

Supporting Employee Mental Health During Challenging or Traumatic Times

During challenging times or traumatic events, organizations can do a lot to support employees. NAMI encourages people to bring their whole selves to work, which includes their mental health. As employers, it's important to acknowledge what's happening outside of the workplace, its potential impact on employee wellness, and support employees so that they can continue to do their best work.

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

When your employees experience something challenging or traumatic, maintain a position of compassion and empathy. Learn about different trauma-related terms and how to appropriately use them here.

Trauma occurs when a person is threatened by or directly experiences an intensely distressing event, such as an assault or the death of a loved one. People experience trauma in different ways, even when exposed to the same traumatic event. Experiencing trauma may or may not result in a clinical diagnosis.

Indirect trauma occurs when a person sees or hears about a traumatic event from another person or on the news or social media. Frequently, a person who works directly with those who have experienced trauma will face indirect trauma, such as journalists, front-line workers, or first responders.

Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS) describes a typical, temporary response to a traumatic or highly stressful event. It includes reactions like feeling on edge, experiencing flashbacks or nightmares, and feeling temporarily disconnected. These experiences can naturally subside over time as individuals process the experience and regain a sense of safety.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a clinical condition that may develop if a traumatic experience persists for more than a month and significantly interferes with daily life. PTSD is characterized by experiences that are more severe and persistent, including:

- re-experiencing the trauma (through intrusive memories or nightmares)
- avoidance of reminders of the event
- negative changes in mood and thoughts
- chronic physical or emotional pain, and heightened arousal (e.g., being easily startled or having trouble concentrating)

It is important to note, this term can feel stigmatizing to some and should not be used lightly. Learn more about [PTSD online](#).

Tips for supporting employee mental health during difficult times:

Recognize the world outside work

Start by openly acknowledging what is happening in the world around us – and that it is likely impacting employee wellness day-to-day. This can be done with an all-staff message from leadership, through town halls, or through other communication channels. Lead with empathy and compassion.

Raise awareness of concerning signs

NAMI provides a wide range of resources about the signs of mental health concerns, which may appear after a traumatic event. How those signs show up at work can differ from person to person, but often include changes in how a person feels, looks, acts, or thinks.

Signs may include how a person:

- **Feels:** excessive irritability, worry, or overwhelm
- **Looks:** confused, exhausted, or fidgety
- **Acts:** less engaged at work or socially withdrawn
- **Thinks:** difficulty concentrating or persistent negative thoughts

Everyone's experience is unique, and there is no "right" way to respond to trauma.

Tips for supporting employee mental health during difficult times:

Encourage conversations in a psychologically safe workplace

While bringing up challenging or traumatic topics may seem intimidating for employers, doing so can help people feel more supported and heard, strengthening organizational culture.

Creating a psychologically safe space to have these conversations is critical.

Organizations can do that by:

- Encouraging [non-judgmental language](#) from all levels of employees.
- Creating a statement of support for employees who are struggling, including available internal and external resources.
- Training all employees and people managers about how to have [mental health conversations](#).
- Include a check-in question at the beginning of 1:1 conversations.
 - *“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 appropriate body language such as facing the person and keeping all screens off and away.
 - *“It makes sense you feel that way.”*
 - *“I imagine it is difficult to carry this right now, I am here to support you.”*

Provide internal and external resources

Make employees aware of available resources, including [Employee Assistance Program \(EAP\)](#) services, crisis hotlines, the NAMI HelpLine, community resources, and other sources for employees to learn about and manage trauma.

Resources:

- **988:** For a mental health or suicidal crisis, call or text 988, or chat online at 988lifeline.org.
 - The 988 Lifeline provides 24/7, free and confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources for you or your loved ones, and best practices for professionals in the United States.
 - Press 1 for the Veterans Crisis Line
 - Press 2 for Spanish services
 - Press 3 for LGBTQI+ support
- **1-800-985-5990:** The Disaster Distress Helpline provides 24-hour, toll-free crisis counseling and support to people experiencing emotional distress related to natural or human-caused disasters. Visit [SAMHSA’s Disaster Distress Helpline](#).
- **NAMI HelpLine:** Open Monday-Friday 10 am ET – 10 pm ET, call 1-800-950-NAMI (6264), text “HelpLine” to 62640, [email helpline@nami.org](mailto:helpline@nami.org), or chat online at nami.org.
- **Find Your Local NAMI:** For community resources, support groups, educational classes, and more. Go to nami.org/local.