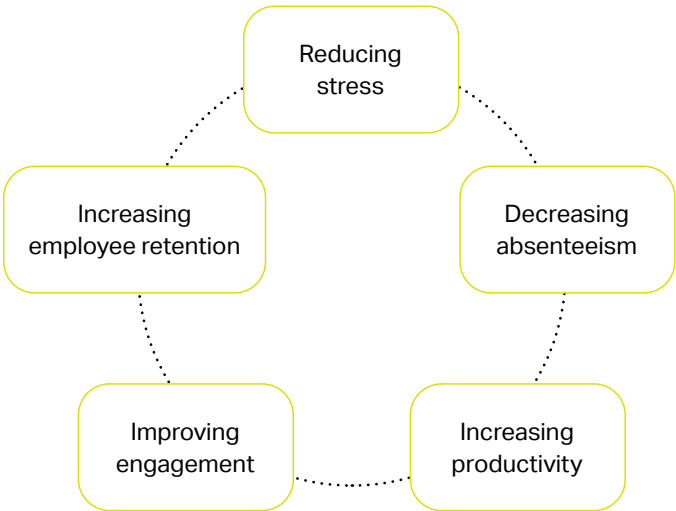
While you cannot do much to influence your team's mental health and wellbeing outside of the workplace, there are things you can do at work. Incorporating these strategies can help keep your team happy, motivated and productive. These strategies may also contribute to the mental health of your customers or clients if they are having more positive interactions with your team.

These simple things can help promote mental health for you and your team:

- Provide recognition and rewards for a job well done.
- Provide opportunities to shape work.
- Promote social connections at work.
- Improve workplace culture.
- Promote inclusion and celebrate diversity within the workplace.
- Provide autonomy and control.

Responding to mental ill-health when it happens is important. However, finding ways to protect and promote mental health can help people stay well and perform at their peak. This is a bit like taking steps to enhance your physical health, such as eating a healthy diet, exercising or getting vaccinated.

Promoting mental health in your business involves recognising and enhancing the aspects of work that make the people working there feel good. By building on the aspects of work that help people thrive, businesses can function at their best too. Promoting wellbeing benefits the mental health of you and your team, and it benefits your business by:



Section 1:
Promoting mental health across the business

Importance of recognition and rewards



Most people enjoy recognition for a job well done, a creative idea or a challenge overcome. As well as making someone feel appreciated, recognition can make employees more engaged, enhance productivity and reduce turnover. Praise and rewards can create a feeling of competence or confidence, which is great for self-esteem and overall wellbeing.

Rewards do not need to be expensive, like raises or expensive gifts. Some examples of low or no cost rewards include:

- **Verbal or written praise:** This may include positive feedback for quality work and acknowledging the value an employee adds to your business. It could be in a meeting, a private conversation or an email.
- **Physical rewards:** Physical rewards do not need to be something big. They can be small tokens of appreciation, such as a cup of coffee on a tiring day, a small restaurant voucher for reaching a particular goal or providing morning tea for your team once a month.
- **Work-based rewards:** These relate to rewarding parts of the work environment. Examples include flexible working hours, working from home, relaxed dress code, staff celebrations and parties or allowing pets at work.
- **Empowerment:** Reward or recognition can also come in the form of giving people more say in how the business operates. This could be showing people how you have taken on their ideas or giving them more responsibility or control.

Every business is unique, so it is important to develop rewards that suit your situation. You can also ask people working with you for their ideas about rewards or recognition.

If you are putting a rewards and recognition system in place, it is important that people see this as fair and transparent.

Case Study



Ryan's café has been really busy over the school holiday period, and his staff have been working extra hard. He wants to make sure nobody's hard work goes unnoticed, and that staff remain motivated to keep pushing through these busy days. Ryan decides to set up a 'thank you station' out the back of the café, with a note thanking all staff for their hard work, as well as some treats to take home to help them unwind such as homemade brownies, face masks, foot soaks and herbal tea. The staff are appreciative and very happy their hard work has been noticed.



Reflection



If you have any employees, do you think they feel valued and appreciated? What is something you could easily do to reward them?

Section 1:
Promoting mental health across the business

Autonomy can improve mental health



Small business owners may have a lot of control over how they do their work. This high level of control, independence and autonomy can have a positive influence on mental health. Workers may find it more challenging to feel this level of control, particularly if someone is telling them what to do, how to do it and when. Finding ways to give people a sense of control or autonomy can promote mental health at work.

Allowing workers to have more say in how the business operates or how they do their work can also open exciting new opportunities. They may have new ideas - such as how to improve a process or promote the business. Allowing people more control over their work can also feel like a reward or recognition of your trust in their work.

Some ideas of building more autonomy or control include:

- Ask your team about any changes they would like to see in their workplace. They could be related to systems and processes, or the work environment itself. You could ask them directly, or they could fill in a short survey or suggestion form.
- Give your team freedom over how they do their job, as long as it gets done on time and to an acceptable standard. There are often multiple ways to approach something, and your team may prefer a different way to what you do.
- Involve your team in decision making about your business. Simple things such as deciding what colour to paint the walls in the shop, involving potential new team members or planning activities can make people feel valued and that they have a say in their environment.

You do not need to do everything your team suggests. Consider their suggestions by weighing up the pros and cons. If it is something that will not work for the business, take the time to explain why and encourage them to make more suggestions in the future.

Case Study



Ryan takes pride in his café and came up with everything from the interior design to the menu. Recently, one of his staff was saying whipped coffee was trending on social media. She suggested adding it into their menu, or even trying a new whipped coffee flavour each month. Ryan realises they already have the necessary equipment and resources for whipped coffee, and that it would be great for attracting younger customers. He really likes the idea, and puts the staff member in charge of coming up with new flavours each month, which makes her feel trusted and empowered. Other staff were sceptical about presenting Ryan with ideas in the past, but they now feel more comfortable after seeing him accept a suggestion.



Reflection



Are there ways you can allow people to have a little more control at work? Are there ways you can seek input from your workers?

Section 1:
Promoting mental health across the business

Invest in building social connections



Social connection is a large contributor to mental health, with many studies linking social connection with lower levels of anxiety and depression, increased self-esteem and empathy, and more trusting and cooperative relationships. We spend a lot of time at work, so we spend a lot of time with the people we work with. In small business, this is particularly true, because there are fewer employees to interact with. When your team have meaningful social connections at work, they will not only feel happier and less stressed, but will be more engaged with your business and your customers.

Case Study 🔍



Sarah does not have employees or co-workers to build relationships with which can sometimes make her feel lonely at work. However, Sarah makes an effort to connect with her clients where possible, especially the ones she has known for years. For example, one of her older clients always offers to make her a cup of tea. Sarah always allows an extra 20 minutes to have a cuppa and a chat, and sees it as a morning or afternoon tea break. Sarah often feels happier on days where she has a conversation with someone, and tries to make opportunities to connect throughout the day, both inside and outside of work.



You can improve workplace relationships in many ways:

- **Team building exercises:** Whether your business is a team of 2 or 20, there are some activities you can do together to help boost your social connection. You could start each day with a regular team routine, wrap up the week by sharing something positive that has happened, or share a regular activity like trivia or trying to pick winners of weekend sporting events.
- **Group outings:** You could engage in a fun group activity outside of the workplace, like dinner together or going to local pub trivia. Planning events like this on a semi-regular basis can be great for relationship building and morale.
- **Create something together:** Working together to make something fun can also be a way of building relationships and finding out more about each other. Examples could be creating a 'best hits' song list or a recipe scrapbook.
- **Create opportunities to connect:** The more time you spend with others, the easier it becomes to chat and connect. Try planning face-to-face meetings, scheduling lunch breaks together or working collaboratively on specific tasks.
- **Lead by example:** Your team will tend to look to their manager about acceptable work behaviour. If you are open, honest, and relaxed, they are more likely to be the same.

Case Study 🔍



Because many of Ryan's employees are busy students and do not work together all the time, Ryan decided to hold monthly team activities that can be completed by an employee at any time out the back of the café. One activity involves each employee writing only 3 words at a time in an exercise book in the break area. They then have to wait for at least 2 other team members to write before they write again. The goal was to write a short story as a team. In another activity, he put bits of paper in a container with things like 'dream holiday', 'best pet' or 'favourite food' written on them. Staff draw one a shift and have to find out the responses of the team members they are working with that day. These activities get staff laughing and to know each other a bit better, making them feel like they are valued as part of the team.



Reflection



What do you do to build relationships at work? What opportunities are there for people to get to know more about each other? Are there relationships you can also build with suppliers or customers as well?

Section 1:
Promoting mental health across the business

Creating a mentally healthy culture



Workplace culture is like the personality of your business. This sense of ‘the way we do things around here’ reflects the values, behaviours, and attitudes of the business. Workplace culture is strongly influenced by leadership, management, workplace practices and policies, the businesses vision and values, the physical work environment, and the people working there.

Small business owners may have a stronger role in creating a culture than owners of larger organisations. Although every work culture will be different, here are some things to consider in creating a mentally healthy culture within a small business.

Positive social connections: Having strong bonds between team members can help manage challenges in the workplace. Social connections have also been linked with greater engagement, motivation, work quality and wellbeing. As discussed above, do what you can to build relationships within your workplace, for example, run some team building activities.

Show empathy: Managers displaying traits such as compassion and understanding build trust and help make team members feel comfortable to ask for help when needed. Be kind to your team, especially with work-related issues.

Open communication: Being open and honest with your team about how you feel means they are more likely to do the same. This might mean providing respectful and honest feedback about the quality of someone’s work, admitting to a mistake of your own, or communicating about how you feel if you are having a bad day. Encourage your employees to speak up and ask for help if needed.

Respectful behaviour: Ensure you and your team respect one another. Examples include respecting religious views or lifestyle choices, using good manners, and appreciating others’ work and contributions. Being disrespectful can be experienced as harassment and potentially even bullying. These can negatively affect mental health.

Healthy work habits: Part of your workplace culture relates to expectations and how work is done. Setting realistic expectations, allowing people to take their breaks, encouraging people to take leave, and not expecting people to work too much overtime are important healthy work habits. It is important for small business owners to lead by example.

Reflection



What is the culture of your business like? What are the things you can see, hear, and feel that tell you whether your business has a good culture to work in? Are there any areas for improvement?

Embrace diversity and create an inclusive environment



Diversity reflects how we are different across attributes such as age, gender, sexuality, culture, race and religion. A diverse team brings a wealth of different experiences, perspectives and skills to your business. It can promote performance, productivity, creative and innovative thinking, and overall health and wellbeing.

Creating an inclusive workplace can also lower the occurrence of discrimination and harassment in the workplace. As well as being good for your business outcomes and staff wellbeing, there are national and state laws that create legal obligations related to equal employment opportunity and discrimination. For example, it is illegal to disadvantage employees and job seekers based on a particular characteristic. You can read more here [Equal opportunity and diversity \(www.business.gov.au/people/employees/equal-opportunity-and-diversity\)](http://www.business.gov.au/people/employees/equal-opportunity-and-diversity).

Fostering an inclusive workplace is part of creating a mentally healthy workplace. Spending the time to understand what diverse employees might need to feel culturally safe is great place to start. You can also take steps to incorporate diversity and inclusion into your hiring practices, training and day-to-day activities.

In addition to this, the diversity of your team, customers and clients should be celebrated. For example, you could celebrate Pride Month or Wear it Purple Day at work to support a team member from the LGBTIQ+ community. Similarly, you could celebrate cultural or religious events prevalent within your community to support your customers and clients.

Case Study 🔍



One of Ryan's employees, Josh, was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) several years before starting at the café. Every year, his café holds an event for World Autism Understanding Day in February to help increase awareness of ASD in the community. The café donates \$1 from each cup of coffee sold that day to a charity that supports autistic youth and their families. The community is very supportive, and it is one of Josh's favourite days. He feels acknowledged and appreciated and is happy to be part of Ryan's team.



Reflection



How could diversity be celebrated in your team? What are some events or activities that are important for people in your workplace? Do people feel their differences are respected in your business? This [diversity calendar \(www.arts.unimelb.edu.au/about/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-calendar\)](http://www.arts.unimelb.edu.au/about/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-calendar) could help identify events or dates you could celebrate in your workplace.

Section 1:
Promoting mental health across the business

More information about looking after the wellbeing of others



- Thrive at Work (www.thriveatwork.org.au/framework/promote) has some great resources and information on optimising employee wellbeing.
- You can learn more about workplace wellbeing from the Black Dog Institute (www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/resources-support/wellbeing/workplace-wellbeing), including 6 ways to make your workplace more mentally healthy.
- Safe Work Australia created a handbook on the principles of good work design (www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/system/files/documents/1702/good-work-design-handbook.pdf) to help you plan how you can make changes to work design.

2

Individual approaches for enhancing mental health



Section 2:
Individual approaches for enhancing mental health

In addition to strategies for creating an environment that supports mental health, small business owners and people working in small businesses can also take individual action to promote their mental health.

Although it can seem challenging to fit wellbeing activities into your daily routine, prioritising small but regular timeslots to invest in your physical and mental health is important. Investing in your professional development and drawing healthy boundaries between work and home activities are also powerful wellbeing tools. Along with healthy habits such as exercise, allowing time for sleep and eating a healthy diet, these strategies can help you keep energised, motivated and focused at work.

Reflection



Think about how you have felt when you have prioritised your wellbeing compared with times you have not. What were some of the differences in how you were thinking, feeling, and reacting during these times? What commitments would you like to make about your personal mental health?



Reflecting on the positive things about work



While running a small business can be challenging, many aspects of it also contribute to your mental health. Pausing to appreciate these positive aspects can build a sense of gratitude. They can also provide ideas for how you can do more of the things you like to do.

Positive aspects of work might include the following:

- **Having autonomy and freedom:** Having a sense of control over your business can enhance your happiness and engagement with your business and increase your productivity and motivation.
- **Working flexible hours:** You may be able to alter your hours around other commitments or activities to create better work–life boundaries, reduce burnout, and enhance your overall productivity and morale.
- **Having creative control:** You can decide how your final product or outputs will look, how you present your business, and what you recommend to customers and clients. Knowing you made these decisions can help you feel accomplished and fulfilled.
- **Building something from nothing:** Achievement at work can increase your sense of purpose and add meaning to your life.
- **Connecting to community:** Many small business owners build up a loyal customer base, build relationships with customers and contribute more broadly to their community. A sense of community and feeling like you belong can be an important part of your wellbeing.

Section 2:
Individual approaches for enhancing mental health

- **Developing new skills:** There is a lot to learn when running a business, presenting many learning opportunities that you otherwise may not encounter. Learning new skills can boost your confidence, happiness, and motivation in your business.
- **Doing something you are passionate about:** Most businesses are created based on the owner's skills, interests or passions, so the work you do likely lines up with your goals and leads to a sense of fulfilment.
- **Seeing the direct benefit of your hard work:** Working closely with the business means seeing the difference your work makes to your customers or seeing direct financial benefits. This builds on your sense of purpose and personal fulfilment, motivating you to keep going.

Reflection

Each small business is different, so take a moment to reflect on the unique positives of your business.

Think about the 'why' of your business. What made you start or join? What are the times that make it all worthwhile for you?

Connect with your purpose at work



Feeling connected and aligned with the purpose and goals of your business is important. It can give you a sense of purpose and make you feel passionate and motivated to continue. Your purpose may be about making a positive contribution or providing a needed service to help your community. It could be providing for your family or saving enough to retire early. Your purpose may simply be to achieve the autonomy and freedom that comes from working for yourself.

Reflecting on the purpose behind your business can help anchor you during stressful or uncertain periods. It can also help you make important decisions that impact your business. To help you define the 'why' of your business, these activities may help:

- Consider the 'why' of your business from your perspective (e.g. flexibility and freedom), as well as from the perspective of customers and clients.
- Try writing a purpose statement. This is a short summary about why you do what you do, and why this is important.
- Think about whether you can change or pivot any aspects of your business to align with your personal goals and priorities. Maybe these have shifted since you started.
- Look at the [stories of other small business owners](http://www.aheadforbusiness.org.au/resources) (www.aheadforbusiness.org.au/resources) for some inspiration.

Section 2:
Individual approaches for enhancing mental health

Case Study 🔍



Sarah started her business for many reasons, with flexibility around school drop-off/pick-up and other commitments a major reason. She also really enjoys cleaning; it makes her feel fulfilled and she can see the direct effect of her work. Sarah believes living in a clean and tidy house can help you feel accomplished, relaxed and ready to take on the day. She wants to clean for people who cannot so they can get home, relax and enjoy their free time without worrying about cleaning.



Case Study 🔍



Ryan has always loved going to cafés; that's why he opened his own. He wants people to receive high quality customer service, food and beverages, so he puts a lot of research into recipes and products. Ryan believes cafés are a happy place where celebrations, dates and catch-ups between friends and family happen. He wants to help make this experience the best it can possibly be. He wants these small moments in life to be appreciated and not distracted from by a poor dining experience.



Section 2:
Individual approaches for enhancing mental health

Professional development and personal growth



Small business owners and people working in small businesses often have to wear many hats. One of the benefits of this work is the opportunity to constantly learn new skills. Both on-the-job learning and formal training can provide professional development that is beneficial for mental health. This comes from a sense of confidence and personal growth that comes from learning to do new things and take on new challenges.

Investing in professional development also often has a direct business benefit. It can help you adopt new technologies, processes, practices or extend into new products or marketing channels. Professional development related to people management can help you bring out the best in your teams.

There are often professional development opportunities specifically for small businesses. Ideas for finding professional development opportunities include:

- Subscribe to newsletters or social media pages for your industry's peak body and look out for opportunities that are directly relevant to your work.
- Join your local business chamber. They often organise events and professional development opportunities for small business owners.
- Keep an eye on events. You can complete an online search or set up automatic notifications for search results that match your interests. Many events now include online options, so check if you can join another way, even if it is in a different state.

- Look for online resources. Many places record webinars and other events and store them online, for example: [Business Australia](http://www.businessaustralia.com/how-we-help/membership/explore-events/virtual-events) (www.businessaustralia.com/how-we-help/membership/explore-events/virtual-events), the [Fair Work Ombudsman](http://www.fairwork.gov.au/tools-and-resources/online-learning-centre) (www.fairwork.gov.au/tools-and-resources/online-learning-centre), and the [Australian Government](http://www.business.gov.au/new-to-business-essentials/webinars-events-and-training) (www.business.gov.au/new-to-business-essentials/webinars-events-and-training), including the [Australian Tax Office](http://www.ato.gov.au/Business/Starting-your-own-business/Small-business-webinars-and-workshops/Small-business-webinars) (www.ato.gov.au/Business/Starting-your-own-business/Small-business-webinars-and-workshops/Small-business-webinars).
- Complete training or courses to help increase your skills. This could be anything from a one-hour online workshop, to a one-day in-person training or a TAFE course. Think about any gaps in your knowledge, such as strategic planning, marketing or time management and look for training in your area.
- Consider local community events and activities, which may be advertised in local papers, newsletters, or online.

Case Study 🔍



Sarah did not advertise much in the past. Some years she added her number to the Yellow Pages, but mostly she relied on word of mouth. However, she now wants more customers, because she has increased the days and hours she can work. At a free marketing webinar advertised by her local business chamber, she discovered that social media is a great way to advertise, and that images often work better than text. So, she started a Facebook page and a TikTok for her business, posting before and after photos and videos of houses she cleaned and organised with owners' permission. The response has been great, and she has picked up several new clients.



Section 2:
Individual approaches for enhancing mental health

Case Study 🔍



Ryan is great at running the logistics of his business. But, he struggles slightly with managing people. He likes having friendly relationships with his staff, rarely says no to leave requests or shift swaps, and often works more hours to cover his staff. He also has difficulty with discipline and letting staff know when they have done something wrong, often fixing mistakes himself. He takes a 2-day training course to help develop his management skills. The course gave him some great techniques, such as only accepting the first 3 leave requests each fortnight. He feels more confident in rostering and discipline and knows it will relieve him of some of the extra work he has been doing.



Reflection



What was the last professional development activity you completed? Do you have some skills gaps that you could improve? Are there new trends in your industry that you would like to explore?

Setting healthy boundaries



Healthy boundaries are important for mental health. You may need to set boundaries with other people, such as not accepting certain requests or not jumping in to fix other people's problems. Or the boundaries may be with yourself, such as ensuring you make time to disconnect from work.

The boundary between work and home can be the most challenging boundary, particularly for small business owners. As the person responsible for the business, switching off and separating business from personal life can be tricky. Even if you love what you do, it is essential to take a step back to develop and enjoy other aspects of your life. Creating more time in the 'life' part of work-life boundaries allows time to engage in self-care strategies to enhance your wellbeing.

Taking time away from your business can actually be a helpful thing. It can allow time to have a break, gain perspective, invest in relationships, and allow you to develop hobbies and interests outside of work. It can help reduce stress levels and provide a buffer if work is overwhelming.

These strategies could improve your work-life boundary:

- Recognise the importance of the non-work dimensions of your life. Putting all your energy into work means something in your personal life may be missing out.
- Create boundaries between work and life, especially when working from home. This might include taking a walk to the end of your street and back, at the start and end of each day, to represent a 'commute', or changing into and out of work clothes to indicate the start and end of the workday.
- Try to stick to regular workdays and hours each week. Maybe you have one or 2 days scheduled to be longer than others but try to keep your weeks consistent and defined.

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- Limit work calls and emails outside your work hours. You could try using a dual SIM phone, so you can turn work calls off after hours or put screen time limits or locks on your emails. You could also use a second phone containing all your work apps, calls and emails.
- Embrace the flexibility of owning your own business by scheduling work around other family and social commitments.
- Streamline your processes or investigate time management strategies (e.g. time blocking). This streamlining could mean completing the same amount of work in a shorter period.
- Understand your limitations as a business. You can say no if you do not have the resources to take on another project or meet an additional request. It is essential to be upfront with customers and clients about your capacity to meet their expectations.
- Consider outsourcing to free up some time in your business or personal life. You could invest in a business mentor, accountant, bookkeeper or other business support so you do not always have to wear all the hats. If you do not want or need support with your business, you could outsource some home jobs like cleaning or gardening to make time for other things during your time away from work.
- Look ahead and plan for longer breaks. While finishing on time and having a day or 2 off each week can contribute to work–life boundaries, it is also great to plan for longer breaks. This planning can be challenging because, for many small businesses, when you are away, the business stops. However, there are some things you can do to prepare for some time off work.

Case Study 🔍



Sarah recently increased her workdays and hours, because her kids are older, and she no longer needs to manage school drop-off/pick-up. However, she still likes to keep her hours flexible, and finishes work on Wednesday at 3pm so she has plenty of time to get home and prepare for family dinner night. She also schedules in 15 minutes after her lunch and 15 minutes after her last client to respond to any calls or emails, so she does not do this after work. Sarah changes out of her work clothes as soon as she gets home to help separate her work and home life.



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Individual approaches for enhancing mental health

Case Study 🔍



Ryan keeps his café open 7 days a week for breakfast and lunch, and usually ends up working a couple of hours once the café is closed each day. Ryan decides he would really like a day off each week, so closes on his quietest day – Tuesday. While this does mean a decrease in sales, Ryan saves on wages and utilities, and thinks it is worth it to prevent him from burning out. This time off gives Ryan time to tend to things in his personal life and have some time to unwind and relax. He finds it helps fuel him for the week ahead and that he is more focused at work.



Reflection



What is your balance between work and life currently like? Are there any areas of life that are not getting enough attention? Are you able to turn off from work to allow a break?

Plan for a holiday



Everyone needs a break now and then. Getting away from our regular day-to-day activities gives us time to unwind and recharge. However, for many small business owners, taking more than a few days off at a time can seem impossible. There are a few things you can consider to holiday-proof your business:

- If you have employees, is there someone you can teach about the operational side of running the business? Do you have a family member who can take over?
- Consider the important aspects of the business you would like to keep running. If you have nobody you can train, can you ask a family member to look after some simple tasks? What tasks would you choose?
- Think about outsourcing something in your absence. For example, ask someone to answer calls and book appointments for when you are back.
- If nobody is running the business, let your customers and clients know that you will be taking time off. Do this via an email, phone call, social media post or sign on your business door. Remember to change any phone messages or automatic email replies as well.
- Keep a separate bank account with funds to cover wages and any other expenses when you take your break. [Look at improving your business's financial situation](http://www.business.gov.au/finance/accounting/improve-your-business-financial-position) (www.business.gov.au/finance/accounting/improve-your-business-financial-position) to help with your rainy-day fund.

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- Move everything onto the cloud. Having all your systems and information stored in the cloud allows you to access relevant files on holiday if you need to, providing some peace of mind in case of emergencies.
- Develop a manual for running your business so that if someone took over from you, they could navigate any systems or processes. For example, include invoicing processes, how to book appointments or answers to common questions customers ask.

Case Study 🔍



Sarah needs to take time off for an operation, and recovery will take 3–4 weeks. As soon as Sarah's operation date is locked in, she contacts all her clients to let them know she will be off work for 4 weeks from the date of her operation. Sarah offers to replace any scheduled appointments during this time with a cleaner she knows and trusts to do a good job. By scheduling in replacements, she is confident she will not be 'replaced' in her absence. Sarah responds to enquiries and schedules future appointments while she recovers, to ensure her business still functions when she returns. Her daughter helps her manage this while she is unwell.



Case Study 🔍



Ryan likes to do things his own way when it comes to his business, and he does not trust anyone to run the café in his absence. However, he has not had a holiday in years besides the occasional night away. He would really like to plan for some time off to relax and unwind after the stress of the past few years. He has 2 part-time employees who are competent in the day-to-day running of the café and could cover all operating hours between them. He trains them in other operational processes like ordering and roasting and gives them the necessary passwords. Ryan does a test run at the café that week, acting as though he is an employee and leaving the part-time staff in charge. The week runs smoothly and gives Ryan the confidence he needs to go on a holiday.



Reflection



When was the last time you took a break? What would be your plan for covering costs and running of the business while you were away? What additional support would you require?

Section 2:
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Build a supportive network



For many small business owners, isolation can become an issue. Working from home, being a sole trader, being 'the boss', prioritising professional relationships over personal ones and working long hours can all contribute to isolation. Whatever the reason, isolation can contribute to a sense of loneliness or increased symptoms of mental-ill health and distress. Connecting with others can help buffer the impacts of stress and provides a support network when you need it. Maintaining a social and support network is crucial for mental health.

Social events are often the first thing we cancel when we get busy or stressed. However, social connection is important to our mental health. You might have existing social groups, networks or peer supports that you can use, or you might be looking for new places to create connections. Here are some suggestions to help keep you connected:

- **Use a co-working space:** Hiring a desk for a day or 2 a week could be helpful if you work from home. Having other people around and engaging in incidental social interactions will help reduce feelings of isolation.
- **Connect with other small business owners:** Your friends and family may not understand what you are going through as a business owner, and sometimes it can be helpful to talk to those who do. There are lots of social media groups you could join, as well as online forums, local chambers, and networking groups.
- **Talk to people at work:** Make calls instead of sending emails, talk to clients about things other than work, and make an effort to connect on a more personal level with suppliers or those you outsource to. Communicating this way can also help build strong business relationships.

- **Add social activities to your workday calendar:** Schedule some time once a week or fortnight to do something social – go out for lunch or coffee, call a friend, or take time to reply to any messages you have been neglecting.
- **Be proactive:** Sometimes, it is challenging to incorporate social connections into your workday, making it more important to schedule time with family and friends. Try to arrange things regularly to get into the routine (e.g. a fortnightly family dinner or a monthly night out with a friend).
- **Meet new people:** This can seem like a daunting prospect, but there are many places you can meet people. Doing something you are interested in or that is important to you means you will likely meet others with similar interests. Options include volunteering, joining a team sport or finding events on Meetup.

Case Study 🔍



As a sole trader, Sarah spends much of her workday alone. Sometimes her customers are home but are usually busy and do not have time to chat. Sarah realises organising social activities outside of work is important. She works on a Saturday morning for one client, but always leaves her afternoon and evening free so she can plan social catch-ups. Sarah and her sister also do weekly dinners with the extended family, alternating houses and cooking duties.



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Case Study 🔍



Ryan gets lots of social interaction throughout his workday with his staff and customers. However, these are often quite short and light-hearted conversations. Ryan sometimes has a friend come to the café on his lunch break so he can have a catch-up and a more meaningful chat. He also occasionally attends his local business networking group to chat with other small business owners in the area. He finds it comforting to hear people experience the same stressors as him. He also gets some great tips for his own business.



Reflection



Who would you talk to for practical support and advice about your business? Who would you turn to if you needed to talk about a personal or emotional problem you were having? Do you often spend time with people that bring you energy, inspiration, or joy?



3

Practising self-care



Section 3: Practising self-care

Part of promoting your own wellbeing includes engaging in simple self-care strategies and prioritising your own physical and emotional health. These activities are quite basic and well known, but they often slip down our priority lists when things get stressful. This section serves as a reminder of the many things you can do to look after your own wellbeing, both inside and outside of your business.

The importance of physical health and movement



Your physical and mental health are very closely linked, so taking action on both is important. Many symptoms associated with mental ill-health are physical in nature, for example, fatigue, weight loss or gain, changes in appetite, or feeling sick and run down. Similarly, many physical health conditions can impact our thoughts and feelings, for example, feeling miserable and frustrated, thinking negatively and not enjoying life as much as usual.

Improving your physical health can help enhance your overall wellbeing.

Physical activity can help reduce the body's stress hormones and improve mood. The current [Australian guidelines](http://www.health.gov.au/health-topics/physical-activity-and-exercise/physical-activity-and-exercise-guidelines-for-all-australians) (www.health.gov.au/health-topics/physical-activity-and-exercise/physical-activity-and-exercise-guidelines-for-all-australians) suggest adults should be active most days, with 2.5–5 hours of moderate activity, or 1.25–2.5 hours of vigorous activity each week. This may seem like a lot if you sit or travel a lot for your work. Here are a few recommendations that might help:

- Start small, especially if you do not currently do much physical activity in your day. Try breaking your activity into several smaller 5–10 minute blocks.
- Increase your incidental exercise, for example, park a little further from work and walk, add walking meetings, or get up and walk around the office while you are on the phone.
- Join an exercise class or group to keep you motivated.
- Get an exercise buddy so that you have someone else to keep you accountable.
- Turn exercise into 'me time' by adding in activities that you enjoy. You can also listen to your favourite podcast or music while moving.
- Make exercise a regular part of your routine and add it to your diary.

Reflection



What is one way you could increase your physical activity each week? Think about how long and how often you will do this.

Make time for sleep

When we have not slept well, we do not perform to our full capacity. Sleep is vital to our ability to think, solve problems, learn new things and cope with pressure. Additionally, those with better sleep report fewer signs of stress and improved mood. To improve the quality and quantity of your sleep, try the following:

- As well as aiming for 7–9 hours of sleep each night, try to improve the quality of your sleep by practising good sleep habits.

Section 3: Practising self-care

- Keep your sleep schedule regular, even on weekends. Going to sleep and waking at similar times each day helps train your body into your sleep routine and may help you fall asleep faster.
- Create a sleep routine where you do something relaxing before bed each night. Drinking a cup of herbal tea, reading for half an hour, or listening to a meditation or sleep story as you go to bed are great ways to relax.
- Avoid bright lights, including screens. Whatever you choose to do to wind down before bed, use dimmer lights and avoid using any devices with bright screens.
- Make sure your bedding is comfortable and minimise any distracting light or noise. Try using a sleep mask to block out light, and a fan or other white noise to block out distracting sounds.
- Set aside time at the end of your workday to reallocate uncompleted tasks or write down anything urgent. Preparing for the next day can help limit your worry time before you go to sleep.
- Avoid overeating, drinking alcohol or caffeine, smoking, or using non-prescription drugs close to bedtime.
- Daily exercise can be a great way to use up some energy and promote sleep at bedtime.

Reflection

What can you do to improve the quality of your sleep?

Eat a balanced diet

Research tells us a healthy and balanced diet can reduce the risk of developing a range of physical and mental illnesses. Here are some simple options to help you eat well at work.

- Try making your lunches for the week in advance. Having simple and healthy meals prepared in advance can limit the chance you will skip lunch or need to rely on takeaway options.
- Try to eat fruits and vegetables that have lots of different colours, as each have different vitamins and nutrients.
- Choose wholegrain or less refined foods over ones that are very processed or high in sugar, fat and salt. The fibre in these foods will help you feel fuller and give you more sustained energy.
- Eat snacks with good nutritional value that will help increase your energy and boost your mood. These include foods like nuts, yoghurt and fruit.
- You could try a meal kit subscription that offers a variety of quick and healthy meals delivered to your door.
- Drink lots of water. It is recommended that you drink between 2–2.5 litres a day. Try swapping any other beverages like energy drinks or soft drinks for water.
- Encourage others to think about healthy options for work morning teas or catered events.

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Practising self-care

Case Study 🔍



Since Sarah is on her feet most of the day and her job is quite physical, she has not previously seen the need for exercise. However, her body often feels stiff and sore after work. A friend mentioned yoga might be helpful, so she does some online classes at home. Sarah finds the movement and stretching really helpful, and also finds this a great way to relax. She feels fitter and more in shape after a few months, which improves her self-esteem. She also finds that doing a short yoga class after work re-energises her and gives her the energy to get through the evening.



Case Study 🔍



Ryan finds it very difficult to switch off after work, and finds his mind racing with things he needs to do before bed, making it difficult to sleep. Due to his early starts, he is lucky to get 5 hours of sleep most nights. He works on his sleep hygiene by changing a few things about his bedtime routine. He gets into bed at 9:30pm each night and reads for half an hour, rather than watching TV right up until lights out. He avoids beverages within 2 hours of bed, so he does not have to get up for the bathroom in the night, and he keeps a note pad next to his bed, so he does not forget anything that pops into his head before bed. Within a few weeks, Ryan's sleep has greatly improved.



Section 3:
Practising self-care

What are mindfulness and relaxation techniques, and how do they enhance wellbeing?



Mindfulness, meditation and relaxation are similar techniques used to focus your attention on the present moment and help you manage stressful thoughts. These techniques are great for reducing stress and anxiety and can be as short or long as you have time for. Completing a relaxation or mindfulness exercise when you feel stressed and overwhelmed can help you compose yourself and focus, allowing you to problem solve and move through your stress.

Mindfulness and meditation are like exercise for your brain. Practising them regularly can ensure you are better equipped to manage stress.

There are many ways to access mindfulness and relaxation exercises, such as free mindfulness apps, watching online videos or listening to podcasts.

Reflection



Have you tried a brief relaxation or mindfulness activity? What did you notice about the experience?

More information about looking after myself



- For an overview of looking after yourself in your business, watch this [20-minute webinar](https://www.vimeo.com/638521639?embedded=true&source=video_title&owner=72284531) (www.vimeo.com/638521639?embedded=true&source=video_title&owner=72284531) by Ahead for Business.
- HeadsUp has more information on [looking after your mental health as a small business owner](https://www.headsup.org.au/your-mental-health/mental-health-and-small-business/looking-after-yourself-as-a-small-business-owner) (www.headsup.org.au/your-mental-health/mental-health-and-small-business/looking-after-yourself-as-a-small-business-owner).
- Take a look at the [Small Business Workplace Wellbeing Guide](https://www.business-sa.com/content-library) (www.business-sa.com/content-library) developed by Business SA.
- [5 Ways to Wellbeing](https://www.5waystowellbeing.org.au) (www.5waystowellbeing.org.au) has some simple tips around connecting, being active, learning, being aware and helping others enhance your wellbeing.

Mental health support services

If you or someone you know needs support, here are some support services you can reach out to now. In an emergency, please call 000.

Organisation	Contact	Description
NASBO	beyondblue.org.au/get-support/newaccess-mental-health-coaching/newaccess-for-small-business-owners	Beyond Blue's NewAccess for Small Business Owners provides a guided self-help mental health coaching program.
Head to Health	headtohealth.gov.au	Provided by the Department of Health to search free or low cost digital supports for mental health.
Beyond Blue	1300 22 4636 beyondblue.org.au	24/7 support for mental health and wellbeing via phone, web chat and online forum.
Lifeline Australia	13 11 14 lifeline.org.au	24/7 crisis support and suicide prevention services.
Suicide Call Back Service	1300 659 467 suicidecallbackservice.org.au	24/7 telephone crisis support for people at risk of suicide, carers and bereaved, as well as online resources and information.
MensLine Australia	1300 78 99 78 mensline.org.au/phone-and-online-counselling	24/7 telephone and online support, information and referral service for men.
Kids Helpline	1800 55 1800 kidshelpline.com.au	24/7 telephone counselling for young people under 25 years.
headspace Australia	1800 650 890 headspace.org.au	Telephone and web chat for young people aged 12 to 25 years.
QLife	1800 184 527 qlife.org.au	Telephone and online chat support service for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and/or intersex (LGBTI) communities.
Relationships Australia	1300 364 277 relationships.org.au	Relationships Australia offers a broad range of services to individuals, families and communities throughout the country.

Mental health support services

If you or someone you know needs support, here are some support services you can reach out to now. In an emergency, please call 000.

Organisation	Contact	Description
Butterfly Foundation	1800 334 673 butterfly.org.au	Support for people affected by eating disorders via telephone, web chat or email.
Carers Australia	1800 422 737 carersaustralia.com.au	Carer gateway of practical advice and connection with local carer services.
SANE	1800 187 263 sane.org	Resources, forums and support for people affected by complex mental health issues.
National Debt Helpline	1800 007 007 ndh.org.au	Financial counselling advice for financial hardship.
Counselling Online	counsellingonline.org.au	24/7 support for anyone affected by alcohol and other drugs.
Gambling Help Online	1800 858 858 gamblinghelponline.org.au	24/7 support for anyone affected by gambling.
Wellmob	wellmob.org.au	Social, emotional and cultural wellbeing online resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.
13 YARN	13 9276 13yarn.org.au	13YARN (Thirteen YARN) connects mob who are feeling overwhelmed or having difficulty coping with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Crisis Supporter.
Standby	1300 727 247 standbysupport.com.au	Provides free face-to face and/or telephone support for anyone impacted by suicide.
LivingWorks training	livingworks.com.au	Provides a range of online and in person training to help identify people with thoughts of suicide and connect them with life-saving first aid resources.
Mindspot	1800 61 44 34 mindspot.org.au	Providing assessment and treatments, including therapist support, accessible online.

Attributions

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