

May 2024

# ENTREPRENEURIAL MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

Windhoek, Namibia 

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b> .....	3
<b>Background</b> .....	3
<b>Study Design</b> .....	4
<b>Results</b> .....	5
<b>Discussion</b> .....	9
<b>Recommendations</b> .....	11
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	11
<b>Authors</b> .....	12

# INTRODUCTION

This report was created in partnership with **Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI)** and the **Namibia Investment Promotion and Development Board (NIPDB) Micro to Small Enterprises (MSME) Department**. The NIPDB worked with research students from WPI to produce mental health support recommendations for entrepreneurs.

This project revolved around investigating the mental health and wellness of small to medium-sized business owners in Namibia. The students distributed a survey and conducted interviews to collect their data. Using these findings, recommendations were produced for the NIPDB to better support the wellness of MSME owners.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

*The main motivation was to improve the overall ecosystem for entrepreneurs. To accomplish this, the project was broken up into three main objectives*

- 1. Identify stressors affecting MSME owners**
- 2. Analyze Namibian business culture**
- 3. Justify mental health support programs and resources**

# BACKGROUND

## ECOSYSTEM

Concerns like high unemployment and income inequality are impeding Namibia's economic prospects. To combat these and to improve citizens' access to the labor market, the nation is implementing entrepreneurial education. Yet constant work pressure and social isolation are not the only risks that come with being an entrepreneur. Entrepreneurs often experience elevated levels of anxiety due to their perceived need to project an impeccable image. Compared to regular workers, research suggests that they are more prone to anxiety. The lack of capital and investment opportunities, as well as a lack of sound financial practices, are two of the specific issues facing Africa.

## EXISTING MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Nestle Central West Africa (CWA), based in Ghana, encourages employees across Central West Africa to take daily “wellness breaks” in the office to discourage employees from being overly sedentary. Along with this, “Workout Thursdays” were implemented as an initiative to further encourage movement outside of the office by bringing in certified personal trainers, and “Fruity Tuesdays” were introduced to provide employees with nutritious fruit in the office. Nestle employees expressed that these initiatives made them feel “part of the company.”

Physical, intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, vocational, financial, and environmental factors will prove critical in identifying and categorizing stressors among participants. If participants are lacking in one of the areas it can grow to be a day-to-day struggle. Entrepreneurs should take the time to determine how these dimensions impact their lives and how they can work to improve them.

## MENTAL HEALTH IN NAMIBIA

According to the WHO,

**“the African Region has the highest suicide rate in the world, estimated at 11.2 per 100,000 population in 2019”**

This number is quite high in comparison to the global average which is “9.0 per 100,000 people. These numbers point to a serious problem, one that is only exacerbated by a lack of psychiatric health care and a great deal of stigma surrounding the issue.

One major contributor to this mental health crisis on the continent is a lack of psychiatric healthcare. This is due to it not being seen as a priority. Prior to Namibia’s independence, those struggling with their mental health in rural areas had to travel to either Windhoek Central Hospital or the Oshakati Intermediate Hospital to receive care. Now, there is a focus on primary care facilities where patients can receive various types of care from one doctor. While this has been great for those with physical ailments, it has not significantly improved the mental health resources available to those in rural communities. A study done by the University of Namibia found that “although 77% of the research participants were trained in mental health; none of them expressed confidence with regard to delivering mental health services to their clients.” These statistics are especially troubling considering

**12.2% of Namibians on average felt seriously depressed in 2013**

according to the DHS. Overall, there is a clear need for better mental health resources in Namibia.

In addition to there being few resources for mental health, stereotypes portray those with mental health disorders as dangerous, dependent, and unfit to work. These stereotypes are perpetuated by healthcare professionals as well, which can make getting help a daunting task. The belief that people suffering from mental illness are “faking it” or are weaker than the general population is not uncommon among general healthcare providers who are new to treating psychiatric patients.

## STUDY DESIGN

A mixed-methods approach was employed to examine the mental health status of Namibian entrepreneurs, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative research techniques. A short survey that took approximately 5 minutes to complete was sent to approximately

**1400 entrepreneurs**

to collect demographic information and assess the extent and frequency of mental health issues among business owners numerically. The survey is a mix of scales and short answer questions. To acquire a deeper understanding of personal experiences, perspectives, and coping mechanisms linked to mental health concerns, data was collected via **individual interviews**. Examining mental health in the context of entrepreneurship in great detail was made possible by this combined approach.

Participants for the survey were drawn from the NIPDB MSME database via email and an Instagram post. This gave a large and diverse pool of entrepreneurs across different sectors and organizational sizes. The majority of the quantitative measurements were collected through the survey. The focus was to gain background demographics and get an initial understanding of common stressors entrepreneurs face. The final question asked the business owners whether or not they would be interested in being a part of a one-on-one interview. **12 interviews were conducted with SME owners**. The interviews lasted an average of 20 minutes each and this is where the majority of the qualitative data was drawn from.

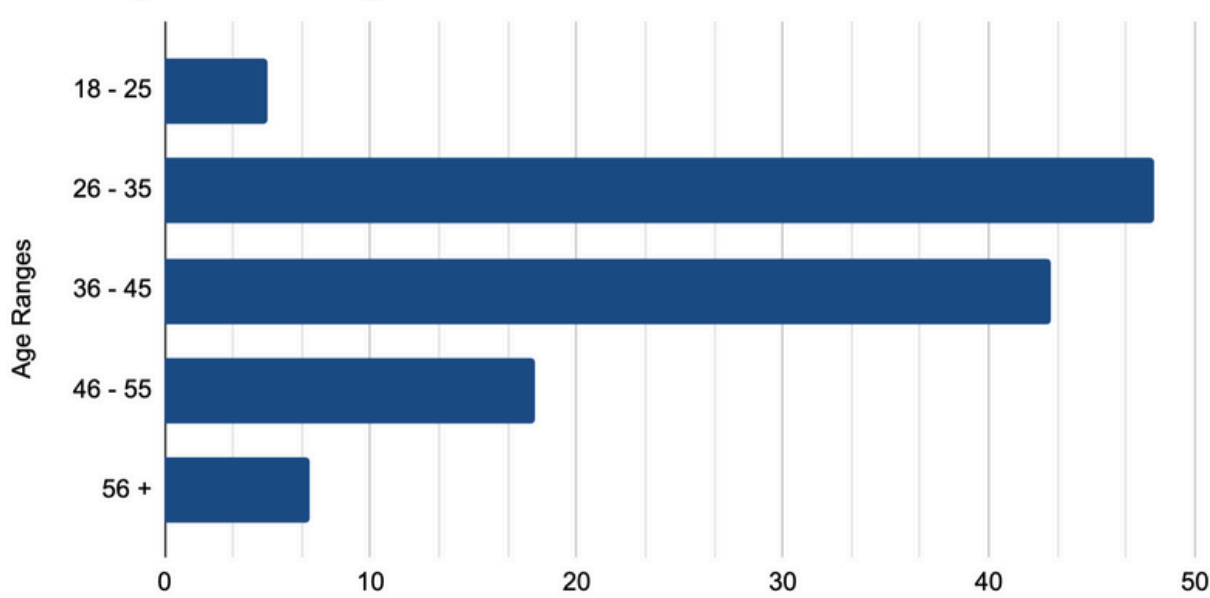


# RESULTS

## DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

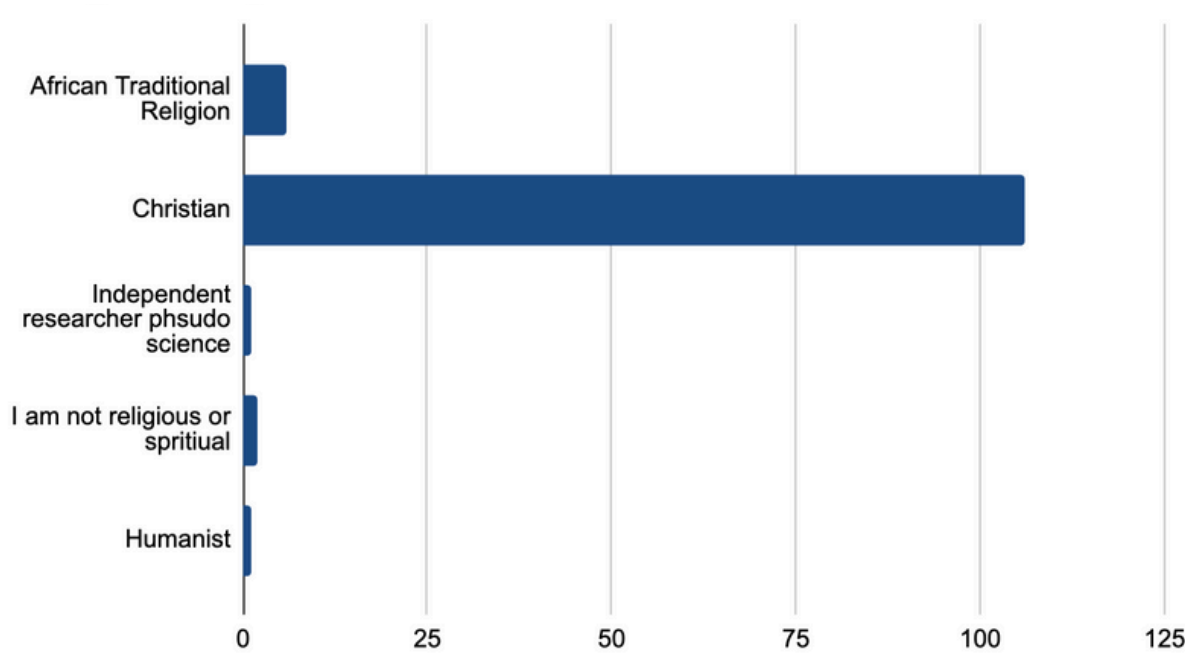
Most participants (40.2%) in the study fell between the ages of 26-35 as shown in the figure below.

### Entrepreneur Age Ranges



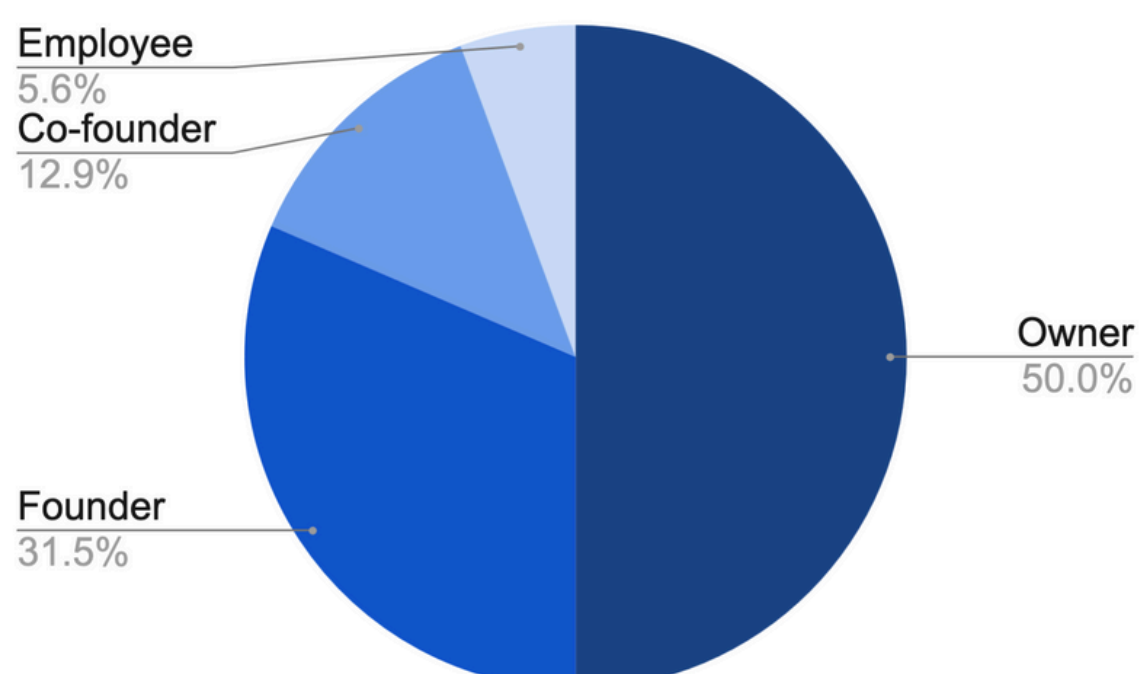
The least represented of these age groups are the oldest and youngest groups. An overwhelming majority of participants were found to be spiritual or religious. 88.3% identified as Christian according to our survey data, shown below.

### Religious/Spiritual Identities



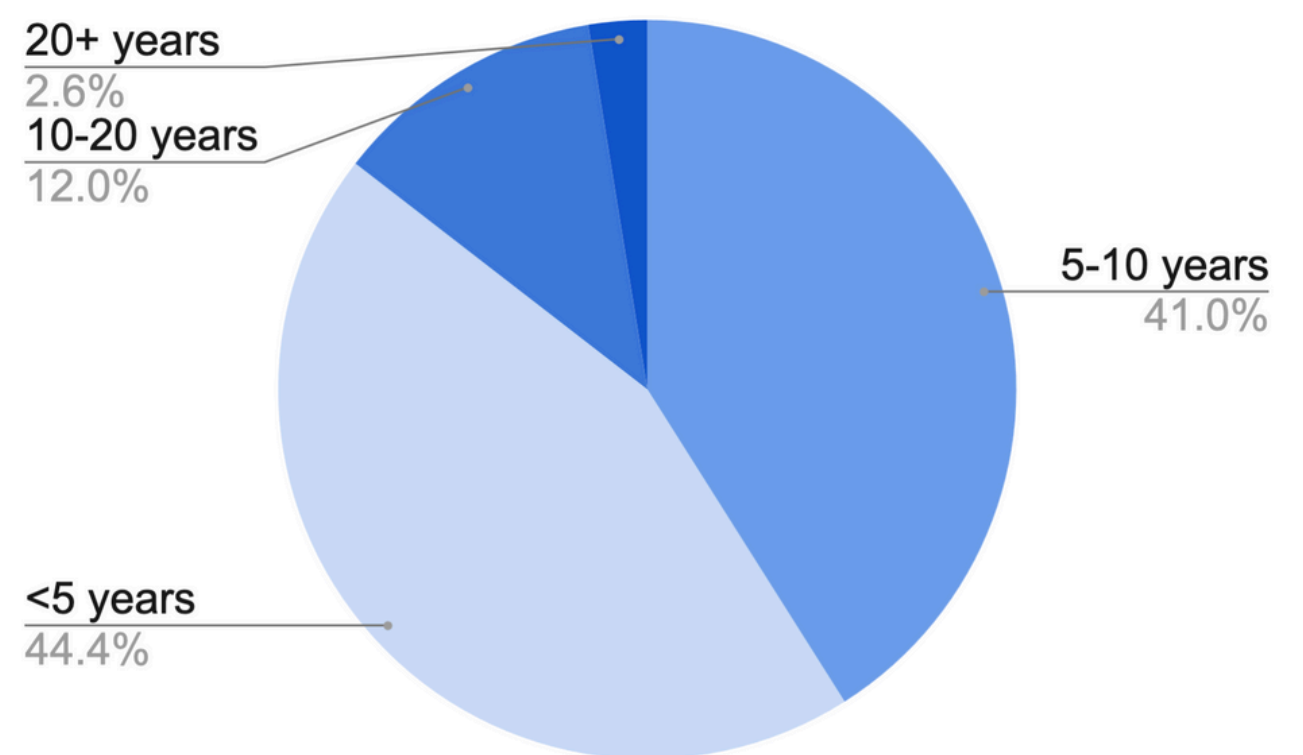
A large majority of entrepreneurs in our sample held the title of either owner or founder within their respective organizations, as shown below.

### Role / Title



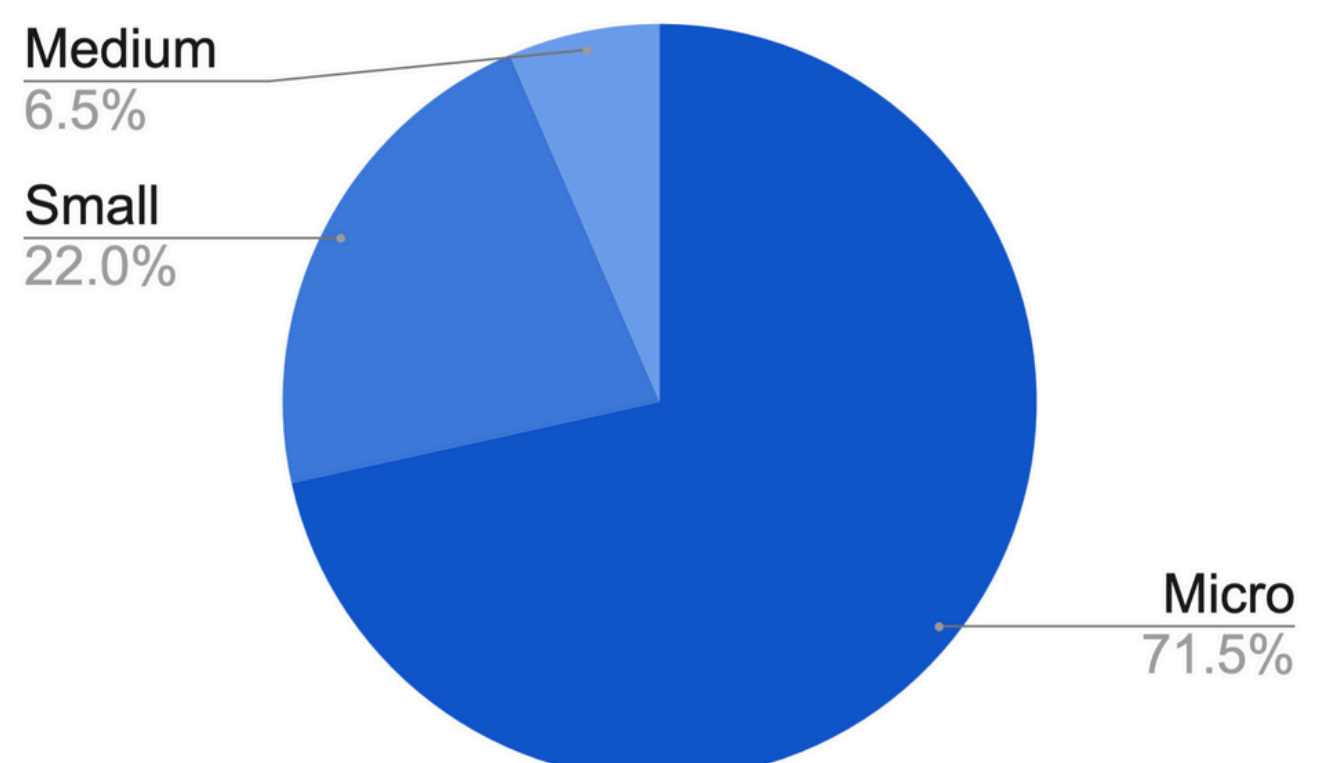
Over half of entrepreneurs surveyed have been working with their company for less than 10 years, with the majority falling under 5 years, as shown in Figure 5 below.

### Years of Experience

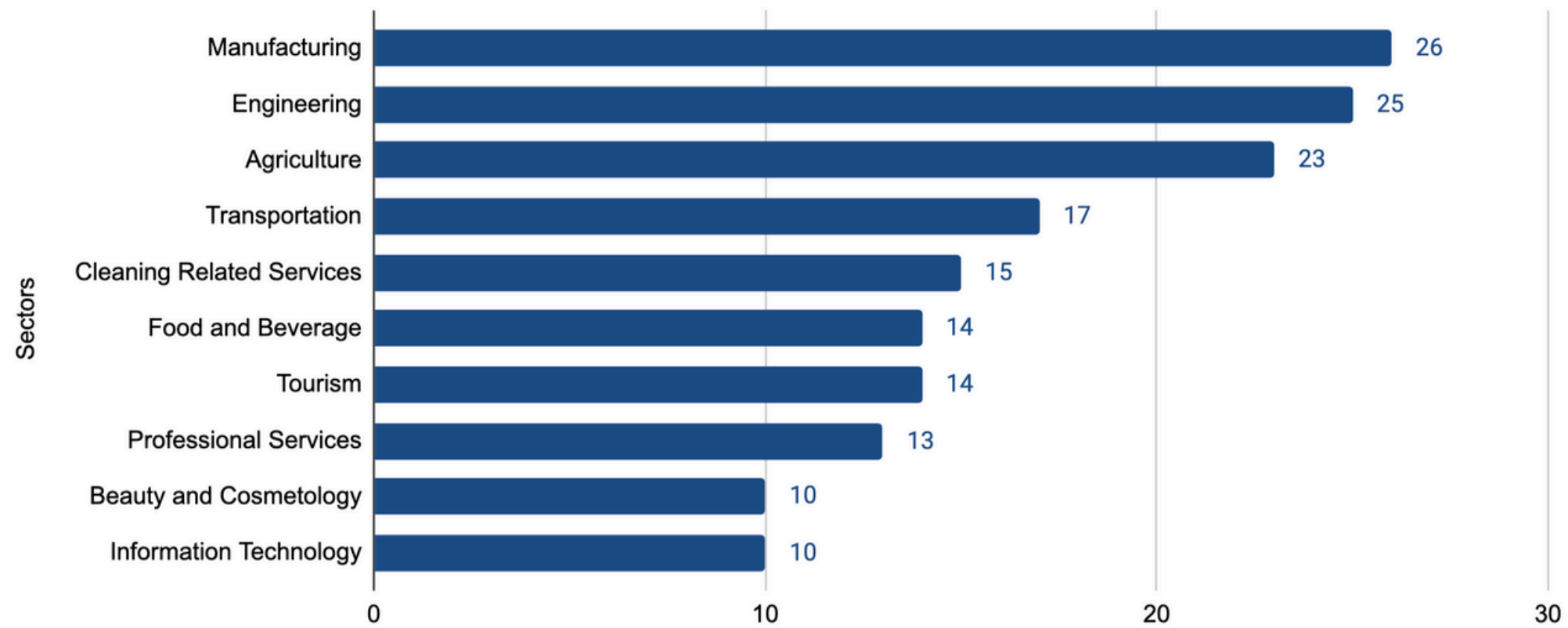


Most entrepreneurs surveyed were owners of their companies in their late 20s to early 30s, Black, and Christian, with just a few years of experience running their company. It's important to note that this sample is not representative of every entrepreneur in Namibia. Rather, this survey was specific to owners of MSMEs that work with the NIPDB. Over 70% of these businesses had an annual income of no more than N\$ 300,000, indicating that they are "Micro" enterprises.

### Enterprise Sizes



## Top 10 Sectors Among Participants



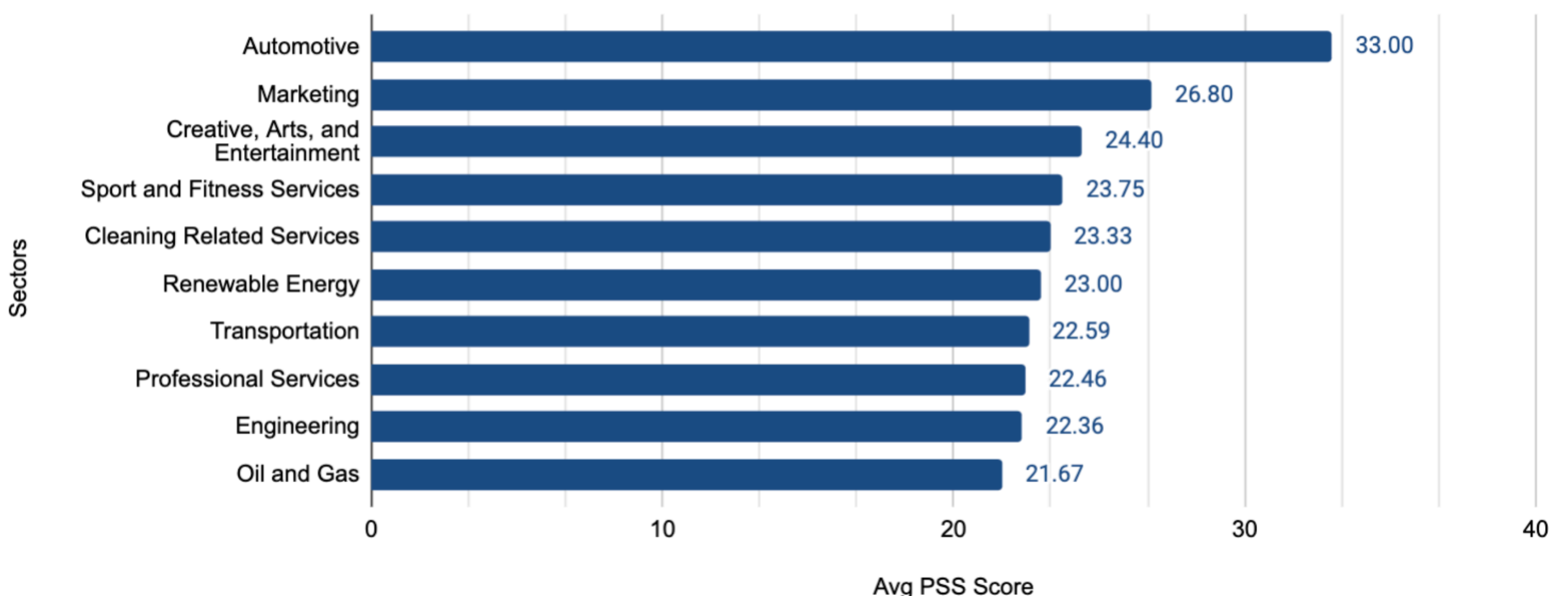
Participants were asked to share what industries their companies work in. The results provided insights into more prevalent industries in Namibia among micro-enterprises. Manufacturing, engineering and construction, and agriculture and forestry are the three largest industries within our sample. From the 121 survey respondents, 74 fell under one or more of these 3 sectors.

## OBJECTIVE 1: IDENTIFY STRESSORS AFFECTING MSME OWNERS

### PERCEIVED STRESS SCALE

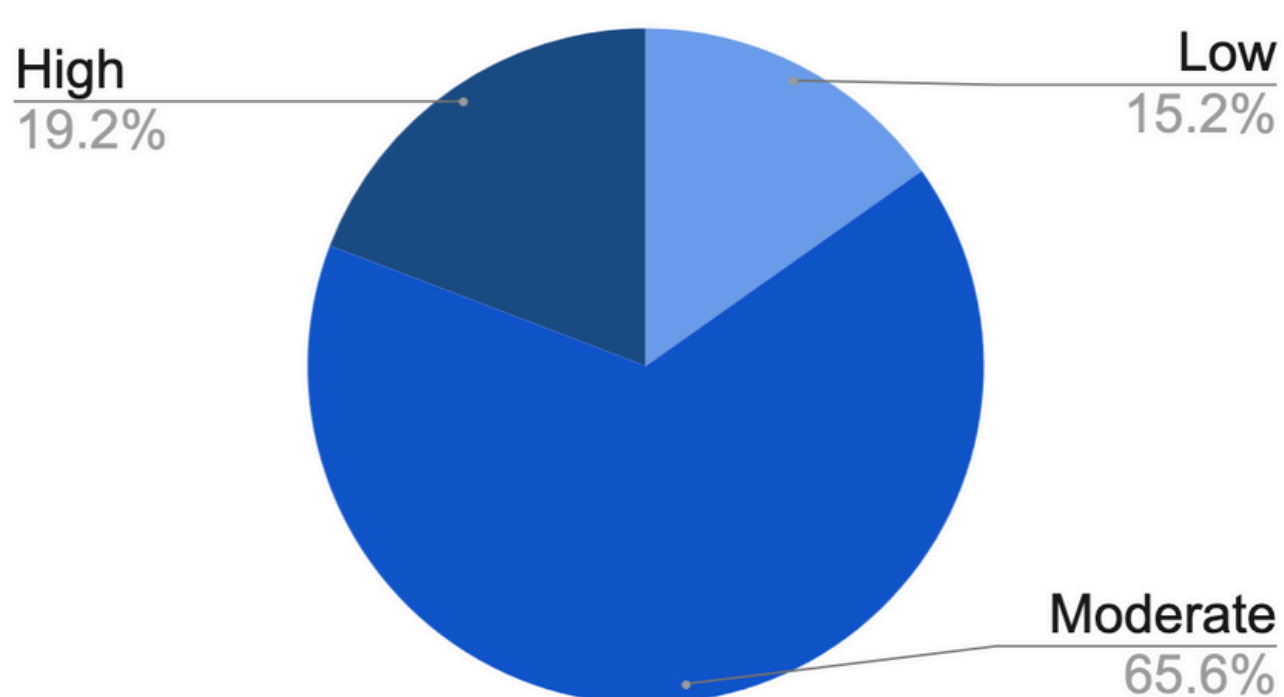
One focus of the study was to analyze the stressors facing participants. The first section of the survey used the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) which allowed for quantifying participant stress. An adapted scale from the State of New Hampshire EAP (NH EAP, 2018) was used, this version shortened PSS down to 10 questions. Participants were asked how often they experience various stressors on a scale of 0-4 ranging from 0 meaning "Never" to 4 meaning "Every day." These questions were then used to score each participant's stress by first reversing the scores for questions 4, 5, 7, and 8 by subtracting 4. After doing so, the scores can be added together to produce a perceived stress score. These scores range from 0 to 40. According to the New Hampshire EAP, scores ranging from 0-13 would be low stress, 14-26 would indicate moderate stress, and 27-40 would indicate high perceived stress. Shown in the figure below, the industries with participants reporting the highest average perceived stress scores were automotive, marketing, and creative arts.

## Top 10 Sectors by Average PSS Scores



This data is reflective of our overall average PSS score of 20 from the survey. As shown in the figure above, the industries with the highest PSS scores were all just over 20 and fell within the moderate stress category. The automotive industry is the only industry that surpasses moderate stress with an average PSS score of 33, suggesting participants in that industry experience high perceived stress.

### Perceived Stress Totals



Considering there is an average PSS score of 20, the survey shows that stress is prevalent among the study population, but it's not considered "high stress" according to the PSS. This doesn't discount the moderate perceived stress that those participants are experiencing, but it wasn't the result that was expected. With nearly half of the sample (49.2%) reporting working over 40 hours a week, and 61.6% of the sample rating their work-life balance as less than 3 on a scale of 1-5, it was expected to see a higher level of stress. Only 19.2% of the sample scored a "high stress" as shown in the figure above.

## WHO INDEX FOR WELL-BEING

Well-being is a broad concept covering physical, mental, and emotional health. The survey asked participants about their well-being to discover if there were any commonalities among entrepreneurs on this topic.

Well-being is a broad concept covering physical, mental, and emotional health. The survey asked participants about their well-being to discover if there were any commonalities among entrepreneurs on this topic.

In this section of the survey, five questions were asked about well-being. These were the WHO-5 questions; a global rating of well-being. The questions were answered on a scale with responses as follows:

- at no time
- some of the time
- less than half the time
- more than half the time
- most of the time
- all of the time

The scores are calculated on a scale from 0 to 25 with 0 representing the worst and 25 the best quality of life. From the survey, the average score was 11.869 which is a percentage of 47.475.

One question that stood out from the rest was, "I woke up feeling fresh and rested." Before the survey was sent out, the research team had a hypothesis that this question would show that entrepreneurs are overworked, thus not getting enough sleep at night and not feeling fresh and well-rested. From the figure shown below, we can see that the majority, 74 participants or 61%, reported feeling well rested less than half the time, sometimes, and never. Three people reported they felt well rested "At no time", 38 said "Some of the time", and 33 said "less than half the time."

## STRESSORS AFFECTING MSME OWNERS

Entrepreneurs often struggle with the overwhelming stress that comes with running a business. Long work hours, a difficult market, and the pressure to succeed are all factors that play a role in this stress. When asked about stress during in-depth interviews, almost every participant was able to acknowledge their stress, but to a certain extent. All of the interviewees who talked about stress were quick to downplay it. One entrepreneur stated,

**“The stress is there. It’s kind of hand in hand with running a company.”**

Almost all participants understood that they were stressed over something work-related, but to them, **this stress is normal**. The research team concluded that this is due to the stigma surrounding mental health in Namibia.

In the survey, the average stress level reported was moderate even though in interviews entrepreneurs explained many aspects of their work life that cause stress. Most participants made it a point to let the team know that their amount of stress was “okay.”

Participant Four was the founder and CEO of his company. When asked about stressors impacting his life, he began by saying that he doesn't like the word “stress.” He explained that learning as you go and plans not always being straightforward were factors playing into the challenges in his life. After describing the specific causes of stress he ended with

**“It's just pure exhaustion, pure exhaustion. Sometimes I just want to switch off.”**

When the investigator followed up on this story with a question about coping with stress, his response was,

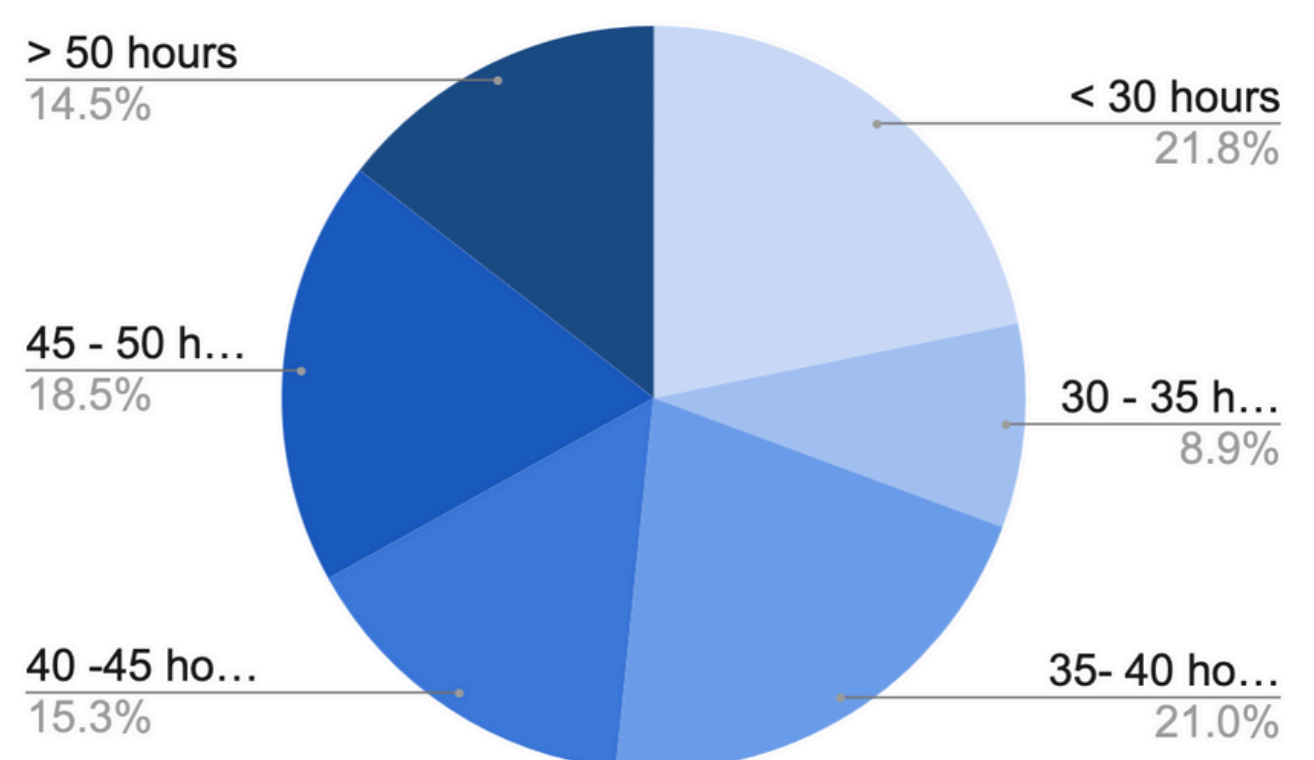
**“Like I said I'm not using the word stress. And that is one of the ways I cope with it, I don't bring it into existence .”**

Close to five minutes of this interview was spent discussing the “challenges” in this entrepreneur's life; yet, he still refused to call it stress. The stigma surrounding mental health causes these entrepreneurs to push all of their feelings away and invalidate the stress that they report feeling.

Participant One spoke about the long hours that most entrepreneurs face. She explained that even after years her business was not making enough profit to sustain her life. This is why she has a full-time job on top of being an entrepreneur. When walking the investigator through her daily routine, she said that she worked from 6:00 to 18:00 almost every day.

This points to another major stressor found among participants. It was found that nearly half of the participants (49.2%) are working over 40 hours a week, as shown in the figure below.

### Entrepreneur Working Hours



This indicates a large portion of our study population may experience some stress due to working. In interviews, participants expanded on this tendency to overwork and the pressures that come with it.

This same participant later in the interview explained that because Namibia is a smaller country, it makes it difficult to reach her target audience. She stated, “This tends to be dominant players that have already captured such a large market. So it tends to get saturated pretty quickly.” Starting a business is already intimidating, but fighting for a spot on the market puts even more stress on new entrepreneurs.

Participant 13, a male co-founder, explained the pressure that entrepreneurs constantly feel. He explained that many people in Namibia are not fortunate enough to receive an education. This participant spoke about how many entrepreneurs have to put a large amount of money into their businesses before they can start to make a profit. He explained that his business has to fully support himself, his wife, his child, and his parents. Not only was he feeling pressure from his family but he was feeling pressure from himself. He did not want to fail or disappoint the people he cared about most.



## OBJECTIVE 3: JUSTIFYING MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT PROGRAMS & RESOURCES

### ENTREPRENEUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout data collection, many interviews consisted of stories of struggles in the early stages of starting a business. One participant stated,

**“I need to speak to someone ASAP. I need business mentorship.”**

A mentorship program would give new entrepreneurs the guidance many wished they had.

An entrepreneur said that most MSME owners have no generational wealth to fall back on, so taking risks within the business is not an option. This makes it so entrepreneurs can not learn about starting and maintaining a business. The lack of background knowledge causes immense amounts of stress and pressure on the founder of the company.

Ideally, a mentor will be a business owner who has been in the business sector for many years. Their experience will help them relate to newer business owners early in their careers. If the MSME owner has questions about technical aspects, coping with stress, work-life balance, and even just someone to talk to, their mentors will be the first ones to hear. By matching up mentors with mentees of a similar race, gender, or sector, the hope is that there will be many similarities between the two.

Another common theme of the survey results is that **physical activity, meditation, and yoga** seem to aid entrepreneurs in times of stress. When asked if there was anything specific that would benefit entrepreneurs' mental health, almost **10%** responded with some kind of wellness activity. “Practicing mindfulness”, “I prioritize regular exercise”, and “Meditation to calm me every time”, were the quotes that were repeatedly written down in the survey.

## DISCUSSION

### KEY FINDINGS

*From the study, the research team was able to produce three main findings. These include the following:*

1. **Lack of guidance**
2. **Normalization of stress**
3. **Overworking**

A large portion of our study captured the experiences of **micro-business entrepreneurs**. Over 70% of participants who took our survey identified their business as a "micro-enterprise", meaning they had an annual income of less than N\$ 300,000. This gives our study a new perspective specific to the owners and founders of micro-enterprises. Many of these entrepreneurs have significantly less experience working in their industries in terms of age and years of experience when compared to those working within small or medium enterprises.

**Lack of guidance** was a significant source of stress for MSME owners. Many of the people we interviewed and surveyed were struggling with things like marketing, managing finances, and managing time. With limited accessibility to resources for help on these things, a large proportion of study participants called for a mentorship program.

While many entrepreneurs were able to admit that they experienced stress, none admitted that it was a problem affecting their life. In more than one interview, participants would downplay their stress yet continue to talk about all of the things they're struggling with at work. This shows a clear disconnect between what they're saying and what they're experiencing.

A recurring theme across our research was the tendency these entrepreneurs had to **work well over recommended working hours**. The World Health Organization discourages long working hours, asserting that overworking can lead to health complications such as heart disease and strokes (World Health Organization., n.d). However, according to the Labour Act passed in 2007, the expected Namibian work week is 45 hours or 9 hours per day.

Some additional findings included the increased perceived stress found among participants that worked in the automotive industry. While this finding was based on the experience of 2 participants, research indicates there may be some unique stressors present among those who work in automotive industries. Being one of the most dangerous industries to work in, workers in the industry report higher workload and physical stress.

These findings show a clear need for increased mental health support among entrepreneurs. For institutions like the NIPDB, improving the well-being of its employees and MSME owners who are affiliated with the organization can yield a positive impact for both sides. Businesses that successfully implement mental health programs see a significant increase in productivity and have an advantage over their rivals in employing top talent.

Additionally, according to their website, "NIPDB exists to unlock opportunities that enable a better quality of life for all Namibians". Improving the well-being of these entrepreneurs who are essentially the driving force behind the expansion of a country's economic power, will make their businesses more productive, efficient, and sustainable. This chain reaction of positive impact and value addition on this specific group of individuals will allow the NIPDB to unlock prospects for Namibia that could vary from decreased unemployment to meeting its responsibility toward fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) objectives proposed by the United Nations.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAM

Mental health stigma is the negative connotation and stereotypes when talking about mental health. The prevalent stigma in Namibia leads to the lack of knowledge on the topic and more importantly, creates barriers when trying to get help and support from others. By educating others on mental health, the hope is that the stigma is reduced enough so more people will seek help when needed.

A mental health program designed specifically for entrepreneurs will be geared towards fostering a community among business owners. Ideally, this program will be a group that will meet twice a month where mental health is the main theme. One participant said on the survey, “I want more healthy conversations and collaborations”. By having this program be a group program as opposed to one-on-one, it will bring entrepreneurs together and create a support network among each other.

In this mental health program, some weeks will involve wellness activities like meditation to reduce stress.

## CONCLUSION

MSME owners in Namibia are in need of mental health support. Many of these start-up owners have found it difficult to get their businesses off the ground. They lack the employees, the time, and the money to properly market themselves and bring in clients. Having a more seasoned person who has been in their shoes to provide guidance is something many MSME owners expressed interest in. If these new entrepreneurs had more direction in running their businesses, their struggles with managing time and money could be alleviated.

A wellness program hosted by the NIPDB would serve to reduce stress and mental health stigma. Background research, interviews, and survey responses all indicated that stigma was a big issue in Namibia, and having a program aimed at supporting and educating people on mental health is an important part of the recommendations. With the recommendations provided in this paper, hopefully, the NIPDB can make a meaningful impact on the mental health of the entrepreneurs they provide support.

# AUTHORS

This report was written by Erin Brodigan, Sara Kelly, Ashleigh Perez, and Dimitris Graikos, four third-year students from Worcester Polytechnic Institute

## CONTACT:

gr-NIPDB@wpi.edu