

Original Article

Developing an Integrated Approach to Workplace Mental Health: A Hypothetical Conversation with a Small Business Owner

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Abstract

An integrated approach to workplace mental health encompasses three main areas of activity: (i) protecting mental health by reducing work-related and other risk factors for mental health problems, (ii) promoting mental health by developing the positive aspects of work as well as worker strengths and positive capacities, and (iii) responding to mental health problems as they manifest at work regardless of cause (work-related or otherwise). This represents an effort to distil what is a complex issue warranting a correspondingly complex set of responses into information for action that is accessible and engaging to workplace stakeholders, and that enables workplaces to begin from varying starting points to build over time towards mature multicomponent workplace mental health programs. This article, based on a plenary presentation at the *Understanding Small Enterprises 2017* international conference (25–27 October 2017, Denver), is presented in two parts. Part I is a concise summary of our integrated approach to workplace mental health. Part II presents a hypothetical conversation with a small business owner/operator who has yet to implement workplace mental health programs, but is considering doing so. In this Conversation, representing an effort in knowledge translation, we attempt to convince the small business owner/operator to begin taking action.

Keywords: application; integrated; intervention; job; knowledge translation; mental health; prevention; promotion; small business; stress; workplace; work

Introduction

This article is a written version of a plenary presentation at the *Understanding Small Enterprises 2017*

international conference (25–27 October 2017, Denver <https://useconference.com/>) in two parts: Part I is a concise summary of what we refer to as an ‘integrated

approach' to workplace mental health. Because the principles and evidence in support of this integrated approach have been articulated in some detail in previous and forthcoming publications (LaMontagne *et al.*, 2014b; LaMontagne *et al.*, 2019), including particular considerations for the small to medium-sized enterprise context (Martin and LaMontagne, 2018), we would direct readers to these publications for more detailed information on the rationale and supporting evidence for this approach. Part II presents a hypothetical conversation with a small business owner/operator who has yet to implement workplace mental health programs, but is considering doing so. In this conversation, we attempt to convince the small business owner/operator to begin taking action.

The integrated approach represents an effort to distill what is a complex issue warranting a correspondingly complex set of responses into information for action that is accessible and engaging to workplace stakeholders, and that enables workplaces to begin from varying starting points to build over time towards mature multicomponent workplace mental health programs. Our advice in Part II comes from our combined workplace mental health research, policy, and practice experience in small, medium, and large workplaces (Martin *et al.*, 2009; LaMontagne *et al.*, 2014a; Shann *et al.*, 2014; LaMontagne *et al.*, 2016; Shann *et al.*, 2018).

Part I: an overview of an integrated approach to workplace mental health

The prevalence and impacts of common mental health problems such as depression and anxiety among working adults have been recognized as a significant concern across the developed world (OECD, 2012). Interventions to address this problem have evolved from various perspectives—each with their own particular value and limitations. We have argued for an integrated intervention approach to workplace mental health (LaMontagne *et al.*, 2014b) that distills and integrates what we argue are the three key areas of activity, originating from different disciplinary threads (Fig. 1):

1. To protect mental health by reducing work-related and other risk factors for mental health problems (mainly informed by the disciplines of public health, occupational health, and organizational psychology);
2. To promote mental health by developing the positive aspects of work as well as worker strengths and positive capacities (organizational development, positive psychology); and

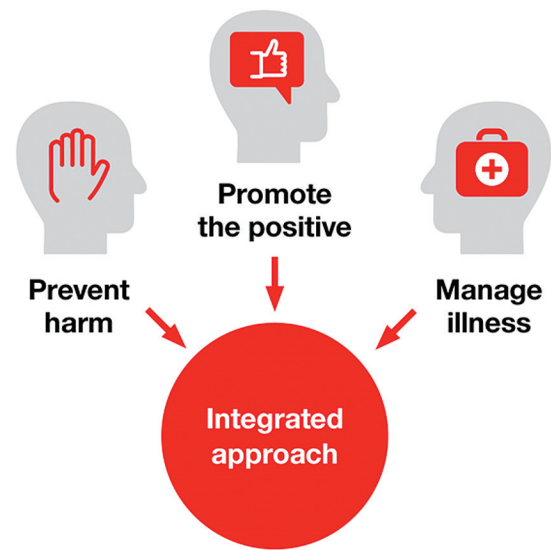


Figure 1. An integrated approach to workplace mental health.

3. To address mental health problems among working people regardless of cause (psychiatry, clinical psychology).

A defining feature of the integrated approach is the mutually reinforcing nature of these three threads or domains of workplace mental health activities. It may also offer efficiencies in implementation as well as preventive synergies, similar to those that have been realized through integrated approaches targeting cancer prevention or other aspects of workplace health (LaMontagne *et al.*, 2014b).

Briefly, we would summarize the three threads of the integrated approach as follows. The protective focus of the first thread aims to identify and address factors that can adversely affect the mental health of employees—therefore encouraging employers to fulfill their responsibility to provide a safe and healthy working environment. The overall goal of the second thread is to complement the risk reduction approach by promoting the positive aspects of work and positive individual and organizational capacities. To some extent, this complementarity is already apparent; e.g. understanding of the importance of job control has evolved from two sides of the same coin. Low job control was identified in public health research as an important risk factor for mental health problems (thread 1), and the promotion of autonomy (or high job control) is a common strategy in positive approaches (thread 2). Maintaining this dual protection–promotion emphasis can benefit workplace

mental health in many ways, not least in encouraging organizations and their representatives to examine and improve upon the positives alongside the negatives of their working environments to build workplaces that are not just safer and fairer but are also more attractive to and engaging for employees.

The third thread can complement the first two in various ways. An important aspect of managing mental illness as it manifests at work is mental health literacy (MHL). Workplace MHL refers to the knowledge, beliefs, and skills that aid in the prevention of mental disorders in the workplace, and the recognition, treatment, rehabilitation, and return to work of working people affected by mental disorders (Jorm *et al.*, 1997). (LaMontagne *et al.*, 2014b; LaMontagne *et al.*, 2019). MHL is relevant to everyone in a workplace, though training content and emphasis is usually different for people supervising others. Australia's national beyond-blue program, e.g. offers 2-h awareness training for general staff and half-day training for managers, with the manager training going into greater depth on legal and ethical considerations from the employer perspective, and a stronger emphasis on how to talk to supervisees who might be experiencing a mental health problem.

Certain knowledge and awareness aspects of MHL relate directly to the other two threads. For example, the workplace MHL strategies we have piloted highlight that poor working conditions and job stress are modifiable risk factors for common mental health problems, and (where applicable) that there are legislative occupational health & safety mandates to protect psychological as well as physical health. This builds employee awareness of, and employer commitment to, the need to address working conditions (linking to thread 1). Workplace MHL can also highlight the protective value of resilience in relation to mental disorders, building motivation for and commitment to positive approaches (linking to thread 2). In addition, starting where organizations are receptive (e.g. often MHL training, thread 3) can provide the encouragement/incentives to employers (near term improvement in MHL) needed to sustain employer interest and commitment to the improvement of working conditions and job quality over the longer term (thread 1). This could help provide entrée into workplaces that might not otherwise consider job stress or other mental health interventions on their own, increasing the reach and uptake of an integrated approach.

Although the principles are broadly applicable, in any intervention approach, some tailoring to context is important. For example, strategies employed in small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are likely to differ from those applied in large public organizations or

corporate entities. Particular considerations for SMEs in this regard have been detailed elsewhere (Martin and LaMontagne, 2018). These considerations are embedded in the hypothetical conversation that follows.

Part II: a conversation with a small business owner/operator

Below we role-play a conversation with a hypothetical small business owner/operator who has yet to implement workplace mental health programs, but is considering doing so. We present arguments around the need for workplace mental health programs and how to get started as well as some options for resourcing supporting materials and other help. The voice of the hypothetical owner/operator is noted and italicized wherever it appears; our responses are in normal text. References and subheadings are included sparingly for the benefit of reader, but are not part of the conversation *per se*.

The sympathetic small business (SB) owner/operator asks: *I'm hearing more and more about workplace mental health, and I know some businesses are doing things in this area. But I don't know a lot about it and I don't have a lot of time or resources to direct this way. What do you think I should do?*

You need to look at three things: (i) preventing harm, (ii) promoting the positive, and (iii) responding to mental health issues as they manifest at work (Fig. 1).

SB owner/operator: Sounds ok, but that could be a lot? Is all that really necessary?

Yes, we believe taking action in each of these three areas is the best way to go. Why? First, by way of background, were you aware that mental health problems are very common in the working population? At any point in time, roughly one in five workers are experiencing a mental health problem (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2012). Most of those problems are mild to moderate—such as temporarily feeling distressed or having mild anxiety, but about one in 20 employed people are working with a serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia or major depression. So, in short, you are likely to work with people who have mental health problems, most likely mild or temporary ones, at some point—if you have not already.

This has particularly important implications for you as a manager or business owner. For example, in Australia and many other developed countries (Shain, 2010) you have legal as well as ethical obligations as an employer to provide work that is—to the extent feasible—free from risks to psychological health. This is the main emphasis of the first thread of *Preventing Harm*:

meeting your obligations under Occupational Health & Safety law. This is mostly about controlling stressors at work—such as long working hours, low control over how you do your job, excessive job demands. These and other stressors can have negative impacts on mental and physical health, as well as on health behaviors, such as smoking and alcohol consumption. Most prominent among these are increases in the risk of depression, anxiety, burnout, and even suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

You, as SB owner/operator, have probably experienced some of these stressors and have a sense of how they could affect your health—for better as well as for worse. For examples, in small to medium enterprises, compared to larger ones, working people tend to have higher autonomy, or control over how they do their work—this is a positive influence on health. But—and this is particularly true for SB owner/operators, they also tend to have longer working hours, lower job security, higher workloads, and higher personal and financial investment in the business (Martin and LaMontagne, 2018). These can negatively affect both physical and mental health.

Other obligations as an employer could concern human rights, equal opportunity, and disability employment laws. These can have to do with providing reasonable accommodation to someone returning to work from a mental or physical illness, or providing reasonable accommodation to workers with disabilities. Here, you can see how *Responding to Mental Health Issues* is an essential thread that you need to consider as an owner/operator.

The one remaining thread is *Promoting the Positive* at work. While this one is not legally mandated, there are good reasons for doing this that we'll come to in a few minutes.

SB owner/operator: But we don't have the time or resources for all this...

You don't have to take it all on at once. You can start small with awareness raising to foster an environment where mental health can be discussed. For example, you could do this by marking World Mental Health Day, or having a suicide prevention awareness day (e.g. an 'RUOK Day', see <https://www.ruok.org.au/>). If you are part of a small business network, Chamber of Commerce, or other network, you could consider getting specific advice there, or even sharing program or support services to make it more manageable and affordable. How about listening to some short perspectives on this from other SB owner/operators? Try our Business in Mind website, which includes some brief testimonials from SB owner/operators (www.businessinmind.edu.au).

SB owner/operator: That's all well and good, but... I don't think the stuff that's out there is really in line with the needs of small business... they don't really understand the particulars and constraints of running a small business.

It's certainly true that the early stuff coming out on workplace mental health was more based on the experience of medium to large business, and also more oriented to their needs. But that's changing—there's a growing range of workplace mental health programs, materials, and more for small businesses of various kinds. For examples, there's our *Business in Mind* workplace mental health program just mentioned that was designed specifically for small to medium enterprises (open access resources at www.businessinmind.edu.au). Then there's a whole new set of specific resources for small businesses on *beyondblue's Heads Up* website (<https://www.headsup.org.au/healthy-workplaces/for-small-businesses>) (Fig. 2). These resources were launched in 2017 and were developed by the Australian government-funded mental health promotion foundation called *beyondblue*. We can vouch for these materials being based on good information and principles; indeed our research has informed some of the materials.

This is an important challenge we know that you face in using the Internet: what sources and materials to trust. We can help you navigate internet resources, helping you select evidence-based advice and programs.

SB Owner /Operator: Ok, so suppose I give this a try. Where do I start?

Small. Picture planting a little tree with three branches corresponding to *Protecting from Harm*, *Promoting the Positive*, and *Responding to Mental Health Issues* as they arise... and growing it over time. Start with one thing on each branch and add on as you go...

Preventing harm

I suspect you might even be already doing some things in these areas. First, let's talk about *Protecting from Harm*: Do you informally check in with staff on a regular basis? Things like having a quick word: 'How'd that job go yesterday?' 'Have everything you need for that client?'

Do you adjust things as needed? Such as re-allocating tasks or staff in response to acute demands, or taking on extra help in peak periods?

SB owner/operator: Yea, I do that sort of thing sometimes, especially when we're busy.

Well, in addition to sound management that's *Preventing Harm* by monitoring and managing workload. In a

Healthy workplaces for small businesses	Mental health and small business owners	Looking after yourself as a small business owner
It makes good business sense to support the mental health of your employees, this is a good place to start.	Learn more about the symptoms and types of stress, anxiety and depression that can be affecting your wellbeing.	Ideas for looking after your mental health at work and achieving a good work-life balance.
Managing others for small business owners	Suicide prevention	Workplace bullying
If one of your staff is struggling you can play an important role in supporting them.	Prevent suicide by looking out for possible warning signs, reaching out and talking about it.	What you should know about preventing and responding to workplace bullying.
Resources for small businesses	Education and training	Small business case studies
Explore the range of workplace mental health information for small businesses.	Build up your expertise or the skills of employees to improve mental health in the workplace.	Find out what's worked for other businesses and people through our collection of case studies and personal stories.

Figure 2. Sample resources for workplace mental health in SB. From beyondblue's open access Heads Up website at <https://www.headsup.org.au/healthy-workplaces/for-small-businesses>.

small business, the owner can often do this effectively by informal means, just by virtue of size and being engaged in the work at the ground level with employees.

SB owner /operator: Yea, that's right. I'm right in there with them when things get busy.

Great. The parallels between good business management and workplace mental health are worth spinning out

further—there's a lot of overlap. To run your business, you work out the service or product you're to provide or produce. Then you work out what it will take to do that—including the sort of personnel/skills/experience, infrastructure, equipment, materials, etc. that will be required. And of course, you want to do this in the most efficient and effective way possible so that your business will be viable (efficiency) and you'll be providing a

product or service of choice (effective). As owner/operator, you've always got an eye on that balance between inputs and outputs (Fig. 3).

Picture the same idea at the level of the individual worker. She or he faces a similar *balance* at the job level—there are certain requirements of the job (what needs to be done, produced, provided) and there are the corresponding resources provided to get the job done. Those resources include what the worker brings to the job (e.g. education, skills, experience) and what's provided beyond that (e.g. the infrastructure, materials, business processes, supervision, etc.). When the requirements exceed what the worker has to get the job done, the worker gets stressed. And if that happens frequently or for prolonged periods then it can be harmful to mental and physical health.

SB owner/operator: So you're saying that managing people's mental health is like managing the business.

Yes—that the same basic principles apply. Good people management is consistent with job stress prevention. And that whatever you might invest in becoming a better people manager is likely to benefit workplace mental health as much as your business.

SB owner/operator: Yes, but the skills are different. Understanding how people are doing isn't the same as monitoring a profit and loss balance.

True. It's the people skills that are emphasized and developed in the 'integrated approach.' Those 'resources' for getting a job done include how you lead and supervise your workers. For example—how you can best support them while at the same time fulfilling other demands of being their boss. What is reasonable in this regard? How do you give feedback that's constructive and motivating and avoid being harshly critical and demotivating? How do you best manage conflict among employees? How do you set a tone or culture where people are engaged in their work yet feel free to talk to you about how they're going?



Figure 3. Parallels between running a business and preventing job stress.

SB owner/operator: Ok. This is a lot, but I can see how all of this would be helpful to me in running my business.

Promoting the positive

Great, enough on *Preventing Harm* for now. Let's see what you might be doing on *Promoting the Positive*. How well do you know your staff, their different strengths, and limitations?

SB owner/operator: Well, yes, generally. I'd say so. It's not so hard because we're a small group.

True, this is a one of the virtues of being small. Do you know what your individual staff like most about their work? Is it possible to give them more of the type of work they like?

SB owner/operator: Maybe...

Great—here's the sort of thing I'm thinking of. Let's take a fictional character, Sally. She's a skilled accounts manager, but she doesn't seem engaged lately. You check in with her to see how it's going, and it turns out she'd be keen to get her head out of the books more often and have more personal interaction with clients. So, you progressively share more client relations responsibilities with Sally, she gets more engaged, and you're freed up to do something else. This is an example of *Promoting the Positive*—in this case with both workplace mental health and business benefits.

Most people like a bit of challenge in their work. It's one of the things that brings us pride, that makes us feel like valuable contributors to community and society. And working toward realistic and achievable challenges promotes mental health. So another example of promoting the positive while simultaneously improving business effectiveness would be to talk to your workers about setting some individual or group work goals of their choosing (e.g. new skill development, rearranging the way a service is provided based on their day to day experience), then supporting them towards achieving those goals.

Responding to mental health issues

Now on to *Responding to Mental Health Issues* as they manifest at work. As mentioned a bit earlier, if you haven't encountered an employee mental health issue yet—including your own mental health—it's likely to occur sometime.

SB Owner /Operator: Are you telling me I'm now responsible for my staff's mental health!?

Table 1. Some Useful Workplace Mental Health Resources.

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- Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace's *Workplace Strategies for Mental Health*: <https://www.workplaces-strategiesformentalhealth.com/>
 - Guarding Minds at Work's *Workplace Guide to Psychological Health & Safety*: <http://www.guardingmindsatwork.ca/>
 - *Guidelines on Providing Mental Health First Aid in the Workplace* (2016): <https://mhfa.com.au/resources/mental-health-first-aid-guidelines#mhfaworkplace>
 - *Promoting Positive Mental Health in the Workplace – Guidelines for Organisations* (2015): <http://www.superfriend.com.au/supporters/research/promoting-positive-mental-health-in-the-workplace-guidelines-for-organisations>
 - *Victorian Workplace Mental Wellbeing Collaboration—Promoting Positive Mental Wellbeing in Victorian Workplaces* (2015): <http://leadingwellvic.com.au/>
 - *Guidelines for Organisations on the Workplace Prevention of Mental Health Problems* (2013): <https://mhfa.com.au/cms/guidelines#mhfaprevent>
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No! But you are responsible for providing work that is psychologically safe to the extent feasible, especially if you are legally an employer. The key knowledge and skills you need here are: how to recognize signs of possible mental health problems, how to appropriately express your observations or concerns, how to offer support, and how to direct or refer people to further help when needed. It's key to remember that as a manager, you're doing what you can to support the person in their work role, *not* trying to solve their mental health problem.

If you have encountered a mental health issue with someone you were managing, think about how you responded. Did you find yourself wanting to know more about how to respond, or worried about saying the wrong thing? Part of this is also understanding worker entitlements to confidentiality—e.g. you need to know a person's work abilities and limitations to determine what accommodations you as an employer can offer, but you don't need to inquire about or know their diagnosis. This requires particular sensitivity in small workplace, where people tend to know each other better than in larger workplaces.

These sorts of discussions can also be about finding reasonable accommodations for someone returning to work from a mental or other illness. Again, some countries have disability accommodation laws that would be relevant here.

Getting started

SB owner/operator: Ok, so what next? Where should I start?

Here are some ideas:

How about thinking about your own mental health as an owner/operator? Check out this site on the new *beyondblue* Small Business pages—it includes a self-check on your work-life balance (from Fig. 2 upper

right, and see <https://www.headsup.org.au/your-mental-health/mental-health-and-small-business-owners-looking-after-yourself-as-a-small-business-owner>).

For an easy entrée, you could do some web-based awareness training for staff—you could start with an overview of this page of resources for employees in small businesses: <https://www.headsup.org.au/healthy-workplaces/for-employees>). That could be followed up by a discussion with staff to see what sort of further training or programs they might like to have. Or you could follow up with something more focused, and where you don't need to be a workplace mental health expert, such as one-on-one or group discussions with staff about what's going well at work and what could be improved.

In addition to the resources we've mentioned already, there are many that we and others have developed to support efforts in *Preventing Harm, Promoting the Positive*, and *Responding to Mental Health Issues* (Table 1). But what we've discussed so far should be plenty for now.

We hope that gives you a concrete sense of what workplace mental health is about and what you can do to have a mentally healthy small business. And we hope you can see that you are probably on the way already, and what you and staff learn will help you as much in life as it will at work.

So plant your little tree and grow those three branches out. In time, you can nurture this into a mature program that supports your business as well serving to make yours a mentally healthy workplace.

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