

Creating Trauma Informed Workplaces

Employers are becoming trauma-informed in the workplace to create a more welcoming, lower stress environment. A trauma informed workplace assists in retaining and supporting employees by acknowledging that employees may come to work with trauma from their past. Employees with trauma may also have a difficult time with work relationships and may be employees who don't easily fit into work culture.

Toxic stress may be at the root of why employees and clients appear more angry, anxious, withdrawn, disengaged, distracted, and unproductive. The workplace itself can be a trigger for toxic stress due to dysfunctional culture, lax safety rules, or ill-equipped managers.

The past fix for troubled employees has been through Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) and yet, an average of only 5.5% of employees use EAP programs. Health insurance can provide mental health support benefits, and still may not reach those who need it. A further understanding of trauma can help people understand the issues and resources for becoming trauma informed.

What is Trauma?

According to SAMSHA, "individual trauma results from event(s) or circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening that has adverse effects on a person's functioning, and mental, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being".

Trauma can stem from several sources from childhood to adulthood. Here are some examples:

Adverse Childhood Experiences can occur in the household as childhood and if unaddressed, carry into future relationships, in the community or environment. Unaddressed toxic stress can reduce one's ability to respond to stressful events with resiliency at work and home.

(<https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/aces/index.html>)

Race Related Trauma Racism and discrimination produce multiple levels of toxic stress and trauma. It can start early in life and continue through the lifespan and in the workplace.

(<https://www.mhanational.org/racial-trauma>)

Secondary or Vicarious Trauma People who work with traumatized clients can experience secondary trauma called "compassion fatigue". Workforce development professionals are vulnerable to this type of trauma. (<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/trauma-toolkit/secondary-traumatic-stress>)

Traumatic Events Major events such as natural disasters, personal tragedy, violence, and pandemics can create trauma for individuals, family systems, workplaces and communities.

(<https://www.samhsa.gov/trauma-violence>)

The Brain Science Behind Trauma

When the brain senses danger, it rapidly activates the amygdala (the system for fight, flight or freeze).

The brain does not distinguish between direct physical threats and threats due to toxic stress and trauma. The brain's emergency response system can become hyper-alert and easily triggered.

These threats, if unchecked, can have a devastating effect. Practices that quiet the body's emergency response system such as deep breathing can be helpful.

Populations with low income, low access to medical care, people with concerns about social determinants and communities of color have been disproportionately affected by trauma and can be found within employee workforces. Becoming trauma-informed through language that we use and work practices can be altered to reduce the effects of trauma in a work situation.

Stress can deplete energy and concentration, reduce work effectiveness and capacity to engage with colleagues, drain productivity, and diminish creativity and optimism. Trauma impacts absenteeism, productivity, and safety.

Trauma Informed Principles

Several versions of trauma informed principles can be found by a variety of settings. The well-being strategy has adopted the principles from the San Francisco Public Health Department because they are interconnected and support equity.

Understanding Trauma and Stress

This principle focuses on improving knowledge specifically related to trauma, stress, trauma reactions and recovery. When we understand trauma and stress, we can act compassionately and take well-informed steps toward well-being

Compassion and Dependability

This principle focuses on improving interpersonal relationships through communication, compassion, support, dependability and respect. Trauma can leave us feeling isolated or betrayed, which impacts trust and the ability to receive support. Developing compassion and dependability re-establishes trusting connections.

Safety and Stability

This principle focuses on reducing threats to physical, social, or emotional safety. Trauma unpredictably violates our physical, social and emotional safety resulting in a sense of threat and need to manage risks. Increased stability in our daily lives and having these core safety needs met, can minimize our stress reactions and focus on wellness.

Collaboration and Empowerment

This principle focuses on seeking out successful opportunities for choice and control for oneself and/or others. Trauma involves a loss of power and control that can make us feel helpless. When we are prepared for, and given real opportunities to make choices for ourselves and our care, we feel empowered.

Cultural Humility and Responsiveness

This principle focuses on learning about social, racial, and cultural backgrounds, how they affect relationships, and how they are related to trauma. We come from diverse social and cultural groups that may experience and react to trauma differently. When we are open to understanding these differences and respond to them sensitively, we make each other feel understood and well-being is enhanced.

Resilience and Recovery

This principle focuses on promoting personal skills, practices or strengths that reduce stress or the impact of trauma. Trauma can have a long-lasting and broad impact on our lives that can contribute to feelings of hopelessness. When we focus on our strengths and take steps toward wellness, we are more likely to become resilient and recover.

Workplace Steps to Become Trauma Informed

SAMSHA uses these four steps below to describe a trauma informed organization.

Realize the widespread impact of trauma and understand the potential paths to recovery. Offer a training to a small team to become trauma informed and understand the basic principles.

Recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma that staff, families, clients or others in the organization may be experiencing. The team will examine the organization’s practices and advise changes through a variety of ways such as observation; interviewing staff, clients and visitors; and examining processes.

Respond by integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, practices and interactions.

Resist re-traumatization Become aware of trauma-informed practices and when you spot a practice that could use improvement, talk it through with your team and change the process. It’s a continual learning opportunity to practice this work.

A phased approach to trauma informed care is practical for all organizations. Training at the frontline and organizational level should be considered.

Trauma-Informed Examples at Work

Vigor Alaska, a shipyard in Ketchikan, Alaska offered systems changes. Alaska recognized that its staff was experiencing stress and it often manifested in anger. They reviewed their practices and realized that their work environment exacerbated the stress of their employees. They begin each day with “stretch and flex”, a two-minute deep-breathing practice. They offer a meditation group and on-site recovery support. Supervisors ask supportive questions like “Who do you want to be?”

Health Federation of Philadelphia, frontline staff and managers are trained in trauma-informed customer service. Training includes coaching in verbal de-escalation and strategies to avoid re-traumatizing customers.

PwC, NYC has created a Working Well Toolkit. The four principles in the toolkit include: Know the impact, break the silence, deliver affordable access, and build a culture of well-being.

Frontline Focus of Chicago Jobs Council offers training that focuses on strength-based coaching techniques, how to use resilience and addresses secondary trauma.

SHIP's Role: Talking to Workplaces About Trauma-Informed Practices

Becoming trauma informed is an advanced activity. Organizations that are interested in, and willing to work on their culture will find that a good start to becoming trauma informed is to talk about how people interact and how employees can bring their whole selves to work.

Organizations that work with the public may be more interested, as becoming trauma-informed can connect to customer service. Trauma informed principles also mirror equity-building principles, which may be a strong motivator for some organizations to take both concepts on at once.

Assisting organizations in becoming trauma-informed is an advanced activity for SHIP LPH. Take advantage of training offered by MDH starting in the Fall of 2022 through 2023 to learn more about trauma informed principles and how to guide organizations on this journey.

Resources

- Guide to Completing the Agency Trauma Informed Self-Assessment <https://www.hca.wa.gov/assets/program/trauma-informed-self-assessment-orchard-place.pdf>
- Harvard Business Review <https://hbr.org/2022/03/we-need-trauma-informed-workplaces>
- Resilient Wisconsin Trauma Informed Practices <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/resilient/trauma-informed-practices.htm>
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network <https://www.nctsn.org/>

This paper is based in large part upon the brief entitled: **A Trauma Informed Approach to Workforce**, An Introductory Guide for Employers and Workforce Development Organizations by National Fund Workforce Solutions, by Vickie Choitz and Stacey Wagner (<https://nationalfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/A-Trauma-Informed-Approach-to-Workforce.pdf>)

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Updated: September 2022*

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