

Member's Quarterly

Summer 2026 Edition

Feature

The Trauma Informed Workplace

It's time to review your plans and procedures

Let's start at the beginning. What is trauma? Trauma is a human's response to experiencing a dangerous or violent event. It could be caused by witnessing a crime or serious accident or from physical or emotional abuse or things like domestic/intimate partner violence. If someone has sustained trauma, they could react in unexplained and unexpected ways like depression, crying or reacting almost violently, or just appearing disconnected and disinterested.

The latter symptoms are the ones most likely to present themselves at work and people do bring their trauma to work with them. While it's not an employer's responsibility to treat or address trauma experienced by their employees, there are different ways that the organization can respond to any trauma that they become aware of. That's the beginning of what's called a trauma informed workplace.

What does a trauma informed workplace look like?

If an employee discloses that they have sustained trauma, an employer should be willing to discuss the situation with that employee, to see if there are things they can do to support them, like flexibility about schedules or workloads. The employer probably already sees the employee struggling and instead of moving to discipline, they open a dialogue with them, particularly if they are a loyal or long-time worker.

In cases where the situation may still be volatile, like domestic/intimate partner cases, the employer might work with an employee on adapting their work conditions and helping them to develop a safety plan or make contact with service providers. In a trauma informed workplace, the employer might also ensure that there is a safe and comfortable environment to have discussions, practice active listening and make sure that the workplace is an area where the employee will not be further traumatized. Employers do not have to be counsellors or social workers, but they do need to show empathy and understanding.

Creating a trauma informed workplace

In addition to developing and maintaining a caring and empathetic workplace, there are multiple ways in which an employer can create a trauma informed workplace. This could include providing training to managers and supervisors, having a plan in place to deal with difficult situations and trauma, and restoring stability in the workplace for all employees.

Training

There are numerous training programs that can help an organization grow into a trauma informed workplace. They range from informal training sessions that focus on soft skills like being emotionally aware and active listening to ones focused on dealing with behavioural challenges and mental health first aid programs. All these types of training programs help managers and supervisors gain the confidence they need to deal with difficult situations and tools to assist them and their employees to get through them.

An important aspect of all training that may be related to a trauma informed workplace is to help managers recognize and respond early to signs of employee trauma and distress. Another is knowing how and when to approach an employee who is definitely in trouble- what to say and do. Empathy is a good start but saying that 'you're sorry' about what happened isn't going to be enough.



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Plan a response

You don't have to wait for a disaster to strike to make a plan about how your organization will deal with a difficult situation. At the very least, HR and senior managers should know who the initial point of contact is and how the first few steps can be rolled out. Every organization should have a bank of resources that they can call on from Employee Assistance Program representatives to local medical and mental health professionals who can be brought in at short notice.

The first response should always be to say that you as the employer are there for individuals who need help. They may not want it right away, but make the offer. It will be appreciated. Next, be vigilant as events play out in the workplace with someone who has sustained a trauma and may be still going through it. Listen to employees around them and be prepared to offer resources as quickly as you can. There may be little you can do at the beginning, but watch and see if that changes over time.

Restore stability

An employee in mental or emotional distress needs as much stability as they can get. The workplace should be one area where it's safe to ask for and receive that support. They should know what kind of flexibility the employer can provide around work scheduling, but also what other help they can access. Is there access to counselling and other supports for themselves and their families from your Employee Assistance Program?

Can they take short or longer-term leave to deal with the situation? Can they access any short-term disability benefits to get them through a particularly difficult period? Can you give them the assurance that their job will be waiting for them when they come back? These are all questions that you can think about now and have responses ready if and when they may be required.

Make sure that you also have a plan to help other employees who may be close to the employee in trouble or may have been affected by their reaction to their trauma. They need to know that the workplace will be safe for everyone and that they can access resources themselves if they need or want them.

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