

When it comes to our regional and remote business community, have we got our mental health message wrong?

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I have recently been speaking with councillors, social workers, and mental health professionals as I travelled around the Wide Bay Burnett, asking each how things are going, and if they have noticed an increase in mental health cases.

The answer has not only surprised me but has made me think - when it comes to providing services to small business, we might not be delivering what's needed.

Not for a second am I dismissing the great work being done in mental health by some fantastic people, nor am I saying anything needs to stop.

A quote attributed to Archbishop Desmond Tutu is

"There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in."

We need to consider that when it comes to mental health and the state's small business community, we have it wrong. We have the message, the plan, and the solution wrong.

To give an analogy – we are using a fire truck to put out a small campfire! We not only spread embers everywhere, but we risk flooding everything else in the process!

So, what was the answer these professionals gave me?

"No, we haven't seen an increase in mental health issues, but have seen an increase in situational stress."

Let me emphasise, I'm not an expert and I rely on what these experts have told me, along with readings provided to me. I stress, what I propose is not a magical bullet, and many people do have substantial mental issues from the stress and anxiety that has been building up over the last almost 2 years.

But for some, the current message of "ring Beyond Blue or Lifeline and talk to someone on the phone" is not working – business owners don't see the need to ring Beyond Blue or Lifeline. They aren't suicidal or depressed, they aren't abusive or violent. They are under stress - a known precursor to the development of mental health issues.

Often, situational stress can be easily treated and managed.

An article written by Eileen Bailey in Health Central said,

"STRESS is an emotional response to a real or perceived threat. Situational, or acute stress, occurs when you think, "I have to solve this problem or something bad is going to happen." Chronic stress occurs when you can no longer see a way to solve the problem. Situational stress can cause short-term physical symptoms.

However, chronic stress can lead to long-term health problems, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes.

Even though situational stress is normally short-term, it can still cause problems. You might find it difficult to concentrate or find you are unable to make a decision. You might feel light-headed. For some people, stress can trigger a panic attack. If you only experience this type of stress occasionally, relaxation techniques like deep breathing, yoga, or meditation can help. Exercise can also reduce stress levels.

If, however, you experience this type of stress on a regular basis (not from an ongoing situation, but you find that you easily become stressed), it might help to work with a therapist to find additional ways to reduce your stress levels.

Chronic stress occurs when you live through a stressful situation day in and day out. Maybe you are in an unhealthy relationship, or you have a demanding job -- or a job you despise. Maybe you care for a sick relative, have financial problems, or have difficult neighbors. When you have chronic stress, you often don't see a solution to the problem or have stopped looking for one. You feel stuck. Because of this, chronic stress can sometimes lead to depression."

<https://www.healthcentral.com/article/situational-stress-vs-chronic-stress-a-primer>

Situational stress can cause a build-up of adrenaline and cortisol in the body and impact a person's ability to make decisions, decisions that can lead them to a way out of the situation or deeper into situational stress and mental health.

In an article written by the Mayo Clinic they outlined the following:

"When we encounter a threat the hypothalamus, sets off an alarm system in your body. Through a combination of nerve and hormonal signals, this system prompts your adrenal glands to release a surge of hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol.

Adrenaline increases your heart rate, elevates your blood pressure and boosts energy supplies.

Cortisol, increases sugars (glucose) in the bloodstream, enhances your brain's use of glucose and increases the availability of substances that repair tissues.

Cortisol also curbs functions that would be nonessential or harmful in a fight-or-flight situation. It alters immune system responses and

suppresses the digestive system, the reproductive system and growth processes. This complex natural alarm system also communicates with the brain regions that control mood, motivation and fear. Once a perceived threat has passed, hormone levels return to normal. As adrenaline and cortisol levels drop, your heart rate and blood pressure return to baseline levels, and other systems resume their regular activities.”

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress/art-20046037>

But when stressors are always present and people feel constantly under attack, the fight-or-flight reaction stays turned on, impacting the decision-making processes, memory, and concentration even a person’s ability to grow and put on weight.

An example of situational stress I have encountered would be the seething anger I have experienced when speaking to businesses about Government grants available. While not a councillor, it is easy to see that the mere mention of lockdowns could be a trigger for stress and anger.

Situational stress could also be an explanation as to why we haven’t yet seen a significant increase in calls to hotlines, particularly from regional and remote areas.

Which brings me back to my point – regional businesspeople aren’t listening to the message of calling Beyond Blue or ringing Lifeline.

What they need is **stress management tips**.

What they need is **someone they can talk to**.

What they need is **a programme tailed for their needs**.

As one business owner stated:

“I’m not depressed or suicidal, I don’t need to ring lifeline. Yeah, I’m stressed, my muscles and joints ache, and I forget stuff, but that’s just being a small business owner and getting old – isn’t it?”

In an article written by Laura Strom for the National Alliance on Mental Illness titled “Situation Symptoms or Serious Depression: What’s the Difference?” she outlined her stress management toolkit.

Exercises such as long, slow deep breathing to reduce stress and anxiety she refers to as the first line of defence. Another is progressive muscle relaxation, a technique where you tighten various muscle groups, hold the tension for 3–5 seconds, then relax. She also highly recommends yoga, tai chi or qi-gong to help ease stress, tension and negative emotions.

“There is no magic pill, and no single technique cures situational stress or clinical depression. When life gets stressful, you can achieve a more peaceful state of mind and experience a greater sense of calm with these techniques, which experts have successfully used for decades. You can also always take the first step and contact your doctor or licensed mental health professional today.”

Laura C. Strom

<https://www.nami.org/Blogs/NAMI-Blog/April-2017/Situational-Symptoms-or-Serious-Depression-What-s>

From areas such as the Gold Coast we hear of men’s “walk and talk” groups helping men get issues of their chest while getting in exercise. Don’t want to talk today? That’s OK. Need to hang back and talk privately? No problems.

From the Kingaroy Chamber of Commerce, we have the S.M.I.L.E. program. This program provides business owners and their employees with the tools to not only recognise signs of stress and mental fatigue, but also the skills to be able to effectively have a meaningful conversation and encourage professional help.

The Chambers philosophy surrounding the program is one of rather than have the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff, lets put it at the top and stop people jumping off. This has been a galvanising rally call for the community.

These are just a couple of examples of the simple on the ground and available support. These programs, while simple, are incredible powerful and making a significant impact in their respective communities. And there are many more out in our communities, trying to make a difference.

So, I come back to the original question I posed at the start of this discussion paper.

Are we doing mental health wrong?

The answer, when it comes to our business community in regional and remote areas, is a resounding **yes - we are**.

For the broader community we do need the messages of beyond blue and lifeline, but for the small business community of Queensland, particularly our rural and remote businesses, we need a different approach.

We need to:

- **Provide messages, tips, tools, and tricks to help our business owners de-stress.**

- **Fund services that are in our communities, giving that friendly ear, literally walking beside them, not on the end of a phone.**
- **Work with those under stress to help them be part of their own solutions.**
- **Continue to reduce situational stress in our communities across Queensland.**

Unfortunately, we only have a limited window of opportunity, as the longer people are under stress, the more likely they will develop significant long-term issues, which are very much harder to treat.

I opened this discussion with a quote from Desmond Tutu and would like to close with one.

“When we ignore the pain, it grows bigger and bigger, and like an abscess that is never drained, eventually it will rupture. When that happens, it can reach into every area of our lives—our health, our families, our jobs, our friendships, our faith, and our very ability to feel joy may be diminished by the fallout from resentments, anger, and hurts that are never named.”

— Desmond Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*

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My Background

I have been involved in the small business community for over 12 years as a member of the Bundaberg and District Chamber of Commerce. I was also a small business owner, working with micro businesses to better market their services.

In late 2020 I was approached by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry Queensland (CCIQ) to join a small team of Regional Stakeholder Managers. The team's charter was to work with regional business organisations, such as but not limited to Chambers of Commerce.

In the 12 months of this role, I travelled over 40,000 km's working with business groups and businesses across the Wide Bay Burnett, from Theodore in the North to Kingaroy in the South, from Hervey Bay in the East to Biggenden in the West.

I saw firsthand not only the increased stress businesses across the region have experienced but the lack of available and appropriate services to help business owners manage this stress.

Business leaders who are facing the real prospect of losing everything ringing me in tears looking for a way out became part of the job.

The business owner who finds that the employee who works back a lot can't go home as they have been evicted from their home and they can't find somewhere to live. What can I do to help the business owner find something for the employee and their family?

Or worse, the business owner who comes to work to find the employee who stayed back took their life in the workshop that night. What do they do next?

The contact on these positions ended early November 2021 after 12 months, but I have kept in contact with all stakeholders and businesses through the Christmas period. Things are not getting any better in our regions.