



# 2021 CHRO Insights Series: TRAUMA AND MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE EFFECT OF TRAUMA ON EMPLOYEES AND IN WORKPLACES

Mental health trauma stems from "an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening" and that "has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being."<sup>1</sup> For those who experience trauma, there is an increased risk of mental health issues including post-traumatic stress (PTS), depression, anxiety, as well as decreasing cognitive abilities including memory and sustained attention.<sup>2</sup>

According to researchers, events like the COVID-19 pandemic are a poignant example of widespread trauma, and current reported risk for PTS among US workers is 83% higher than pre-pandemic levels.<sup>3</sup> The challenges of the past two years have increased the urgency of employer strategies to address disruptive events and broadened society's understand of how many people are struggling with the mental health effects of traumatic experiences on a daily basis – even they never develop PTS.

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<sup>1</sup>Trauma and violence. SAMHSA. (n.d.). Retrieved September 27, 2021, from <https://www.samhsa.gov/trauma-violence#:~:text=SAMHSA%20describes%20individual%20trauma%20as,physical%2C%20social%2C%20emotional%2C%20or>

<sup>2</sup> Mental health index. Total Brain. (2021, September 17). Retrieved October 6, 2021, from <https://www.totalbrain.com/mentalhealthindex/>.

<sup>3</sup> Mental health index. Total Brain. (2021, September 17). Retrieved October 6, 2021, from <https://www.totalbrain.com/mentalhealthindex/>.

## ***How common is trauma in workplace settings?***

In employment settings, trauma can also occur from cases of workplace violence or violent threats, natural disasters, employee suicide, sexual harassment, and physical or mental abuse in the form of a hostile workplace culture or microaggressions. Cultural attitudes toward trauma and traumatic events in the workplace can vary widely around the world, but global and national figures show large portions of global workforces are likely to be affected by trauma over the course of employment:

- 70.4% of respondents to a World Health Organization study in 24 countries reported experiencing traumas, with an average of 3.2 traumatic events per lifetime. Only a portion of these individuals went on to develop PTSD, but traumas involving interpersonal violence had the highest risk.<sup>4</sup>

*In Japan, suicide is considered a serious societal issue, with nearly 2000 deaths in 2020. "Occupational sudden mortality", known as karoshi, or death by overwork, is a common characterization of serious mental health challenges leading to death in Japanese society. Suicide due to job stress or overwork is called karojisatsu ("overwork suicide").<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>4</sup> Kessler, R. C., et al. (2017, October 27). Trauma and PTSD in the WHO world mental health surveys. European journal of psychotraumatology. Retrieved October 6, ...

- While traumatic events do not necessarily lead to developing PTS, research has shown that 1 in 4 people globally are estimated to be living with symptoms of post-traumatic stress.<sup>6</sup>
- Exposure to traumatic events can occur in employee populations of any size or working in any industry, though some industries and some workplace settings may be particularly high-risk. For instance, in the U.S., 2 million people in the U.S. have reported being victims of workplace violence annually (an additional estimated 25% of workplace violence incidents go unreported,) and about half of those are in the healthcare industry.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, more than 20% of global healthcare workers are reported to have experienced depression, anxiety, and/or PTSD during COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>8</sup> Prior to the pandemic, estimated rates of PTSD in front-line health workers already ranged from 10% to 50%, and suicide rate among doctors was >2x that of the general public, indicating the actual incidents of mental health issues in these groups to be much higher than reported cases and the effect of trauma may be compounded by multiple sources in some job roles.

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from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5632781/>.

<sup>5</sup> Published by Julia Engelmänn, & 22, M. (2021, March 22). *Japan: Work related suicides 2020*. Statista. Retrieved October 6, 2021, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/622325/japan-work-related-suicides/>

<sup>6</sup> Yuan, K., et al. (2021, February 4). Prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder after infectious disease pandemics in the twenty-first century, including COVID-19: A meta-analysis and systematic review. *Nature News*. Retrieved October 6, 2021, from <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41380-021-01036-x>

<sup>7</sup> Factsheet Workplace Violence - Occupational Safety and ... (n.d.). Retrieved October 6, 2021, from <https://www.osha.gov/sites/default/files/publications/factsheet-workplace-violence-spanish.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> ScienceDaily. (2021, March 10). High rates of depression, anxiety, PTSD Worldwide among health workers during COVID-19. ScienceDaily. Retrieved October 6, 2021, from <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2021/03/210310150402.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> PTSD is more likely in women than men. NAMI. (n.d.). Retrieved October 6, 2021, from <https://www.nami.org/Blogs/NAMI-Blog/October-2019/PTSD-is-More-Likely-in-Women-Than-Men>.

Trauma with long term effects can occur well before an employee ever joins the workforce. For instance, survivors of childhood trauma are more likely to experience learning problems and limited academic success, as well as have long term physical and mental health needs.<sup>9</sup> According to researchers, more than two thirds of children report at least one traumatic experience by age 16.<sup>10</sup>

Employees with marginalized identities, which may include Black, Indigenous, and employees of color, and LGBTQIA employees, as well as employees with intersecting identities, face even greater risks of trauma and PTS both in and out of the workplace.<sup>11</sup> Incidents of racial and institutional violence both recent and historical, creates a greater risk of heightened trauma for minority employees.

### ***What is the effect of trauma for employers?***

Employees whose mental health has been negatively impacted by trauma are part of every global workforce, and COVID-19 pandemic has intensified this phenomenon. Research reveals a distinct

*Although post-traumatic stress (PTS) is widely associated with veterans, especially male-identifying veterans, it can affect anyone who has been through a traumatic incident. In fact, 10% of women are likely to develop PTS at least once in their lives compared to 4% of men.<sup>12</sup>*

<sup>9</sup> Understanding child trauma. SAMHSA. (n.d.). Retrieved October 7, 2021, from <https://www.samhsa.gov/child-trauma/understanding-child-trauma>.

<sup>10</sup> Copeland, W.E., Keeler G., Angold, A., & Costello, E.J. (2007). Traumatic Events and Posttraumatic Stress in Childhood. Archives of General Psychiatry. 64(5), 577-584.

<sup>11</sup> Bunn, C. (2021, May 14). Arrested, then traumatized: Black people on what comes after police encounters. NBCNews.com. Retrieved September 27, 2021, from <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/arrested-traumatized-black-people-comes-police-encounters-rcna888>.

<sup>12</sup> Va.gov: Veterans Affairs. How Common is PTSD in Women? (2018, September 18). Retrieved October 7, 2021, from [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/common/common\\_women.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/common/common_women.asp).

causational relationship between the pandemic and the rising levels of anxiety and pandemic-fueled trauma among employees across all industries and work types.<sup>12</sup> The resulting impairment of mental health can be contextualized for the workplace as well - unaddressed trauma manifests as absenteeism, poor presenteeism, task avoidance, employee conflicts, accidents, or loss of motivation.<sup>13</sup>

Traumatic experiences and the resulting impact on mental health – in and out of the workplace, prior to or during employment – can have an impact on the ability of employees to work to their full potential, and as such, supporting employees through a traumatic event or through PTS is not only the right thing to do, but it also has profound business management implications.

*The average employee experiencing mental health issues uses nearly \$3,000 more in health care services per year than their colleagues. However, the additional cost of days lost averages nearly \$5000 per year per employee, and the costs of turnover averages nearly \$6000 per year per employee across industries and occupations, with some worker types experiencing greater degrees of distress and greater associated costs.<sup>14</sup>*

12 Mental health index. Total Brain. (2021, September 17). Retrieved October 6, 2021, from <https://www.totalbrain.com/mentalhealthindex/>.

13 DeFraia G. S. (2016). Workplace Disruption following Psychological Trauma: Influence of Incident Severity Level on Organizations' Post-Incident Response Planning and Execution. *The international journal of occupational and environmental medicine*, 7(2), 75–86. <https://doi.org/10.15171/ijoem.2016.746>

14 Mental health employer cost calculator. National Safety Council. (n.d.). Retrieved October 7, 2021, from <https://www.nsc.org/mentalhealthatwork#/>.

## PART ONE

### CRAFTING AN EMPLOYER RESPONSE TO TRAUMA

Traumatic events will occur in the lives of employees, and employers can take steps to mitigate the most disruptive and debilitating impacts by preparing for traumatic events and providing trauma-informed care and support.

Workplace settings are an effective access point for mental health services as well as being a supportive environment for recovery, especially in response to instances of trauma that occurs at work. Employers with a proactive and preventative approach to trauma in the workplace are able to deploy additional resources where required, scale their responses, and tailor near, medium and long-term support as the situation requires.

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*"Traumatic events have a powerful impact in workplaces and if left unattended, they can have very severe side effects for a company and its culture. It is important for employers to consider trauma informed care as a strategy for their stability and long-term viability."*

*- Jeff Gorter, R3 Continuum*

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Employers who are leading the way in developing a comprehensive approach to trauma are:

- **Recognizing the many dimensions of trauma, including the workplace:** Trauma can stem from individual experiences, in and out of the workplace, as well as a stem from a variety of events or incidents. Bringing together a representative strategic planning group on trauma from within the organization can help leaders to understand potential risks and pressures that may exist for different employee types or those working in different locations.
  
- **Practicing traumatic event responses:** Scenario planning that helps each person understand their role in the event of a traumatic incident, including when and how their responsibilities will evolved as needs change, allows employers to respond more quickly and effectively while also creating opportunities to consider response gaps.
  
- **Integrating trauma into information sessions aimed at normalizing mental health discussions:** Just as stigma reduction efforts educate employees on symptoms and effects of common mental health conditions like depression or anxiety, normalizing conversations around the effects of trauma make it more likely that employees experiencing distress will be able to recognize and respond to their mental health needs.

## PART TWO

### CREATING A TRAUMA-RESILIENT WORKPLACE

*One Mind at Work has compiled insights and best practices from experts to share how employers can create a trauma-informed workplace and what barriers still remain.*

#### **Building a Resilient Culture**

By definition, disruptive events that can lead to mental health trauma are unpredictable in their scope and impacts. Building a resilient work culture where employees and managers leverage tools and mechanisms to promote mental health can help to mitigate disruptive mental health impacts when a traumatic event does occur. Training employees on stress reduction and coping skills, and training front-line managers on emotional intelligence, providing empathetic responses and where they can refer employees for available support builds a culture of wellness.

#### **Reducing Stigma**

Employers who have recognized the need for a trauma informed workplace often begun with creating awareness in their companies. By reducing the stigma around mental health challenges, employers are fostering a safe environment where employees who experience trauma can utilize available resources when needed. Training modules, leadership discussions and workshops addressed at reducing mental health stigma broadly, but that also include

information on trauma and mental health can help to normalize symptoms of PTS and other trauma-related mental health challenges and promote help-seeking.

## **Creating Empathetic Leadership**

In addition to being equipped with the interpersonal skills training to recognize signs of distress among team members through their performance, managers and executives can be compelling advocates for mental health within the organization by sharing their own experiences. By promoting authentic and vulnerable discussions around mental health led by figures who have been successful in their roles, workplaces set the tone that mental health challenges are not necessarily a barrier to thriving in the organization.

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*"If our caregivers are not healthy, then our organization is not going to be healthy. We are not going to be able to provide the high quality of care that our patients and their families need and expect, not in any sustainable way. There are so many factors we cannot control, but what we can control is the way we choose to show up every day for our patients and our colleagues. This requires recognition and gratitude, and a sense of purpose. During the pandemic, our team really came together, and so many people have said that this crisis has helped them find a renewed sense of meaning and purpose in the work that they do."*

*- Amy Frieman, Hackensack Meridian Health*

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## MANAGING A CRISIS

When a traumatic incident occurs in or around a workplace, employers benefit from having short-term and long-term strategies in place to support employees through their experience. A considered employer reaction to a disruptive can improve how employees perceive their employer's commitment to the well-being of the workforce, build trust and loyalty, and support a return to normal work productivity.

### **People Come First**

In the initial stage after a traumatic incident, leaders can find themselves overwhelmed by responsibilities. However, a primary priority for employers should be to attend to their employees' needs through communication and resources. Practical steps could include a statement to acknowledge the event, inform employees of the available support services and encourage positivity and community in the workplace, or a message that guides managers in speaking about the incident in clear and consistent language that validates employees' reactions. A visible focus on employees following traumatic event conveys a sense of security, direction, and stability.

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*"Strong crisis response helps cut through the stigma. When a crisis hits, it grabs peoples' attention and often opens them up to help. In this way, responsive crisis help can open up doors for more proactive behavioral health care."*

*- David Levine, Global Crisis Care*

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## **Make Choices Available**

When a traumatic incident occurs, employees may need support in navigating mental health issues, but no form or method of support should be assumed to be the right intervention for a particular employee or in response to certain event. Instead, providing a variety of support systems during and after a traumatic event such as on-site support, telephone or app-based access to providers, debriefing sessions or peer-to-peer support sessions allows employees to choose the services that are most comfortable and supportive in their recovery to them.

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*"We are aware of the immense pressure that healthcare workers are under. So, during the crisis, we temporarily relaxed some of our policies that we normally would not have, for example, around PTO. We provided new employees the opportunity to roll over paid time off. This helped our workers know that we were there to support them during this journey."*

*- Linda McHugh, Hackensack Meridian Health*

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## **Recovery Through Work**

Although work can be a source of stress and anxiety at times, work can also provide a sense of control, purpose and stability to employees during instances of heightened unpredictability such as following a traumatic event or

incident. Providing employees the choice and the opportunity to return to work, while simultaneously utilizing other support systems, can support growth, resilience, and recovery.

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*"Being able to return to work or stay at work is a clear expression of functional resilience."*

*- Jeff Gorter, R3 Continuum*

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## RECOVERY IS A JOURNEY

Research shows that exposure to trauma can have long-term mental health impacts, and recovery is a journey that can sometimes take years. Acknowledging how healing from trauma is process, and that every employee will respond differently to trauma and to support, necessitates a phased approach to trauma response by employers that includes a long-term support component.

### **Self-Guided Support**

As every individual effected by a traumatic event navigates their healing process, it is important to create opportunities where employees can seek support at the pace and for the

*"People have been able to access trauma support or any well-being support at a time that suits them and have been able to engage with it far more than the traditional style of resources."*

*- Fiona McAslan, NatWest*

duration that works best for their needs. Employers leveraging self-guided support systems for trauma demonstrate a commitment to employee self-determination that can be beneficial to mental health following a disruptive event.

## **Understanding Metrics**

Most employers leverage metrics to assess mental health support and collect information about the effectiveness of programs and interventions, but in the case of a traumatic workplace incident, metrics may show that the effect is a mitigated negative response rather than a complete avoidance of negative consequences. As such, leading employers combine traditional workforce metrics like utilization of benefits, employee retention, and mental health disability with qualitative feedback from employees on their experience accessing support as a way to evaluate the impact of trauma response.

## OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO RESPONSE

Although significant gains have been made by employers in sharing information and formulating response strategies for trauma in the workplace, barriers remain that may prevent a comprehensive and appropriately tailored approach to support for employees.

### **Mental Health Stigma**

A reluctance to engage with mental health services can be a pervasive attitude in some organizational cultures. Concerns related to privacy, utility and effectiveness of mental health support and services are common in many workplaces and can create a reluctance to access interventions in normal circumstances. Misconceptions or a lack of information about the mental health impacts of trauma and available support can exacerbate unaddressed needs in the employee population following a traumatic event. Additionally, approaches by employers to assess the magnitude and the impact of some disruptive events, in effect classifying what should or should not be considered traumatic, can be dismissive or invalidating of employees' experiences. Fostering an open dialogue around mental health and stigma encourages employees to seek help when it is most appropriate and comfortable for them.

### **Siloed Support Systems**

Building a workplace trauma strategy requires embedding

trauma informed care throughout mental health programs and support systems, as well as connecting care platform, so that employees can access modes of care according to their needs. Many employers are relying on Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) to provide a first level of support, but some leaders are leveraging a more integrated approach that combined the EAP with other resources in a central hub. In instances of high mental health need, like immediately following a traumatic event, deploying a navigation service not only provides support to individuals in crisis, but it also connects employees to longer term care and support options.

### **Lack of Trauma-Response Infrastructure**

Employers report a lack of available health system infrastructure specifically focused on trauma response, including a limited number of providers who are trained in trauma response available through benefits plans. A coordinated response with EAP resources and crisis management support is a way to bridge a gap in services, but may can be costly or may not be feasible in the variety of circumstances in which employees may experience trauma.

### **TRAUMA-INFORMED WORKPLACES ARE THE FUTURE**

Traumatic events – like a global pandemic – can cause a significant amount of stress for leaders and exacerbate mental health challenges in the workforce, but upon

reflection can also be an opportunity for reducing stigma and open doors for positive change. Many employers are taking important steps toward understanding the short and long term impacts of trauma on employees, and adjusting practices, resources and support to better meet the needs of future workers.

Specifically, the development of a strategic plan for crisis response is becoming a top priority for leading companies, and embedded within that is a strategy for support the mental health of employees. According to a recent survey of global businesses, only 35% had a crisis response plan that was easily applicable to the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning the majority were unprepared or inadequately prepared for the rapidly changing circumstances.<sup>14</sup> The insights provided by the experts participating in this report point to an imperative need for a cultural shift at workplaces as well, from reducing stigma to promoting empathetic leadership.

An overwhelming 80% of employers also report that their “most consequential” action during the pandemic has been to consider the physical safety and emotional health of employees in response to the crisis. More than ever, the pandemic has provided a space for employers to make active and intentional efforts to show they care, and that the workplace can be a place of healing and positivity.

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<sup>14</sup> PricewaterhouseCoopers. (n.d.). Global crisis survey 2021. PwC. Retrieved October 7, 2021, from <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/issues/crisis-solutions/global-crisis-survey.html>.

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## ABOUT ONE MIND AT WORK

One Mind at Work is a global coalition of leaders from diverse sectors including business, medicine, research, education, law enforcement, the military and civil society. These leaders have joined together with the goal of transforming approaches to mental health and addiction. Launched in 2017, One Mind at Work now has more than 80 global employer members, representing more than 7 million employees, and more than 30 research and content partners.

One Mind at Work convenes leaders to transform approaches to mental health and addiction with the goal of delivering better mental health, wellness and economic outcomes globally. Working together with other influential leaders, we will effectively address mental health disparities, promote brain health and achieve a society and health care system in which mental health is treated the same as physical health.

## ABOUT THE SHRM FOUNDATION

The SHRM Foundation's mission is to mobilize the power of HR and activate the generosity of donors to lead positive social change impacting all things work. The Foundation is committed to elevating and empowering HR as a social force through its innovative solutions to workplace inclusion challenges, programming designed to inspire and empower the next generation of HR leaders, and awarding scholarships and professional development grants to educate and develop students and HR professionals.

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