

## 2019 Martin Seligman Health and Wellbeing Award

### WINNER: Arts Centre Melbourne

#### The Arts Wellbeing Collective

##### Origins and principles

In 2010, Equity, the union for Australian and New Zealand actors, was receiving worrying feedback from their National Performers Committee about the mental health and wellbeing of Australian actors that included stories of bullying, sexual harassment, high levels of stress, depression and alcohol and drug abuse. At the same time, Entertainment Assist, a Melbourne-based charity, was hearing similar stories from across the wider industry, including technicians, production, marketing and management from a broad geographical spread. In response, Entertainment Assist commissioned Victoria University to interview artists and arts workers about their mental health and wellbeing.

The study uncovered shocking statistics. Of the 3,000 surveyed:

- 44% experienced symptoms of moderate to severe anxiety.
- 15.2% experienced symptoms of moderate to severe depression.
- Nearly 30% had thoughts of suicide.
- Nearly 1 in 10 had attempted suicide.

The results of the [Victoria University and Entertainment Assist survey \(van den Eynde, Fisher and Sonn, 2016\)](#) which came out first were shocking. More than a third of performing artists, 25% of industry support workers and most roadies and crew reporting mental health problems. These problems were seen as a result of issues such as bullying, sexual abuse, long and unrewarding working hours, low wages and low financial security, and a lack of appreciation for years of commitment. A follow up quantitative survey in 2016 of more than 3,000 performing artists, composers, performing arts support workers and people working in the film industry found equally problematic results.

This seminal research found that the majority of those surveyed expressed an overwhelming love of their creative work but that there was a “powerful, negative culture within the industry including a toxic, bruising work environment; extreme competition; bullying; sexual assault; sexism and racism”. What made this research a world-first was that it also gathered data about the impact of such a work environment on the mental health and wellbeing of employees, and interviewed entertainment industry workers in production, technical, and administrative roles – helping to shift the conversation away from the ‘tortured artist’ assumption.

The distressing findings of those surveyed included:

- Suicide attempts were more than double that of the general population - suicide ideation was approximately 5-7 times more than the general population and 2-3 times more over a lifetime.
- Symptomology of moderate to severe anxiety was experienced at a rate 10 times higher than in the general population, and symptomology of moderate to severe depression at five times higher than in the general population.
- 16% of workers suffered insomnia—three times greater than the general population.

- The impact of irregular work patterns and sleep disorders meant that 58% had trouble finding time for families, 63% had trouble maintaining a social life and 45% had trouble keeping contact with their friends.

The 2015 Actors Wellbeing study confirmed that the performing arts were “rife with preventable mental health issues, compromised physical health and addiction”. Amongst the recommendations of this report were two that are particularly relevant to what happened next:

- The urgency of raising actors’ awareness about the industry-specific challenges of depression, anxiety and stress, and alcohol- and drug-use.
- Training institutions and industry stakeholders should develop, implement, and maintain strategies to develop actors’ capacity both to recognise these challenges and to foster appropriate behaviours and practices.

As the largest performing arts centre in Australia, Arts Centre Melbourne takes its role as a sector leader very seriously and saw a major industry-wide need. Existing mental health programs weren’t hitting the mark, as they were often at odds with the unusual nature of creative work.

Performers, creatives and arts administrators all work under the intense pressure of completely immovable deadlines – whether the show is ready to go or not, 2,000 people are walking through the doors at 7.30pm. For many in the industry, a lot of time is spent on tour - away from home, friends and family for weeks, months or even years at a time. Actors specifically undertake the emotional challenge of inhabiting a character every night – perhaps one who is evil, sadistic or manipulative. All these factors – and many more – motivated Arts Centre Melbourne to intervene.

What was needed was a specially tailored prevention program for the performing arts industry, targeting the particular mental health and wellbeing challenges presented by the unique nature of the work.

### Implementation

A passionate and dedicated advocate of promoting positive mental health, Arts Centre Melbourne CEO, Claire Spencer, led the exploration of a program to address the unique mental health and wellbeing challenges faced by those in the performing arts. With the support of funding from government bodies, corporate sponsorship and philanthropic support, the Arts Wellbeing Collective was conceived as a consortium of arts and cultural organisations whose shared vision is to improve mental health and wellbeing for performing arts workers.

The objectives of the program were to:

- Improve support services for arts workers
- Collate and share information
- Effect industry cultural change
- Improve support networks within and between arts organisations.

The Arts Wellbeing Collective Pilot Program took place in 2017. It was hoped that the Arts Wellbeing Collective would attract 15 member organisations to participate. More than 130 organisations signed on in the Pilot year alone. The initial program comprised four workshops. Nearly 40 workshops, seminars and professional development activities took place over the course of 10 months.

Arts Centre Melbourne leadership ensured the Arts Wellbeing Collective team had genuine support to test and trial a variety of interventions, listen and empathise with the thousands engaged with the program, continually adapt the program in response to feedback, and examine trends across the sector - regardless of size and scale of the organisation. This gave the Arts Wellbeing Collective team

the opportunity to see beyond the statistics, and begin to refine a comprehensive, tailored program that could have significant impact on the industry.

Since its inception, the Arts Wellbeing Collective has embraced tenets of positive psychology, embedding the program in the promotion of positive mental health. Deliverables are positioned as empowering, future-focussed, and encourage organisations and individuals to promote positive mental health and prevent mental health problems. Positive psychology concepts utilised include strengths assessments, values building, understanding of flow states, broaden and build theory, mindfulness, positive job design, and understanding the role of promoting positive mental health for individuals, organisations and as a sector.

The guiding principles of the Arts Wellbeing Collective include:

- Prevention focused, promoting positive mental health and wellbeing, and raising awareness of mental health, mental health problems and the value of early intervention.
- Working in partnership, ensuring a variety of partnerships state-wide and across the industry – collaboration is core to the Arts Wellbeing Collective and vital to success.
- Creating systems level change, through seeking to understand and address systems, cultures and traditions that contribute to poor mental health and wellbeing in the performing arts.
- Long-term thinking, prioritising resources and initiatives that have capacity for long-lasting impact, scalability and transferability.
- Knowledge creation and dissemination, working with experts and industry leaders to find, share, create and translate the best available information, tailored for creative contexts.
- Encouraging innovation, testing, trialling and evaluating, sharing useful findings with energy and authenticity, and continue to be rigorously planned, strategically responsive and thoughtfully adaptable.

Following the proof of concept of the Pilot Program, and independent evaluation and analysis, the Arts Wellbeing Collective received funding from WorkSafe Victoria's WorkWell Mental Health Improvement Fund.

The program is completely free of charge for performing arts workers and organisations, and comprises support for developing mentally healthy creative workplaces, through targeted consulting in partnership with peak bodies, organisational psychologists and industry leaders, acknowledging the sometimes unusual needs and composition of creative workplaces. This initiative involves the exploration of what it means to create mentally healthy workplaces in the performing arts – given that a workplace can range from someone's lounge room through to a major concert hall. By developing tailored, practical principles as to what constitutes a mentally healthy workplace in the arts, mental health and wellbeing can be front of mind across workplaces of all shapes and sizes, and systemic changes can be made for long-term impact.

### Benefits and Outcomes

In its third year, the Arts Wellbeing Collective continues to create positive, systemic cultural change in the performing arts. Described by workshop participants as *earthshattering, empowering, and* thought provoking, ongoing impact measurement evaluation includes focus groups, interviews, and written feedback.

Part of the Arts Wellbeing Collective development process was to have the Pilot Program reviewed by an external consultant. Consultant and researcher Ann Tonks was appointed, and through a process that included program participation, review of participant feedback, focus groups and consultation with member organisations, evaluated the program and provided a series of recommendations to Arts Centre Melbourne.

Feedback was overwhelming positive with a desire for the program to continue and expand. The program was seen as timely, useful, resource-rich and generally well presented. Every workshop

attracted positive general comments and their overwhelming tone was gratitude for the content and to Arts Centre Melbourne for the Arts Wellbeing Collective initiative.

Following the evaluation and analysis of critical success factors, Arts Centre Melbourne worked with innovation partner, Pricewaterhouse Coopers (PwC) to investigate opportunities for strategic growth and optimisation of the program. Their report highlighted several areas for potential growth including sector diversification, geographical expansion, digital scaling, policy development, and vertical integration. These growth options were then assessed according to their alignment to vision, capacity to fulfil key objectives of the Arts Wellbeing Collective, and the capabilities and priorities of Arts Centre Melbourne.

The recommendations from the evaluation and the PwC report were then assessed against best practice research into organisational health and wellbeing frameworks. Much of the research has been adapted and interpreted as the Arts Wellbeing Collective model is unique in that it addresses both sector and organisational development, as well as building individual capacity. The existing literature on workplace mental health and wellbeing typically focusses on interventions within single organisations, not an industry-wide program.

The Arts Wellbeing Collective is the only program of its kind worldwide – embracing extensive cross-industry partnerships and collaboration as a core way of working, enabling:

- Validation of issues as whole of community, not just any one person or one organisation
- Advocacy to key groups such as government and funding bodies, as a united front as opposed to disparate attempts to improve a sector-wide problem
- The ability to identify and address trends at scale; seeing what issues, interventions and themes were shared across all arts and cultural organisations, regardless of size and scale
- Industry led-by industry, for industry; this program was initiated at ACM for the whole sector, and thus had an existing trusted brand leading the work, and a trust that came from the intrinsic understanding that this program is 'for us'.

A detailed monitoring and evaluation plan involving ongoing research and review is in place. This includes review tools such as case studies, employee surveys, partnership analysis tools, social network analysis and HSE Management Standards Indicator Tool. The full evaluation will be completed by the end of 2021.

## Summary

The Arts Wellbeing Collective is an industry-leading, internationally renowned Arts Centre Melbourne initiative that promotes positive mental health and wellbeing for those who work in the performing arts. The Arts Wellbeing Collective currently comprises a consortium of more than 200 arts and cultural organisations who benefit from this uniquely tailored program.