

https://www.newsroom.co.nz/pro/business-welcomes-10m-mental-health-package?utm_source=8+Things+Subscribers&utm_campaign=d01ad66db3-Newsroom+Pro+26.10.2021&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_2412c1d355-d01ad66db3-%5BLIST_EMAIL_ID%5D&ct=t%28Newsroom+Pro+26.10.2021%29

Business welcomes \$10m mental health package

The \$10 million announced for work-related mental health in Auckland is a step towards Government at last recognising the huge stress many employers and workers are under. Now business leaders and health officials need to quickly design something that helps.

Tiare Tolks is a health psychologist specialising in workplace mental health and wellbeing. She's done the job for more than a decade, and has seen many people facing difficult stuff. But she's never seen anything like what's happening now.

Covid and lockdowns have brought economic stress for many companies, big and small. But the mental distress for their owners and employees is also enormous.

"Covid has created a new world of uncertainty, loss of control, change, fear and grief," Tolks says.

An estimated one in four New Zealanders report significant levels of distress, up from one in five before the pandemic, she says. And work-related problems are a major factor.



One in four people are feeling mental distress, Tiare Tolks says, and Covid-related work problems are a big part. Photo: Supplied

But employees, leaders and SME business owners often find it hard to ask for support, and executives and managers are grappling with how to identify, address, resource and evaluate what's happening in their workforces, Tolks says.

"Many leaders feel uncomfortable addressing suffering with their people for fear of 'getting it wrong'. They also feel unclear about their role, responsibility and what to do. And they struggle to ask for help themselves."

So the Government's announcement of \$10 million for business mental health support is good news. The money comes as part of a [boosted, \\$60 million programme of grants](#) for advice and planning support under the Regional Business Partner Network.

The mental health money is only available for Auckland businesses, which is strange - why not for SME owners in locked-down Waikato or people with wrecked tourism business in the South Island?

However, as a much-needed recognition of the stress impacting Auckland business owners and workers it's a good step, says Amanda Maoate, a registered psychotherapist and performance coach with humansoftware.

She says she's seeing problems growing every week - anything from people having difficulty concentrating or struggling to do their work, to people at risk of suicide.



Amanda Maoate, locked down in Piha, says problems are getting worse. Photo: Supplied

“It’s critical the Government is finally acknowledging and validating that workplace mental health is a real issue. They were aware, but until now they have not put their money where their mouth is.”

Alan McDonald, head of strategy and advocacy at the Employers and Manufacturers Association, says once the EMA and other organisations, like the Auckland Business Chamber of Commerce, started pushing the Government on business mental health about a month ago, things moved quickly, culminating in the announcement today.

“It’s gone from nowhere to a \$10 million package,” McDonald says. “It’s been sitting there in the background, but over the last three to four weeks it’s reached a point you can’t ignore. The lockdown has worn people down, their resilience has gone, and their ability to cope with change.”

Small business owners are really under pressure, he says, but it’s also hard for employers in bigger companies - line managers, for example.

A survey by recruitment company Frog pointed to locked-down working parents, managers, extroverts and new hires as being most at risk from ‘burnout’ - a World Health Organisation-recognised condition arising from poorly-managed work-related stress.

Designing the programme

Companies and individuals hoping to get access to support will have to wait, however. The lack of recognition until now means programmes are only now starting to be designed.

“The Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment and the Ministry of Health, alongside the Auckland Chamber of Commerce and the Employers and Manufacturers Association, are currently working out the details including start dates in a co-design process,” a senior official from the office of Economic Development Minister Stuart Nash, told Newsroom.

“The intention is for this to start as soon as practicable and cover as many businesses as possible.”

Pushed further on timing, the spokesperson said officials had a “great first meeting with stakeholders today and we hope to be in a position to have further information in a couple of weeks”.



Alan McDonald says the design group has an unofficial goal of November 1, but that might not be possible. Photo: Supplied

The EMA’s Alan McDonald says while it would be good to get something ready for the first week of November, that might not be practical.

“It might be best just to say within the next two-three weeks, as the funding was only confirmed overnight, so allocating/accessing the funding process still isn’t entirely clear to us.”

Both Tiane Tolks and Amanda Maoate say there are plenty of good resources available, but often they are hard to find. A centralised database of practical information and resources would be a good start.

Heather Polglase, Spark's human resources director, has seen at first hand a wide range of problems in the company's approximately 5000 employees - "from fear of the unknown, to social isolation, juggling childcare and dependents, and supporting people who are in vulnerable situations".

She says the team designing the \$10 million business mental health programme need to allow for a wide range of mental health issues.

"From what we have learned on our own journey since Covid hit in 2020, I would encourage the approach to be as holistic as possible, to cater to the wide range of challenges you could find in a workplace. These challenges can range from the more serious end of the spectrum, where people are really struggling, right through to what I'd call being 'under strain'.

"There is no one size fits all, and you need a range of different tools to cater to that spectrum of need."

Polglase says Spark has identified four key areas – work environments, connection, mind health, and energy. Interventions include giving every employee a 'day off on us', and employing health and wellbeing experts, including psychologists, to provide practical wellness tools for staff.

Jo Nicol, an organisational change consultant and director of Hiakai Co-labs says a good first step would be to create "a centralised, easy-to-find portal SMEs can go and get access information".

She says there are three different groups of people needing quite different resources: people at crisis point; people struggling; and people within an organisation who are "enablers of mental health, who create an environment to address the problems".

"Leaders need to be able to ask the question, 'How are you?', say 'I'm worried about you'. And then they need to be comfortable they can handle the answer."

Amanda Maoate, humansoftware

Maoate says companies could have people trained to see and act on mental health issues, rather like designated first aiders, but for wellness.

But she believes the importance of mental health should also be embedded within the framework of every company, from the board down, like physical health and safety is now.

“Leaders need to be equipped to have conversations with someone they are worried about - and then know what to do next. They can be difficult conversations, and we aren’t expecting people to be mini-mental health practitioners. But they need to keep eyes and ears open and they need to be able to ask the question, ‘How are you?, say 'I’m worried about you’. And then they need to be comfortable they can handle the answer.”

A business-led approach

Nicol says she is working on bringing together a senior leadership forum to work on common mental health issues facing SMEs and corporates. “How to write a wellbeing strategy, how to deal with mental illness in their workplace, how to get quick access to skilled professional staff”.



Jo Nicol says mental health needs a business-wide, CEO-led approach. Photo: Nikki Mandow

She says after being quoted in a recent Newsroom article ([Stressed, locked down Auckland workforce ignored in Government’s Level 3 decision](#)), Nicol received a flurry of messages from executives keen to be involved in a business-led initiative.

“Mental health issues can’t be solved one company at a time,” she says. “A business-led solution where companies combine resources for the betterment of organisations nationally is a far smarter approach.”

Does the Government really understand?

Meanwhile, the Government has doubled down on its insistence that Auckland businesses cannot use the small freedoms available under Level 3, Step 1 to check in on stressed or vulnerable staff one-on-one - even outside and masked.

“Alert Level 3, Step 1 is about allowing Aucklanders to connect with family and loved ones again in a safe way. While it allows increased opportunities for seeing people outdoors and engaging in outdoor recreation, it is not intended to change the Alert Level 3 guidance around business operations,” a spokesperson from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet told Newsroom after the announcement.

Instead, “businesses wanting help supporting their employees’ mental wellbeing can refer to the [Mental Health and Wellbeing Support page](#) on the business.govt.nz website”, the spokesperson said.

Newsroom took a look. There is some useful material, including articles and helpline numbers. But no articles relevant to business stress and burnout have been updated since the latest, potentially most damaging pandemic started in August, and a top-line article on [resilience for small business owners](#) almost callously references ways to access help that only business people outside Auckland can enjoy.



This Government-sanctioned photo of a cosy wellness chat won't be much comfort to stressed Auckland business people. Photo: business.govt.nz

Underneath this photo of two people chatting knee-to-knee in a booth (remember that, Auckland?), the article, written in February, starts with this helpful reminder: “2020 might be in the rear-vision mirror, but Covid-19 is not yet behind us.” You don’t say.

The article continues with resilience tips, like “expand your network”.

“You might want to organise a regular coffee catch-up with another business owner, or see what events your local Chamber of Commerce has coming up.

“This will help combat social isolation as well as keep you up to date on new developments and put you in touch with your peers.”

"Do a small group of people in Wellington know what's happening in Auckland? Do they realise how serious the situation is?"

Brett O'Riley, EMA

It's the sort of attitude from Wellington that Auckland-based Brett O'Riley, chief executive of the EMA, finds unconscionable. [Commenting on the fact](#) Aucklanders can now have a picnic with friends, or a walk with whānau, but a manager is not legally allowed to catch up with a struggling staff member in the park, and a stressed, stuck-at-home office worker can't get support from a colleague through a one-on-one, masked, stroll along a beach, O'Riley says the Government's actions can feel callous.



Brett O'Riley says business duty of care to employees includes mental health. Photo: Supplied

This isn't an abstract conversation, he told Newsroom. This is about companies with staff members at risk, maybe suicidal. It's about telling business leaders to ignore their duty of care to an increasingly vulnerable workforce.

“How can DPMC advocate that with a clear conscience? Do a small group of people in Wellington know what's happening in Auckland? Do they realise how serious the situation is?”

We can't ignore this

Auckland Business Chamber chief executive Michael Barnett says he's noticing the stress of lockdown in his own life and own organisation, as well as in the companies he talks to.

“People are not dealing with it. People are struggling. I’m seeing it, I’m hearing it.”

Michael Barnett, Auckland Business Chamber

Barnett lost a son to suicide in 2016 and is critically aware of the way mental illness can impact individuals and the people around them.

And he knows Covid, particularly the extended Covid lockdown, is very hard for many business people.

“People are not dealing with it. People are struggling. I’m seeing it, I’m hearing it.”



Michael Barnett says work-related networks can be as important as whānau or friend-based ones for some people. Photo: Supplied

He knows his own networks - whether it be colleagues in the office, people he has a coffee with or meets at Chamber of Commerce events, or friends he sees for his weekly tennis game - are important for his own mental health.

“The networks you have through work are more than just business networks,” he says. “There are conversations I might have with a business colleague that I might not have with a friend or family member.”

He says the \$10 million Government money is critical and he and EMA chief executive Brett O’Riley - another strong workplace mental health advocate - will be pushing strongly for wellness to be made a government priority.

“The Ministry of Health is busy, but people like Brett and I are familiar to making sure we are not being ignored. Brett and I have already spoken, and I have witnessed some awful things over the last 10-12 weeks. I lost a son to suicide; I intend to do something and do it bloody quickly.”