

Lead

# Coping with pandemic stress as a small business owner

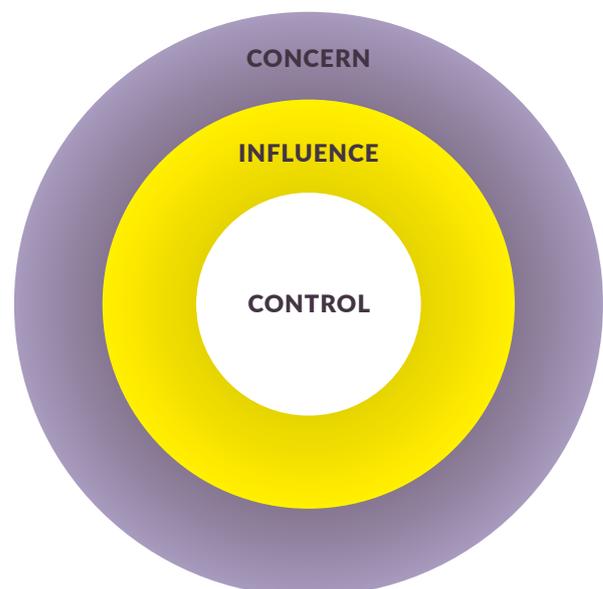
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*It's been a rollercoaster 18 months for our small business owners in Aotearoa - jumping from lockdown to lockdown, from unknown to unknown, and navigating the minefield of ever-changing employee, stakeholder, and business needs. With these big challenges can come strong emotions (fear, worry, anger, overwhelm), physical signs of stress (poor sleep, muscle tension, breathlessness) and even changes in the way we think – finding it harder to concentrate, plan and prioritise.*

In the work our team of psychologists does with small businesses around the motu, we find that understanding the science of what's going on in our brains can help. When we operate in an environment of uncertainty, our brains furiously seek to find answers. As a result, we often land on the worst-case scenario as a way of preparing for the scariest outcome. This can cause our amygdala (the emotion centre of the brain) to fire up, engaging that “fight or flight” response. Problem is – when our amygdala fires up, our ability to think clearly and make good decisions dials down (not good when we're trying to run a business!). The trick is finding a way to cope with the uncertainty, and the emotions that come with it, while also keeping our “smart brain” on board.

Our best tips for looking after ourselves and protecting our smart brain start with directing energy towards what you can control and influence – and finding ways to ignore or de-prioritise what you can't. Imagine a circle with yourself in the middle – you control your own reactions and behaviour and, likely, certain business decisions. At the next ring of the circle, you have some influence (but not control) over your employees' behaviour, your whānau and your community response. At the outer ring of the circle, you have concern for

the national pandemic response, hospital capacity, business regulations etc. – but you usually don't have control over them. Identifying and categorising our worries into these circles can help us with where to direct our energy.



## SO, WHERE DO WE START WITH WHAT WE ACTUALLY HAVE CONTROL OVER?

Consistent scientific research has shown that we experience less fatigue and maintain stronger wellbeing when we experience stress or challenge for specific periods of time (i.e. diving into the complex business decisions), then balance this effort with active recovery (when we purposefully recharge our mental and physical batteries). Oscillating between periods of challenge and periods of recovery is ideal, with planned and regular recovery as optimum.

If the idea of scheduling recovery time, when you're run off your feet with business demands, is laughable, remember that recovery takes many forms. It's not just about going on a holiday. It's about taking purposeful steps – however small - to cool down our stress response and give our bodies and brains time to recoup.

## WHEN YOU NEED IMMEDIATE RECOVERY, TAKE ACTION. TRY OUT THESE SIMPLE STRATEGIES:

1. Slow down your breathing – check you are breathing from your diaphragm (belly breathing), not your chest, and take slow breaths for a few minutes. This helps to return your body and mind into a restorative state.
2. Disconnect – take a “no technology” break (even 5 minutes is useful) to reduce mental fatigue.
3. Do something pleasurable – try the 5-minute quiz, or chat to a colleague you like, or plan something you enjoy for actioning later, as feel-good emotions provide recovery fuel for our brains and bodies.
4. Speak more slowly. Notice if you are feeling pressured to get the sentence out, or if you are tripping over your words. Breathe.
5. Deliberately move more slowly – notice the urge to rush and resist it. Give yourself permission to pause.

Remember too - if you feel like you are too busy to take a recovery break, it's a definite sign you need one!

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## FOR LARGER CHUNKS OF RECOVERY, TAP INTO YOUR CORE WELLBEING BOOSTERS:

- **Physical.** Recognising it's hard when we're busy or locked down, keep doing your best to prioritise your health – regular exercise burns off the adrenalin that keeps us in “fight or flight” mode, eat well, try to sleep, and stay away from too much alcohol and sugar (it's just making your body work harder).
- **Mental.** Practise mindful meditation - there's overwhelming scientific evidence that regular practice will improve our mental clarity as well, reduce mental fatigue and dial down our emotion response to engage our “smart brain” instead. If you are not sure how to start, try a free app or simply try tuning into your breath for a few minutes when you notice your stress response kick in. Also helpful is breaking tasks down into smaller, manageable chunks and purposefully doing one thing at time – multi-tasking drains energy.
- **Emotional.** Increase your experiences of positive emotion – and think of them as something you plan for, rather than stumble upon. It can help to actively think of (or do) something that helps you feel grateful, content, hopeful or satisfied and schedule those activities into your calendar as non-negotiables. For example, walk the dog at sunset, bake with the kids, or listen to your favourite comedy podcast. These experiences help to both energise and buffer us when life, work (or both) are draining.

Finally, don't hesitate to get support – connect with others – and seek professional help if it all feels too hard. Asking for help can feel difficult, especially when you're the sole business owner *but don't try to do it alone*. Ask yourself who in your network might understand. We recommend both practical/business advice and support – such as someone else in your business network - as well as emotional support from someone close to you. Chances are, they're in need of some connection too.