

Building Organizational Resilience in the Face of Covid-19

Understanding Through a Trauma Lens

As a result of COVID-19, everyone is in a state of alert, living much of the time in their lower, survival brain. Staff are worried about their jobs, how to care for children, if they or their family members will get sick. The emotional impact of this experience on ourselves and our staff depends on their individual characteristics and experiences, the social and economic circumstances of their family and their community. Our individual responses may be similar to responses we might see in those who have lived through other traumas such as combat, assault or hurricanes. Those who respond more strongly to the stress of this crisis may be individuals with pre-existing mental health conditions, as well as physicians, health care providers and first responders who are helping with the response to COVID-19. It is likely we will begin to encounter colleagues who react or respond in a way that seems excessive or strange. These are opportunities to recognize and expect traumatic responses – misplaced coping or survival mechanisms.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) definition of trauma has three elements.

“Individual trauma results from an **event**, series of events or set of circumstances **experienced** by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening with lasting adverse **effects** on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional or spiritual well-being.”

Fear and trauma interrupt our ability to access our frontal cortex. When we are in our survival brain, it is harder to think, problem-solve, focus or productively manage conflict. Understanding trauma and its impact is the first step to beginning to foster resilience through this crisis.

What You Can Do

As a leader, you are moving mountains to cope, bounce back and adjust in the face of this unprecedented adversity. These efforts prompt the questions: How do we intentionally promote resilience in the workforce? How do we continue our complex services while taking care of our families, our work force, each other and ourselves? The teachings and principles from trauma-informed approaches and resilience offer a foundation for answering these questions.

Safety – As leaders, we need to focus on prioritizing physical, emotional and psychological safety in every interaction and process.

- Share training and resources on how to respond and stay safe.
- Share best practices for working remotely.
- Model vulnerability. Explore challenges and difficult emotions including grief and create safe spaces for staff to do the same. Holding space for ourselves and our staff helps people regulate their emotions.
- Avoid spreading blame. Information is frequently changing and may cause frustration or errors such as slips in quarantine etiquette. Show grace and compassion. Now is the time to align and connect.

- Create balance. We can stay in our thinking brain by practicing regulation strategies such as:
 - Focused breathing
 - Pausing between activities
 - Mindfulness
 - Grounding techniques
- Create structure, keep structure. Keep your meetings, honor your staff by being punctual and predictable. Ensure that supervisors are checking in with staff often, asking how they are doing and what they need. Ensure someone is checking on you. Some key strategies:
 - Use all technology means available to connect. Technology options that promote face-to-face contact are best.
 - Replace some emails/texts/messages with video or phone calls.
 - Establish a buddy system on your team so everyone has someone checking in on them regularly.
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Trust and Transparency – Trust is imperative in our organizations, especially during times of uncertainty and fear. Build trust by practicing intentional relationship building.

- Overcommunicate and share as much information as possible. Staff have lots of questions and may doubt your decisions or intentions. Be accepting of staff who are slow to trust. Remember that during times of crisis learning brains are offline.
- Understand that staff can handle difficult news. Offer opportunities for processing hard information and allow differences of opinion
- Examine current expectations. Consider how established work practices can be adjusted. Explore how teams may be able to adjust to changing needs and challenges of staff and clients. This is an opportunity to be flexibly direct, especially about what needs to be done today or this week.

Collaboration and Mutuality – Working together, while practicing physical distancing, is required right now.

- Consider allowing staff to use the organization’s sharing platforms, such as Zoom, to stay in touch with their families.
- Partner with staff. Ask for ideas and listen to and consider solutions. If the solutions aren’t feasible, communicate that and thank staff for the input.
- Assume that everyone is doing the best they can.
- Look for common experiences with staff (not only related to this crisis) that can highlight our shared humanity. If working virtually – take time to introduce family members, animals.

Voice and Choice – Everyone needs to feel seen and to know their options.

- When possible, seek staff input in planning or changing team and organizational processes. Offer options, when possible, for altering work schedules based on staff needs. Ensure everyone is invited to contribute. You don’t need to have all the answers, or the best answers, and it’s okay for employees to experience fear, anxiety and rigidity.

- Honor different ways to engage in the work. Understand that those who are quiet, or even sullen, may not always have the capacity for rich conversations about how they are feeling or what they need.
- Recognize your privilege and practice cultural humility.
 - Be curious and unknowing regarding how this may be impacting those you work with. This pandemic impacts people differently across all sectors of society. Increase your curiosity about how this may impact marginalized populations.
- Ensure all staff know how to access employee assistance program (EAP) resources to address behavioral health concerns.

Peer support – Now, more than ever, we can rely on each other and our shared experiences.

- Consider creating a buddy system that ensures no staff member is outside of the protective culture.
- Celebrate the wins for the day or week. Focusing on what you can do as opposed to what you can't do will help combat powerlessness.
- Help yourself by helping others. Practicing kindness and helping others are great ways to reinforce your own feelings of agency and control and they have the bonus of making you feel empowered and connected.
- Normalize trauma symptoms and promote resilience. It is critical to practice self-care and self-compassion. Be kind to yourself. You are doing the best you can, and it is enough.

Building resilience in the workforce is key to adapting to the challenges ahead. The good news is that there is opportunity in crisis. Throughout the history of the human race, times of crisis have always heightened the opportunity for bringing out the best in us. Thousands of us are acting with compassion and cooperation daily. Acknowledging and celebrating each other in these moments will allow us to emerge even stronger as a collective humanity.