

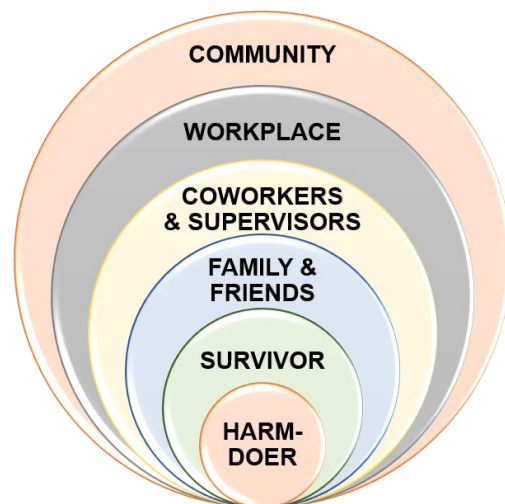
Addressing the Impacts of Violence Trauma in the Workplace

Promoting Worker Wellness and Resilience through Trauma-Informed Practice

*By **realizing** the traumatic effects of violence and harassment, **recognizing** the elements of trauma, **responding** in a survivor-centered way, and **resisting** policies and practices that lead to **re-traumatization** workplaces can ensure safe, productive, and resilient workplaces for all workers.*

In the United States 52.2 million women and 27.6 million men will experience sexual violence; 19.1 million women and 6.4 million men will be stalked; and 43.6 million women and 37.3 million men will experience intimate partner violence in their lifetime.ⁱ Domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and harassment, touches every workplace. Abusive actions taken by perpetrators not only affect the safety and ability of survivorsⁱⁱ to thrive at work, their actions also threaten the workplace as a whole.

The Ripple Effect



Impact on Survivors

- Perpetrators **sabotage survivors' employment** by making harassing calls and texts, showing up at the workplace, causing the survivor to be late, or depriving them of sleep.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Survivors of intimate partner violence **lose over seven paid days of work in year** because of abuse, whether to recover from the physical aspects of violence, seek safety, or cooperate with the justice system.^{iv}
- Physical violence, sexual violence, and psychological abuse can lead to **long-term adverse health impacts** and psychological changes that can negatively impact job performance.

Impact on Co-Workers

- Co-workers often report feeling **concern for their own safety** when perpetrators continually call or show up at the workplace to stalk, harass, or threaten another; others report **feeling some resentment** towards the survivor because of the impact their abusive partner has on the workplace.^v
- Nearly 20 percent of perpetrators of intimate partner violence reported **causing or almost causing a serious accident** at work because they were distracted.^{vi}

Impact on Workplaces

- **Perpetrators use employer's resources** – phone, laptops, and more – to control and threaten their targets.^{vii}
- **One in three female workplace homicides were committed by a personal relation**, most of which were intimate partners. In many cases, bystanders were also killed.^{viii}
- **Domestic violence costs U.S. businesses nearly \$1.27 billion** (adjusted for 2019 dollars) in productivity losses.^{ix}
- Businesses may bear **legal liability for incidents that occur on-site or for wrongful termination** of survivors which can potentially result in penalties and damages civil lawsuits.

Harm perpetrated against employees – whether at work or at home – has dangerous consequences for everyone. The impacts of experiencing and/or witnessing such violence must be recognized and addressed in both workplace policies and interventions. How workplaces respond to violence can shape the options survivors have to remain safe at work and can contribute to whether the workplace has an effective culture of prevention,

safety, and accountability.

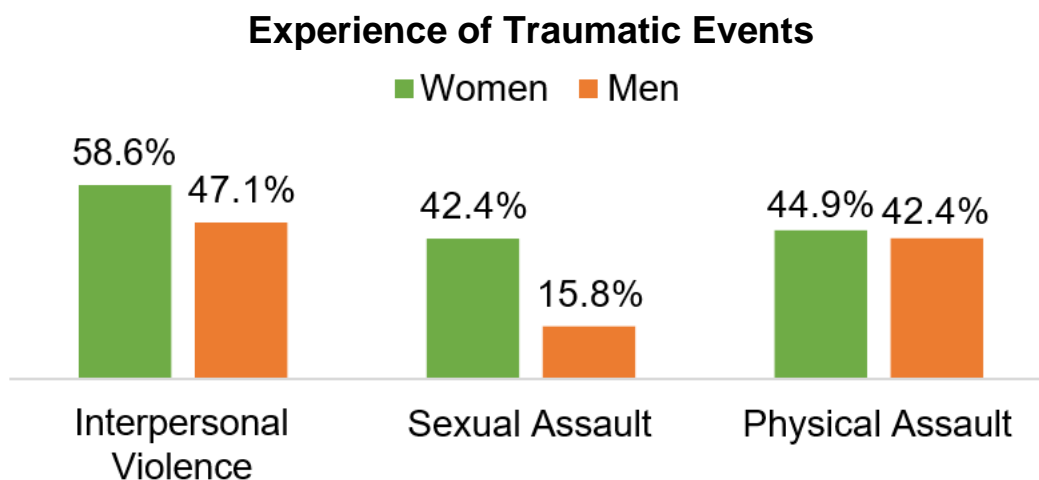
Realize the prevalence of trauma among employees

Trauma is defined as “an event, series of events, or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening with lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.”^x

A national study found that 89.7% of U.S. adults had been exposed to at least one traumatic event in their lifetime.^{xi}

People may experience a wide array of trauma in their lifetime.

Traumatic events can include near death experiences, the loss of a loved one, witnessing a violent act, experiencing child abuse, and exposure to forms of violence, including domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and harassment^{xii}.



We bring our whole selves to work. Exposure to threats or acts of violence and the impacts of trauma can shape how individuals perceive and relate to their surroundings. What impacts us outside of the workplace is carried with us and affects how we relate to the workplace and our jobs. The effects of trauma are not limited to the individual experiencing it. Trauma can undermine a workplace’s ability to fulfill its mission.

Realizing that employees have likely experienced one or multiple forms of trauma is the first step workplaces must take to build the buy-in and

support necessary to implement trauma-informed policies and practices for a safety and supportive workplace. When employees are safe and supported, the workplace succeeds.

Recognize the impact of violence and trauma

Trauma often triggers an unconscious flight, fight, freeze, or fawn response in our brain and floods our body with stress hormones.^{xiii} How one reacts to a traumatic event is not a choice an individual makes; it is a subconscious survival response that occurs deep within our brains.

Threats or acts of violence and the resulting trauma can change how individuals perceive and relate to their surroundings. Without proper support and care, the body's natural response to trauma can be detrimental to one's long-term physical, emotional, and cognitive well-being (see chart on the next page).

While many of the signs associated with a trauma response – such as being withdrawn, having headaches, or difficulty concentrating – are experienced by all people from time to time, these symptoms are often chronic and multiplied for individuals who

experience a trauma event. The harms caused by experiencing traumatic events may also result in some individuals misusing drugs or alcohol and/or engaging in risk-taking behaviors as a means of coping with their experiences, which can further exacerbate the impacts of trauma.

Fight

- Confronting the actual or perceived threat aggressively

Flight

- Running from the actual or perceived threat

Freeze

- Being unable to move or act against the actual or perceived threat

Fawn

- Complying with the threat as a means of protection against further harm

Emotional



- ☐ Numbness, apathy, withdrawal
- ☐ Anxiety and fear
- ☐ Guilt and shame
- ☐ Anger and irritability
- ☐ Depression
- ☐ Suicidal thoughts

Physical



- ☐ Gastrointestinal issues
- ☐ Headaches
- ☐ Sleep problems
- ☐ Chronic pain
- ☐ Panic attacks

Cognitive



- ☐ Difficulty focusing / making decisions
- ☐ Flashbacks
- ☐ Hypervigilance
- ☐ Decreased working memory

These negative physical, emotional, and mental health impacts can manifest themselves among employees in a variety of ways.



Physical signs of injury or chronic illnesses

Bruises, lacerations, and broken bones are often expected signs of abuse or violence, however domestic and sexual violence are more than physical abuse. Changes in health include headaches, gastrointestinal, and/or gynecological issues which are common conditions resulting from abuse.^{xiv}



Increased absenteeism

Survivors of domestic violence on average lose 7.1 paid days of work a year, and survivors of sexual assault 8.1 days a year to seek medical attention, resources, and safety.^{xv} Abusive partners may also sabotage their partners' ability to get to work, or may force them to leave work early.^{xvi} Individuals experiencing sexual harassment and violence from a coworker may avoid work because of the abuse experienced while in the workplace.



Inability to concentrate

Trauma and fear can trigger a constant state of flight or fight which can diminish cognitive functioning.^{xvii} Some abusers may also keep survivors up at night in efforts to sabotage their employment.^{xviii}

**Increase in personal calls, texts, or visits**

Domestic violence is about power and control, and abusive partners may constantly monitor their partners by calling to check on them or by showing up at the workplace unexpectedly.^{xix}

**Unwillingness to report or cooperate with an investigation**

Individuals who experience workplace harassment may fear retaliation, being ostracized by others, or may face threats for reporting. As a result, they may refuse to cooperate or seek help despite the severity of the abuse.

**Appearing agitated, angry, sad, or hypervigilant**

Trauma, depression, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – all common among survivors – can result in survivors displaying a range of emotions that may appear to be inappropriate or extreme.^{xx}

**Other general changes in behavior or work performance**

Once confident employees may suddenly become timid or second guess themselves due to psychological abuse; or individuals experiencing abuse may withdraw from activities and engagement with coworkers that they used to enjoy.^{xxi}

When such signs present themselves in the workplace, they may be mistaken for a lack of skills or poor work ethic and dismissed until a time when the impact becomes too disruptive and the employees exhibiting these potential signs of trauma are met with punitive measures rather than supportive measures. When signs are recognized as a result of violence or harassment, employees often want to help but lack the strategies and resources to respond when a co-worker is clearly in need or support.

By **recognizing** common responses to trauma and how they may manifest themselves within the workplace as well as understanding the ways in which workplaces themselves may compound the harm caused by abusive individuals and trauma, workplaces can take the necessary steps to proactively and supportively respond so that survivors, co-workers, and workplaces as a whole are able to remain safe and thrive.

Respond by incorporating an understanding of trauma into workplace policies and practices

Workplaces can become more trauma-informed by considering how current policies and practices impact survivors and adopting better approaches to reflect how individuals experience trauma. Being trauma-informed is less about *what* you're doing and more about *how* you're doing it."^{xxii} It is an ongoing process that can range from simple actions to sweeping change.

Resist re-traumatization by examining and modifying potentially harmful practices

Not being believed, a lack of appropriate support from supervisors and leadership, or being pushed to take a specific course of action can intensify a survivor's experience of trauma, impacting their job performance and creating an unsafe and harmful environment for that survivor and other employees. Over time survivors who do not receive appropriate support may ultimately leave their jobs, workplaces can experience high rates of turn-over, and morale is eroded when employees see other co-workers facing additional harms resulting from an employer's failure to respond in a trauma-informed, survivor-centered way.

To ensure that the efforts a workplace engages in to support survivors is effective, it is critical that workplaces routinely evaluate how policies and practices are impacting workers, particularly survivors who have sought help. Employers should consider the following opportunities to assess policies and practices:

- Conducting annual [climate surveys](#) to determine progress and remaining areas of need.
- Evaluating supervision and staff training efforts with [pre- and post-training surveys](#).
- Implementing an [Annual Review Checklist](#) to assess policies and procedures.
- Evaluating the usage of and satisfaction with services and support offered to employees.^{xxiii}
- Evaluating safety and security measures to identify potential vulnerabilities.

Implementing such assessments and opportunities for feedback itself is a trauma-informed practice as it upholds voice and provides an opportunity to improvement through collaboration. Assessments and changes made in response to their findings will also help build trust in the employers'

commitment to creating a safe and supportive workplace. Continual reflection will help to ensure that policies and practices minimize harm and **reduce re-traumatization**.

Workplaces Respond provides technical assistance to workplace stakeholders seeking to better prevent and respond to domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and harassment impacting the workplace. Scan this QR code to access the Resource Center.



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