

Trauma in The Workplace

Trauma is a person's response to a disturbing or distressing experience, event, or injury that overwhelms their ability to cope and impacts their physical, emotional, and mental well-being. Trauma responses are common and can affect anyone.

Common types of trauma include:

- Acute trauma: Results from a single, overwhelming event
- Chronic trauma: Results from repeated and prolonged exposure to distressing events
- Complex trauma: Results from multiple, often interpersonal, traumatic experiences
- Secondary (Vicarious) trauma: Results from close contact with individuals who have experienced trauma; common among caregivers, advocates, and helping professionals

SAMHSA's Six Trauma-Informed Principles in the Workplace

SAFETY

Employees feel physically and psychologically safe.

- Foster respectful communication
- Address threats, harassment, and unsafe conditions promptly
- Create predictable routines and clear expectations

TRUSTWORTHINESS & TRANSPARENCY

Organizational decisions are conducted with the goal of building and maintaining trust with participants and staff. Clearly explain processes, expectations, and changes

- Follow through on commitments
- Be honest about what can and cannot be offered

PEER SUPPORT

Connection and shared understanding promote healing.

- Encourage teamwork and mutual support
- Normalize debriefing and reflection after difficult work
- Reduce isolation, especially in high-stress roles

COLLABORATION & MUTUALITY

Power differences are recognized and minimized when possible.

- Invite employee input and feedback
- Emphasize partnership rather than control
- Approach challenges as shared problem-solving

EMPOWERMENT, VOICE, & CHOICE

Employees are supported in making informed decisions.

- Offer choices when possible (e.g., flexibility, task planning)
- Focus on strengths and capacity
- Respect autonomy and individual needs

CULTURAL, HISTORICAL, & GENDER RESPONSIVENESS

Workplace responses acknowledge identity and lived experience.

- Recognize the impact of bias, discrimination, and historical trauma
- Respond with cultural humility rather than assumptions
- Ensure policies and responses are equitable and inclusive



Common Responses

Changes in
concentration
or performance

Emotional
Responses

Withdrawal
or
Disconnection

Hypervigilance

Avoidance

Supportive Responses

- Encouraging non-judgmental language from all levels of employees
- Create a statement of support for employees who are struggling, including available internal and external resources
- Train all employees on how to check in with employees during 1:1s
 - "Before we get started, I wanted to check in to see how you're feeling with everything going on, and how I might best support you during this time?"
- Avoid minimizing or dismissing a person's feelings and use active listening techniques such as validation, giving your full attention, and using appropriate body language