

Six Supportive Ways to Address Trauma that Shows up at Work

We spend most of our day, week, month, and year at our workplace, and as such, the workplace is a community. When traumatic events occur at work or within our world, it can affect us all. Incidents like racially-motivated shootings, large-scale health crises, or witnessing a coworker experiencing domestic or sexual violence and harassment, are only a few examples of traumatic incidents that affect individuals in the workplace. It is important to remember, coworkers and employees are full people and emotional beings who deserve to feel safe and supported. Below are six responses that individuals or organizations can take in response to a traumatic incident to promote well-being and resilience.

1. Acknowledge what happened

Address that an event or situation occurred that impacts workers and the workplace. The key to this step is to check-in and take the lead of the survivor or person who has experienced or is experiencing harm or trauma. Be open and available to the person experiencing trauma or violence, and take their lead. Their safety and privacy are most important.

When discussing an event or experience that happened within the workplace or to a worker, tell the truth while respecting confidentiality, and only share what is absolutely necessary. This shows respect for the people affected and can help put an end to rumors that could further harm the people who are involved. Further, this can help reduce the risk of re-traumatizing individuals who have faced similar experiences. For incidents that happen outside of

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work, acknowledge the incident with an understanding that events outside of work, particularly incidents connected to individuals' identities, will impact worker stress levels and health. Be clear, specific, and direct when naming incidents outside of work such as a racially-motivated killing or mass shooting. Rather than saying something generic such as, "This week has been challenging for many of us," name directly the incident and people who were involved such as: "We are grieving the death of Breonna Taylor, a Black woman who was shot in her home by the police."

Acknowledging the incident and sharing the workplace's response could put people at ease because it demonstrates an awareness of what has happened and that action is being taken.

Resource: "[How to manage when things are not okay \(and haven't been for centuries\)](#)" The Management Center

2. Start the conversation

Open communication is key. Reach out to employees to discuss what happened. Create or advocate for opportunities for dialogue where people can discuss how they are feeling and what they need. Make sure you are building an environment where expressing emotion is both acceptable and welcome by modeling those practices. It can help to grieve, process, and heal together as a team, particularly if the incident occurred at work. In the case of a death, it can be healthy and generative to name and talk about the person and coworkers' memories of their colleague who died or was killed.

Open and direct conversations establish that it is okay to be honest with your coworkers. This builds trust and can lead to a supportive environment where people feel empowered to take sick days and mental health days to recuperate. If for any reason you are unable to hold open conversations, provide a way for employees to anonymously share their feelings and concerns with each other and management, such as creating an anonymous poll, with tools such as [PollEverywhere](#).

Make sure employees and coworkers know that their voices are important. Create and communicate action steps that will be taken after receiving responses. This is critical in reinforcing that staff voices are being taken seriously.

3. Practice Emotional Intelligence

When opening or leading conversations about traumatic incidents, utilize empathy rather than sympathy. Often, in an attempt to be supportive, supervisors and coworkers may try to help by “fixing,” which can feel invalidating or unnecessarily goal-oriented. Try and let go of this solution-oriented mindset and approach with empathy, compassion, and active listening. Let people know that you are here for them and will be supportive in the ways that feel supportive to them. For example, before offering any feedback, ask your employees, “What would be most helpful right now? I am happy to just to listen, or I can explore solutions with you.”

When approaching these conversations, also be mindful of “toxic positivity.” Toxic positivity is a behavior in which one pushes a “positive mindset” to the point of erasing or dismissing the struggle at hand. Often, toxic positive statements start with “At least...” or end with a statement encouraging people to, “Be strong” or “Stay positive.” While toxic positivity statements may be shared in an attempt to help, they often have the opposite effect and can signal that you are not fully present or listening.

To avoid this, practice [emotional intelligence](#). Think about your emotional self and how you convey and comprehend challenging emotions like shock, grief, and anger.

4. Share relevant resources

Make sure employees know what resources are available to them through the workplace and through their local community. Emphasize information related to physical and mental health as well as company leave policies that are available. Encourage and model taking breaks from work when

necessary to promote self-care and well-being. Consider bringing in local service providers who specialize in supporting survivors of trauma, including but not limited to domestic and sexual violence, gun violence, and racial trauma and justice. Creating space to hear from mental health care professionals can help to reduce the stigma and normalize seeking help.

Here are some directories to identify local service providers:

- Domestic Violence Programs: www.thehotline.org
- Sexual Violence Programs: www.rainn.org

5. Monitor staff well-being and check-in often

Make it a practice to check-in with coworkers as well as yourself throughout the weeks after an incident and around key anniversaries or dates of the traumatic incident. Recovering from a traumatic event takes time and looks different for everyone. These events cause emotional, physical, and sometimes life-threatening harm, which can have an adverse impact on functioning, and mental, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being. The fear, uncertainty, and change may significantly affect employees' ability to perform their job duties as they had prior to the incident. "Business as usual" may be difficult to return to and expecting staff to move on as though nothing had happened may lead to further harm.

6. Be aware of the signs and side-effects of trauma and stress

On the next page is a chart that shows a few of the symptoms and side-effects people may experience as a response to a traumatic incident. Sometimes, people experience trauma through physical or cognitive symptoms long before they are able to process their emotional symptoms.

WORKPLACES RESPOND

TO DOMESTIC & SEXUAL VIOLENCE

A NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER

Emotional

- Shock, numbness, denial
- Fear, anxiety
- Survivor guilt (if involving a fatality)
- Performance guilt (feeling you did not do enough)
- Helplessness and hopelessness
- Anger, irritability
- Grief, sadness, crying

Physical

- Hyperarousal (feeling on high alert or having more intense reactions and feelings than you normally might)
- Insomnia
- Inability to relax
- Loss of appetite
- Physical complaints (often vague and widespread)
- Lack of energy and drive

Cognitive

- Dissociation
- Confusion
- Impaired memory and concentration
- Reduced self-esteem
- Hypervigilance (increased alertness and sensitivity to surroundings or fearing dangers that may not be real)
- Blaming others
- Flashbacks and intrusive thoughts

Social

- Withdrawal
- Loss of trust
- Loss of focus
- Missing deadlines or meetings
- Avoidance of reminders of the traumatic event

Adapted from "[Managing Trauma in the Workplace: Supporting Workers and Organisations.](#)"

When these signs are present, reconnect, engage, and offer support. As you help others, remember that you also deserve space to process and receive support. You do not have to “have it all together” all the time.

Moving forward together

As you work toward a safer and more supportive work environment, remember that the goal is to make sure staff feel heard and supported. Encourage staff members to show up as their full selves at work. Creating a workplace culture that supports employees through traumatic incidents is just one part of a more trauma-responsive workplace. As a whole, caring for each other's mental health can help with both personal well-being and creating a more intentional and people-centered, as well as productive, workplace.