



# ADDRESSING THE IMPACTS OF VIOLENCE TRAUMA IN THE WORKPLACE

Promoting Worker Wellness and Resilience  
through Trauma-Informed Practice

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WELCOA WHITEPAPER BY FUTURES WITHOUT VIOLENCE



By **realizing** the traumatic effects of gender-based violence and harassment, **recognizing** the elements of trauma, **responding** in a survivor-centered way, and **resisting** policies and practices that lead to **re-traumatization** workplaces can ensure safe, productive, and resilient workplaces for all workers.

## THE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT RIPPLE EFFECT



In the United States 52.2 million women and 27.6 million men will experience sexual violence; 19.1 million women and 6.4 million men will be stalked; and 43.6 million women and 37.3 million men will experience intimate partner violence in their lifetime.<sup>i</sup> Whether domestic violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment, or stalking, gender-based violence and harassment touches every workplace. Abusive actions taken by perpetrators not only affect the safety and ability of survivors<sup>1</sup> to thrive at work, their actions also threaten the workplace as a whole.

<sup>1</sup> Individuals who experience gender-based violence and harassment will be referred to as “survivors” to focus on their power and agency rather than the victimization they experienced.

### IMPACT ON SURVIVORS

- » Perpetrators **sabotage survivors’ employment** by making harassing calls and texts, showing up at the workplace, causing the survivor to be late, or depriving them of sleep.<sup>ii</sup>
- » Survivors of intimate partner violence **lose over seven paid days of work in year** because of abuse, whether to recover from the physical aspects of violence, seek safety, or cooperate with the justice system.<sup>iii</sup>
- » Physical violence, sexual violence, and psychological abuse can lead to **long-term adverse health impacts** and psychological changes that can negatively impact job performance.

### IMPACT ON CO-WORKERS

- » Co-workers often report feeling **concern for their own safety** when perpetrators continually call or show up at the workplace to stalk, harass, or threaten another; others report **feeling some resentment** towards the survivor because of the impact their abusive partner has on the workplace.<sup>iv</sup>
- » Nearly 20 percent of perpetrators of intimate partner violence reported **causing or almost causing a serious accident** at work because they were distracted.<sup>v</sup>

### IMPACT ON WORKPLACES

- » **Perpetrators use employer’s resources** – phone, laptops, and more – to control and threaten their targets.<sup>vi</sup>
- » **One in three female workplace homicides were committed by a personal relation**, most of which were intimate partners. In many cases, bystanders were also killed.<sup>vii</sup>
- » **Domestic violence costs U.S. businesses nearly \$1.27 billion** (adjusted for 2019 dollars) in productivity losses.<sup>viii</sup>
- » Businesses may bear legal **liability for incidents that occur on-site or for wrongful termination** of survivors which can potentially result in penalties and damages civil lawsuits.

Harm perpetrated against employees – whether at work or at home – has dangerous consequences for everyone. The impacts of experiencing and/or witnessing such violence must be recognized and addressed in both workplace policies and interventions. How workplaces respond to gender-based violence can shape the options survivors have to remain safe at work and can contribute to whether the workplace has an effective culture of prevention, safety, and accountability.

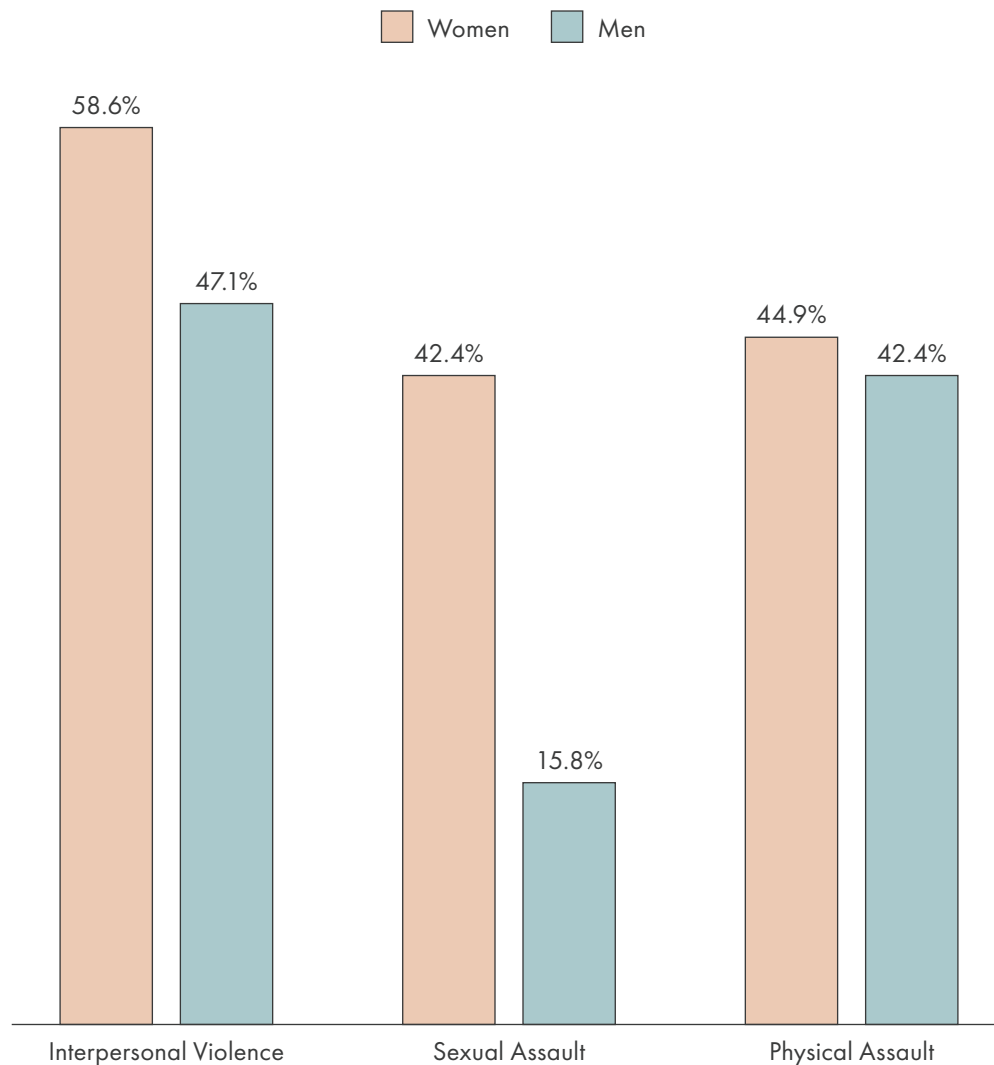
## Realize the prevalence of trauma among employees

Trauma is defined as “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.”<sup>ix</sup>

## A national study found that 89.7% of U.S. adults had been exposed to at least one traumatic event in their lifetime<sup>x</sup>

**People may experience a wide array of trauma in their lifetime.** Traumatic events can include near death experiences, the loss of a loved one, witnessing a violent act, experiencing child abuse, histories of oppression, persistent racism, and exposure to gender-based violence and harassment, including domestic violence, sexual violence and harassment, stalking, and human trafficking.

## EXPERIENCE OF TRAUMATIC EVENTS



## A PERSON'S IDENTITY CAN INFLUENCE THEIR EXPOSURE TO TRAUMATIC EVENTS

Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, as well as religious minorities who have been subjected to violent and often fatal acts, systemic and institutionalized oppression, and persistent acts of discrimination often carry the impacts of trauma over many generations.



### RACIAL TRAUMA

- » Discrimination and racism has been consistently shown to have increased traumatic stress responses among marginalized groups.



### GENDER TRAUMA

- » Violence and harassment based on a person's gender, including violence and harassment targeting gender-non-conforming persons and sexual orientation has resulted in high rates of trauma and PTSD within these groups.



### GENERATIONAL TRAUMA

- » Inter or trans-generational trauma is when parents' exposure to extremely adverse events is so damaging that their children are shaped as a result of their parent's ongoing experiences of trauma.

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### We bring our whole selves to work.

Exposure to threats or acts of violence and the impacts of trauma can shape how individuals perceive and relate to their surroundings. What impacts us outside of the workplace is carried with us and affects how we relate to the workplace and our jobs. The effects of trauma are not limited to the individual experiencing it. Trauma can undermine a workplace's ability to fulfill its mission. **Realizing** that employees have likely experienced one or multiple forms of trauma is the first step workplaces must take to build the buy-in and support necessary to implement trauma-informed policies and practices for a safety and supportive workplace. When employees are safe and supported, the workplace succeeds.



## RECOGNIZE THE IMPACT OF VIOLENCE AND TRAUMA

Trauma often triggers an **unconscious flight, fight, freeze, or fawn response** in our brain and floods our body with stress hormones.<sup>xii</sup> How one reacts to a traumatic event is not a choice an individual makes; it is a subconscious survival response that occurs deep within our brains.

Threats or acts of violence and the resulting trauma can change how individuals perceive and relate to their surroundings. Without proper support and care, the body's natural response to trauma can be detrimental to one's long-term physical, emotional, and cognitive well-being (see chart below).

While many of the signs associated with a trauma response – such as being withdrawn, having headaches, or difficulty concentrating – are experienced by all people from time to time, these symptoms are often chronic and multiplied for individuals who experience a trauma event. The harms caused by experiencing traumatic events may also result in some individuals misusing drugs or alcohol and/or engaging in risk-taking behaviors as a means of coping with their experiences, which can further exacerbate the impacts of trauma.

### FIGHT

- » Confronting the actual or perceived threat aggressively.

### FLIGHT

- » Running from the actual or perceived threat.

### FREEZE

- » Being unable to move or act against the actual or perceived threat.

### FAWN

- » Complying with the threat as a means of protection against further harm.



### EMOTIONAL

- Numbness, apathy, withdrawal
- Anxiety and fear
- Guilt and shame
- Anger and irritability
- Depression
- Suicidal thoughts



### PHYSICAL

- Gastrointestinal issues
- Headaches
- Sleep problems
- Chronic pain
- Panic attacks



### COGNITIVE

- Difficulty focusing / making decisions
- Flashbacks
- Hypervigilance
- Decreased working memory

**These negative physical, emotional, and mental health impacts can manifest themselves among employees in a variety of ways.**

#### **Physical signs of injury or chronic illnesses**

Bruises, lacerations, and broken bones are often expected signs of abuse or violence, however domestic and sexual violence are more than physical abuse. Changes in health include headaches, gastrointestinal, and/or gynecological issues which are common conditions resulting from abuse.<sup>xiii</sup>

#### **Increased absenteeism**

Survivors of domestic violence on average lose 7.1 paid days of work a year, and survivors of sexual assault 8.1 days a year to seek medical attention, resources, and safety.<sup>xiv</sup> Abusive partners may also sabotage their partners' ability to get to work, or may force them to leave work early.<sup>xv</sup> Individuals experiencing sexual harassment and violence from a coworker may avoid work because of the abuse experienced while in the workplace.

#### **Inability to concentrate**

Trauma and fear can trigger a constant state of flight or fight which can diminish cognitive functioning.<sup>xvi</sup> Some abusers may also keep survivors up at night in efforts to sabotage their employment.<sup>xvii</sup>

**Increase in personal calls, texts, or visits**

Domestic violence is about power and control, and abusive partners may constantly monitor their partners by calling to check on them or by showing up at the workplace unexpectedly.<sup>xviii</sup>

**Unwillingness to report or cooperate with an investigation**

Individuals who experience workplace harassment may fear retaliation, being ostracized by others, or may face threats for reporting. As a result, they may refuse to cooperate or seek help despite the severity of the abuse.

**Appearing agitated, angry, sad, or hypervigilant**

Trauma, depression, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – all common among survivors of gender-based violence – can result in survivors displaying a range of emotions that may appear to be inappropriate or extreme.<sup>xix</sup>

**Other general changes in behavior or work performance**

Once confident employees may suddenly become timid or second guess themselves due to psychological abuse; or individuals experiencing abuse may withdraw from activities and engagement with coworkers that they used to enjoy.<sup>xx</sup>

When such signs present themselves in the workplace, they may be mistaken for a lack of skills or poor work ethic and dismissed until a time when the impact becomes too disruptive and the employees exhibiting these potential signs of trauma are met with punitive measures rather than supportive measures. When signs are recognized as a result of violence or harassment, employees often want to help but lack the strategies and resources to respond when a co-worker is clearly in need or support.

By **recognizing** common responses to trauma and how they may manifest themselves within the workplace as well as understanding the ways in which workplaces themselves may compound the harm caused by abusive individuals and trauma, workplaces can take the necessary steps to proactively and supportively respond so that survivors, co-workers, and workplaces as a whole are able to remain safe and thrive.

## Respond by incorporating an understanding of trauma into workplace policies and practices.

Workplaces can become more trauma-informed by considering how current policies and practices impact survivors and adopting better approaches to reflect how individuals experience trauma. Being trauma-informed is less about what you're doing and more about how you're doing it.<sup>xxxi</sup> It is an ongoing process that can range from simple actions to sweeping change.

There are six key trauma responsive elements that workplaces should consider when developing and implementing policies and practices that support workplace safety and promote prevention.

**SAFETY****TRANSPARENCY  
AND TRUST****PEER SUPPORT****COLLABORATION  
AND MUTUALITY****EMPOWERMENT,  
VOICE, AND CHOICE****CULTURAL, GENDER,  
AND HISTORIC ISSUES**



1. Physical and psychological safety is essential for a thriving and productive workplace. Promote physical and psychological **safety** by acknowledging that we bring our whole selves to work and validating individual needs and experiences and providing non-judgmental support.



2. Workplaces should have model written policies and practices that support physical and psychological safety, but if those policies are not implemented consistently and transparently, workers will be unable to trust the employer's response to the impacts of violence and harassment in the workplace. Build **trust** by being **transparent** and consistent in sharing what your workplace can and can't do to help. Describe processes to report harassment or violence and provide information on available accommodations and support services or referrals to community resources that can offer assistance related to current or previous victimization and trauma.



3. Employees are a workplace's most valuable asset. Creating workplaces that strive to cultivate its own workforce by building leadership, sharing expertise, and supporting professional development of others is essential. Opportunities for **peer support** helps to build camaraderie and can reduce the isolation that result from experiences of violence, harassment, and trauma. Cultivate mentors and other leaders of diverse identities and backgrounds to help create opportunities for those individuals who may come from marginalized communities.



4. Workplaces must foster a culture that promotes dignity, agency, collaboration, and respect. Valuing all employees as equal members in fulfilling the employer's mission can help to do that in a meaningful way. Foster a culture that promotes dignity, agency, **collaboration**, and respect. This can be accomplished through leveling power differences between staff in all positions so that staff have a meaningful role in contributing to the mission.



5. Survivors are the experts on their own experiences and know what they need to be safe and thrive at work. Providing opportunities for survivors to exercise choice and control, share feedback, and to determine what practices make the most sense for them, is vital. **Empower** employees with a meaningful **voice** and information-driven **choice** in performing their job duties and contributing to the team.



6. Gender-based violence cannot be separated from other forms of oppression based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and other identities. Abusive individuals exploit these identities to gain greater power and control further compounding can compound one's experiences of violence or harassment and exacerbating the impacts of trauma. Workplaces must address all forms of violence, harassment, and behaviors intended to exercise power and control over others to workplaces that promote respect, dignity and greater safety for all.

Workplaces that **respond** by applying trauma-informed principles – safety; trust and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice; and cultural, historical, and gender issues – to workplace policies, administrative and supervisory practices, and supports for those who have experienced violence and trauma will help create safe and more productive workplaces for all.

## RESIST RE-TRAUMATIZATION BY EXAMINING AND MODIFYING POTENTIALLY HARMFUL PRACTICES

Not being believed, a lack of appropriate support from supervisors and leadership, or being pushed to take a specific course of action can intensify a survivor's experience of trauma, impacting their job performance and creating an unsafe and harmful environment for that survivor and other employees. Over time survivors who do not receive appropriate support may ultimately leave their jobs, workplaces can experience high rates of turn-over, and morale is eroded when employees see other co-workers facing additional harms resulting from an employer's failure to respond in a trauma-informed, survivor-centered way.

To ensure that the efforts a workplace engages in to support survivors is effective, it is critical that workplaces routinely evaluate how policies and practices are impacting workers, particularly survivors who have sought help. Employers should consider the following opportunities to assess policies and practices:

- » Conducting annual [climate surveys](#) to determine progress and remaining areas of need.
- » Evaluating supervision and staff training efforts with [pre- and post-training surveys](#).
- » Implementing an [Annual Review Checklist](#) to assess policies and procedures.
- » Evaluating the usage of and satisfaction with services and support offered to employees.<sup>2</sup>
- » Evaluating safety and security measures to identify potential vulnerabilities.

Implementing such assessments and opportunities for feedback itself is a trauma-informed practice as it upholds voice and provides an opportunity to improvement through collaboration. Assessments and changes made in response to their findings will also help build trust in the employers' commitment to creating a safe and supportive workplace. Continual reflection will help to ensure that policies and practices minimize harm and **reduce re-traumatization**.

<sup>2</sup> Note that an increase in reporting does not necessarily reflect an increase in need, it can reflect that there was an increase in trust in the employer's ability to support and respond to survivors' needs and is actually a positive sign as new policies and practices are implemented.



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17002 MARCY STREET, SUITE 140 | OMAHA, NE 68118  
402.827.3590 | WELCOA.ORG

