

Study shines a spotlight on darkness within the entertainment industry

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They were 30 hours that turned Matthew Henderson's life on its head. Back in March, the respected theatrical stage manager lost three friends to suicide, all of whom he had worked alongside in the entertainment industry.

"In this line of work, you create family when you are on the road, and that 30-odd hours affected so many people I know," Henderson says. "Suicide was something that had impacted my life when I was about 13, when I lost a good friend. Then it was every couple of years. Then I lost someone I knew or had worked with every year. Then it was a couple of times a year. When that day happened back in March, when three people I knew took their lives, I realised there was something wrong and we needed to fix it."

Henderson, who is production stage manager for *The Lion King*, took to Facebook late at night to vent his thoughts. The next morning he had hundreds of responses from friends and colleagues. That encouraged him to contact Entertainment Assist, a charity helping workers in the entertainment industry.

Henderson learnt the problem was deeper than he realised.

With funding from the Pratt Foundation, Entertainment Assist commissioned Victoria University to conduct the largest survey of industry workers undertaken anywhere in the world. The results of that survey of 2900 people, ranging from singers and actors to roadies and riggers, found that the rate of attempted suicide in the industry is more than double the rest of the population. In the past 12 months, workers in the entertainment industry considered taking their own lives almost seven times more than the general population.

Almost one in every 14 performers surveyed admitted to making an attempt on their life. For roadies and technicians, the figures were even more troubling, at almost one in 12. That compares with roughly one on 30 for the wider Australian population.

"Sadly, it was pretty much what we expected," says Susan Cooper, general manager of Entertainment Assist.

"Anecdotally, we have known there has been a problem forever, but we didn't have statistics to stand up and take notice. Now the problem cannot be denied."

According to the survey, more than 40 per cent of Australian performers have been diagnosed with mental illness, with the most common being depression and anxiety.

Cooper says a range of factors contribute to high rates of mental health issues and suicide attempts in the industry.

"I think, the nature of the industry, it attracts people who are artistic," she says. "By that very nature have to have a sense and sensitivity to be a performer, but it's also a cut-throat industry and there you have problems. Then it's the nature of the industry. The majority of people are shift workers. That causes an enormous impact on family. Income is a real issue. And there just aren't enough jobs for the supply of workers. That means fewer jobs fewer opportunities, and the stress and anxiety of not knowing where your next pay packet is coming from."

Such is the rate of pay disparity with the rest of the community, 63 per cent of professional performers earn less than the national minimum wage of \$34,112 a year.

Entertainment Assist will on Thursday – which is world suicide prevention day – announce a concert to raise awareness of the issues confronting the industry. A production titled *Out From Under* will be held on September 21 at Her Majesty's Theatre. It has been written and produced by Henderson and some of his friends since that dark day back in March.

Hosted by Julia Zemiro and directed by Kelley Abbey, confirmed artists and presenters include iOTA, Daniel MacPherson, Dami Im, Debra Byrne, Silvie Paladino and Michael Cormick.

"I just can't sit on the sidelines anymore," says Henderson. "Asking someone if they are OK is just the first step, but we need to learn to look out for each other better, or this won't go away."

HAUNTING NUMBERS

63% of performers earn less than the National Minimum Wage of \$34,112

10% of professional singers have attempted suicide

59.5% of entertainment industry workers have sought help for mental health issues

40% of performers have been diagnosed with a mental illness

36% of roadies reported "suicide ideation" in their lifetime

Lack of sleep, low pay, drug and alcohol abuse the contributing factors

Source: Working in the Australian Entertainment Industry survey, Victoria University

For help or information call Lifeline 131 114 or beyondblue [1300 224 636](tel:1300224636).

www.entertainmentassist.org.au

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/study-shines-a-spotlight-on-darkness-within-the-entertainment-industry-20150909-gjinxp.html>