

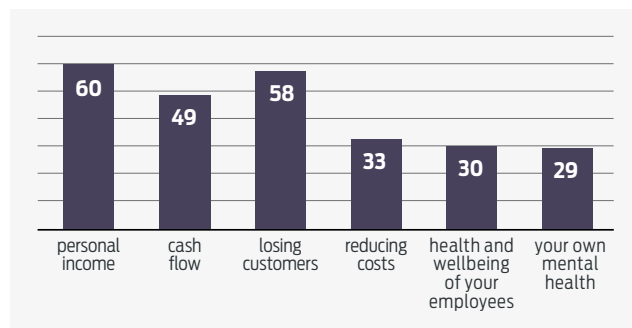
# Investigating drivers of poor mental health in the industry

The COVID-19 pandemic put a lot of pressure on people working in the busy construction industry. We explored what steps owners of small and medium-sized construction firms could take to become more resilient. We also continued our quest to learn more about the triggers of poor mental health in the sector. This year, we looked at why the relationship between builders and clients often caused stress, and we came up with ideas that would help both parties to know what to expect.

A healthy construction sector means more than a booming build and property market. In 2018, the ground-breaking BRANZ study *Mental health in the construction industry* revealed that the sector had the highest proportion of suicides across all industries. Since then, BRANZ's mental health research has continued, focusing on learning more about the reasons behind these alarming numbers and the drivers of poor mental health in the construction sector.

At BRANZ, we fast tracked the research project *The mental health and wellbeing of small and medium-sized construction firms in New Zealand*, originally planned to be undertaken later in 2021. Earlier studies had informed us that those working in small and medium-sized construction firms generally struggle the most in times of uncertainty. We were also aware that COVID-19 would increase some of the primary factors that contribute to suicide risk for construction industry workers, such as job insecurity and work-related stress.

The study investigated the sources of stress on construction sector SMEs before and during the pandemic. A third of those who responded to a survey released in August 2020 expressed concern for the health and wellbeing of their employees and their own mental health. The key driver of stress for the participants in this survey was the financial wellbeing of their business.



Areas of concerns raised by SME owners in New Zealand (percentage of survey respondents). Source: Xero.

The mindset of the owners of construction enterprises has a direct impact on the employees and subcontractors working for that company. The study found that well-managed firms generally result in good mental health and wellbeing for the owners and employees involved. The report reinforced the importance of business basics and strong management practices – an area that small firms often struggle to stay on top of.

## Understanding the root cause – looking at the builder-client relationship

This year, we also teamed up with Registered Master Builders Association and New Zealand Certified Builders to explore



how conflict between builders and their clients can impact on both parties' mental health. We then came up with ideas on how to repair that often strained relationship.

The study *Understanding the builder-client relationship* showed that communication demands on builders are high. Many worked with clients outside business hours and on weekends, leaving little time for builders to take a break and put work aside. Most builders who had experienced a serious disagreement with a client reported that the conflict impacted on their mental health. Conflict often emerged when the client's expectations were not met. We believe early and clear communication with clients could help both parties to navigate through the tension points that commonly emerge during the build process.

As a next step, BRANZ suggests industry bodies work with consumers to develop a workbook that would function as a mutually agreed code of conduct for the builder-client relationship. A *Working together* resource could regulate when and how a builder can be contacted, frequency of site visits and the process for identifying and reporting defects.

The study also encourages the industry to provide better advice around creating professional boundaries, on self-care and on help with managing the mental health impacts ongoing conflict and stress may cause.

This year's mental health-related research helped us gain a better picture of some of the factors that affect the mental health of the building and construction workforce. The more we know about these stress factors, the better the industry can address the root causes and work with providers on developing tailored support programmes.

## Read more:

- ▶ **Research report:** [The mental health and wellbeing of small and medium-sized construction firms in New Zealand](#)
- ▶ **Research report:** *Understanding the builder-client relationship*  
[Part 1: Builder perspectives](#)  
[Part 2: Client perspectives](#)
- ▶ **BUILD article:** [Poor business skills hurting](#)