



Manager guide:

How to support staff members following a traumatic event

Trauma affects each person uniquely. What may be deeply traumatic for one staff member might affect another differently.

As an employer, your role is to create a supportive environment that acknowledges these differences while providing comprehensive assistance. When organizations prioritize staff wellbeing during difficult times, it demonstrates that people are valued as human beings first, not just as workforce contributors.

The most effective trauma support programs are those that remain flexible, comprehensive and responsive to individual needs while maintaining clear organizational structure and accountability.

Following are things to consider after a traumatic event occurs:

- **People come first**—Focus on staff wellbeing first. If possible, immediately suspend non-essential business operations, establish clear communication channels for updates and support, ensure leadership is visible, accessible and actively engaged and create safe spaces for staff members to process their emotions.
- **Provide multiple support options**—Offer the program’s confidential counseling services, if appropriate, arrange for onsite counselors, provide access to mental health resources and educational materials, consider other support needs like financial assistance or emergency funds.
- **Support return-to-work flexibility**—Depending on the nature of the traumatic event, implement gradual return to work programs, adjust workloads and deadlines as needed, and create staff member support systems, including regular check-ins. Remember, there is no timeline for healing and support needs may change over time.

This guide is comprised of tip sheets focused on different aspects of managing trauma in the workplace.

Visit MagellanHealth.com/News/Crisis-Communications for helpful resources

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Sources:

Center for Study of Traumatic Stress

United States Department of Veterans Affairs

Web MD Health Services

Note—Payment for onsite Critical Incident Response (CIR) services varies depending on your program. Most CIR services are available on a fee for service basis. Please adhere to your organization’s internal approval process prior to requesting this service.

This document is for your information only. It is not meant to give medical advice. It should not be used to replace a visit with a provider. Magellan Health does not endorse other resources that may be mentioned here.

For helpful resources, visit
MagellanHealth.com/News/Crisis-Communications

How trauma affects the workplace

Trauma in the workplace profoundly impacts not just individuals but entire organizations. Creating a trauma-informed workplace is both a business responsibility and necessity. Understanding the effects of trauma and providing appropriate support can enhance resilience, productivity and a culture of caring.

Types of workplace trauma

- **Direct workplace trauma**—Incidents like accidents and violence at work
- **Personal trauma**—External events such as abuse or natural disasters
- **Collective trauma**—Shared experiences impacting multiple staff members, like pandemics
- **Historical trauma**—Systemic experiences affecting specific groups
- **Secondary trauma**—Exposure to the trauma of others

Common manifestations

- **Cognitive issues**—Difficulty concentrating, poor memory, impaired decision-making
- **Emotional signs**—Increased anxiety, emotional detachment, trust issues
- **Physical symptoms**—Fatigue, increased sick days, headaches
- **Performance problems**—Reduced productivity, increased errors, communication challenges

Creating a trauma-informed workplace

A trauma-informed workplace is built on four key principles:

1. **Safety first**—Establish physical and emotional safety by creating predictable environments and maintaining confidentiality
2. **Trust and transparency**—Leaders should communicate openly, share timely information and honor commitments to build trust
3. **Choice and control**—Offer flexibility and encourage staff member input in decision-making to empower them
4. **Collaboration and empowerment**—Foster peer support and recognize staff member strengths to create a supportive environment

Practical implementation

Leaders should be trained to recognize trauma signs and respond empathetically. Providing immediate support, adjusting workloads and maintaining confidentiality are crucial. Long-term strategies include flexible work arrangements, mentorship programs and access to mental health resources.

Organizational policies should encompass comprehensive mental health support, clear crisis response protocol and established reporting procedures. Regular check-ins can monitor staff member wellbeing and address concerns proactively, while robust staff assistance programs provide additional support.

How to recognize signs of trauma in staff members

After experiencing a traumatic or upsetting event, individuals may find themselves re-experiencing it, avoiding reminders of it or remaining on high alert, anticipating that it might happen again. These trauma responses—commonly referred to as fight, flight or freeze—can show up in many ways. When you know how to identify these indicators, you will be better equipped to offer support.

Key signs of trauma include:

Changes in work performance

- Impaired performance, such as making mistakes or missing deadline
- Feeling overwhelmed by the workload
- Difficulty in making decisions
- Increased sick days or lateness
- Loss of interest in work

Physiological changes

- Tiredness e.g., dozing off at their desk
- Headaches, fatigue or aches and pains
- Change in physical appearance

Decreased in connection

- Appearing spaced out, distracted or disconnected
- Social withdrawal from colleagues

Increased emotional reactivity

- Displaying signs of stress, anxiety or irritation
- Exhibiting irritability or a short temper
- Appearing sad or low in mood
- Experiencing jumpiness, shakiness or trembling
- Being hypersensitive to feedback or criticism
- Having mood swings or sudden emotional outbursts, such as anger

Organizations must be sensitive to the emotional, physical and psychological needs of their staff members when traumatic events occur. Providing adequate support in these situations is essential.

How to support staff members dealing with trauma

As a manager or supervisor, you play a crucial role in supporting staff members who are experiencing trauma. While you are not expected to be a therapist, your response can significantly influence a staff member's recovery and ability to stay engaged at work.

Here are some tips for approaching this sensitive topic:

- **Create a safe space for communication.** Encourage confidential conversations without pressure. Ensure you have a private, comfortable meeting area, or allow for different communication preferences, i.e., in person, phone, email, etc.
- **Practice active, empathetic listening.** Give the person your full attention and validate their feelings. Use supportive phrases like, "I hear you" and "That sounds really difficult." Avoid pressing for details or pushing them to discuss specific issues. Allow for silences and emotional moments. It is more important for them to express how they feel now and what they need than to recount what happened. Let them know that they can approach you (or a relevant team member), whenever they feel ready.
- **Empower them through choice.** Ask how you can best support them. For instance, inquire about what would be most helpful for them right now or how they prefer to communicate with the team. This approach helps the person to regain a sense of control and provides clear options while respecting their decisions, even if they differ from what you would choose.
- **Provide practical assistance.** Whenever possible, offer flexible work arrangements and workplace accommodations. Options could include remote work, adjusted hours or schedules, temporarily reduced workloads or time off for self-care appointments.
- **Maintain consistent support.** Check-in regularly, respecting their preferred frequency. Recovery from trauma is not a linear process and can't be rushed. Some people might cope by burying their feelings initially and not feel the impact of what's happened until much later. A sustainable support plan with short-, medium- and long-term strategies is essential for regularly reviewing and adjusting support measures.
- **Offer professional resources.** Guilt, shame and self-blame can be common feelings after experiencing trauma. Let the person know that help is available through their program, support groups, crisis hotlines and other resources.

Supporting a staff member through trauma requires patience, empathy and flexibility. While immediate support is essential, remember that recovery is a journey that may require ongoing adjustments and support over time.

Supporting staff members through loss

Loss is an inevitable part of life that touches every workplace. Whether it's the death of a coworker, friend, family member or significant other, or even collective trauma from natural disasters or public health crises, grief can have a profound impact on staff members. As a leader, your response can significantly influence both the staff member's healing journey and their long-term relationship with the organization.

Varied responses to loss

Everyone processes grief differently. Some staff members find comfort in work, seeking the structure and sense of control it provides. Others need more time and space to cope with their loss. Both responses are valid and deserving of support.

Grieving and work

The traditional workplace approach often involves leaving the grieving person alone for a few days, hoping they will quickly return to work. High work demands and the stigma surrounding emotional vulnerability can contribute to this approach, especially in environments where there may be an expectation to "keep it together." However, this can be counterproductive, leading to increased isolation, prolonged mourning, reduced performance, diminished organizational loyalty and a higher turnover risk.

Best practices to support a grieving person

Building a relationship of trust with a grieving person can provide them with a strong source of support, helping them recover from grief. The benefits of improved workplace functioning can far outweigh the temporary impact of grief on productivity. Here are several ways to help:

- 1. Be flexible**—Understand that grief is not a linear process. Staff members who are grieving will experience both progress and setbacks in focus and productivity. Acknowledging the loss and reducing demands during these setbacks is important. Be present and help them manage the boundaries between their personal life and work.
- 2. Show support**—Simple gestures can carry significant meaning in the aftermath of loss. Tailor your actions to fit your organizational culture and the grieving person's preferences. Demonstrating support through a phone call, text, personal visit, sending flowers or a card or attending the memorial service signals that the workplace cares.
- 3. Ask questions**—Whenever possible, follow the staff member's lead regarding their preferences for time off, support and assistance. Inquire about what they would like you to communicate to others at work and how they wish their colleagues to respond upon their return.
- 4. Communicate with coworkers**—When the grieving staff member is ready to return to work, the manager is essential in preparing their coworkers. Inform them of the returning staff member's wishes and provide educational resources about supporting others dealing with grief.
- 5. Inform**—Clearly explain relevant policies and benefits, including the staff member assistance program, bereavement leave, flexible work arrangements, and other mental health resources. Those who are grieving often seek structure and routine during a time when they may feel out of control. Regular check-ins are crucial, and if a staff member continues to struggle several months after a loss, it may be helpful to suggest professional assistance.

By fostering a workplace that acknowledges and supports staff members through loss, you are not only helping individuals—but also creating a more resilient and compassionate organization.

How to build a trauma-informed, resilient workplace

A trauma-informed workplace recognizes that trauma affects many individuals and can significantly impact their work life. This approach requires understanding both the widespread effects of trauma and the diverse pathways to recovery. By implementing trauma-informed practices, organizations create environments where staff members feel safe, supported and empowered to heal.

Incorporate empathy and support for others into organizational values

This involves leadership explicitly supporting a trauma-informed work culture while reinforcing those values through policies, communication and action. Leaders should promote a culture that does not allow behaviors such as abusive supervision, bullying, harassment or discrimination.

Establish comprehensive support system

Remind staff members that help is available. Refer them to the program to access mental health resources including educational content and a clear pathway to seek confidential counseling for emotional wellbeing and mental health challenges.

Deliver educational programs

Provide training for managers to identify symptoms of trauma in their team members and learn how to respond to them. Additionally, all staff members can benefit from training that explains trauma in a non-stigmatizing way and encourages seeking help when it is needed.

Examine the physical work environment

Check to make sure that the environment is equally accessible for everyone and has adequate personal space. Try and remove potential triggers such as confined spaces, isolated areas or places that emphasize power hierarchies. For example, a tight physical space can be retraumatizing for someone who has experienced abusive supervision. Include private space for self-care and wellbeing activities.

Monitor and respond to staff member wellbeing

Implement regular check-ins through different methods including direct conversations with managers, anonymous feedback channels and surveys to assess overall organizational wellbeing and trauma-support needs. Create an action plan based on feedback and track progress on initiatives.