

SELF-EMPLOYMENT WELLNESS ACTION PLAN

All employers have a responsibility to look after the mental health of their employees, so when you're your own boss, you too have to remember to look out for your most important employee – you. 5 million people are self-employed in the UK, who is looking after their wellbeing at work?

Research shows that the main stressors of the self-employed fall into three buckets:

Emotional: I'm not good enough, I'll never find the work, I'm worried about money, I'm feeling isolated. The thoughts and feelings that swim around in your head and get in the way of doing a good job for your customers.

Behavioural: I'm too busy, I'm not busy enough. The practical issues of how you work and what you need to work.

External: The client went quiet; the client didn't pay me, HMRC Self-Assessment reminders. The things which are usually almost entirely outside of our control.

Understand your stressors

At the end of each working day in a notebook or file on your computer, note down positive and negative experiences from your day. Did something get you excited? Did something frustrate you? Did something worry you? Capture it, and at the end of the week, reflect back to see if there are any themes. Do this for a while and you'll start to see patterns in which experiences have the most impact upon how you're feeling.

Share your challenges

It can be hugely beneficial to share these stressors with others. Talking about your experience with others who have been in similar situations helps you discover and learn techniques for coping. There are many communities focused on supporting the self-employed – such as Doing It For The kids www.doingitforthekids.net for self-employed parents; and some are general groups which cover many aspects of self-employed, such as Freelance Heroes www.freelance-heroes.com

Not only will you learn from others but simply vocalising an issue it can make it much clearer in your own mind about how to start seeing or reacting to challenges in more positive ways.

Work life balance

Take proper breaks, for example by taking at least half an hour for lunch and getting out of the area you are working if you can.

Try to ensure that a line is drawn between work and leisure. If you do need to bring work home try to ensure that you only work in a certain area of your home - and can close the door on it. Try and have a separate work mobile phone and email address so that these can be turned off during non-working hours to protect your work life balance.

Take seriously the link between work-related stress and mental ill health. Try to reduce stress, for example through exercise, relaxation or hobbies.

Recognise the importance of protective factors, including exercise, leisure activities and friendships. Try to ensure that these are not sacrificed to working longer hours, or try to ensure that you spend your spare time on these things.

Watch out for the cumulative effect of working long hours by keeping track of your working hours over a period of weeks or months rather than days. Take account of hours spent worrying or thinking about work when assessing your work-life balance. These are a legitimate part of work and a good indicator of work-related stress.

Build up resilience and ways of working well

When you gather an idea of where your main stressors are coming from, you can start to tackle them head on. Your own group of individual stressors and challenges are unique, but there will be common answers to many of them. Leapers www.leapers.co and Mind www.mind.org.uk are building a library of resources, guides and tools to help maintain your own mental health when self-employed. Making use of these resources can help you identify the stresses, and find ways of starting to address them.

Put proactive foundations in place

It can be easy to focus on the things which are causing you worry now, and forget to put things in place that stop stress from happening in the first place. These can include Finance; Healthy Habits; building and maintaining support Networks; Working Relationships and Learning and Development. Mind Tools www.mindtools.com has lots of free courses on subjects such as time management and stress management which can help. Locally the Dorset Growth Hub www.dorsetgrowthhub.co.uk can support with business growth, social media support and has a regular catch up and coffee webinar which can be great for networking and sharing common problems. Taking time off work is essential - it is when we can rest, reset, reflect, do something other than focus on work. If there's no-one counting the days off, it can be very easy to forget to take the time off. There are no right or wrong approaches to taking holiday - but starting with a minimum amount of time off, for example 25 days, the standard paid holiday for employees in the UK - could be a good place to start.

1. What helps you stay mentally healthy at work? (For example: taking a lunch break, keeping a to do list, having a diary to hand).
2. Are there any situations at work that can trigger poor mental health for you? (For example: conflict with a client, something not going to plan).
3. What can you do to support you to stay mentally healthy at work? (For example: A healthier work life balance and connecting with others).
4. What steps can you take if you start to feel unwell at work? (For example: take a break from Your working day and go for a short walk, speak to a family member or friend).

You are your businesses most important asset

Without you, your business doesn't exist. If you're not able to work, your business is not working. Taking time to invest in your own emotional wellbeing is not a luxury but an essential task to ensure your business can function. Being proactive and putting foundations in place on the good days, means you'll be better supported on the bad days. Be kind to yourself.