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WRITTEN BY DAWN MARTIN

Rewriting the NARRATIVE

HOW A BRYAN SCHOOL PROFESSOR IS CHANGING THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT WORKPLACE TRAUMA

When people come to work, they bring with them their entire life experience. Sometimes, this includes psychological trauma that has occurred either on the job or in their personal lives.

In fact, 70% of adults have experienced at least one traumatic event in their lifetime, and those in high-risk professions – including health care, law enforcement, and the like – can experience elevated physical or psychological danger, says Dr. Madelynn Stackhouse, associate professor of management in the Bryan School of Business and Economics. Despite this, trauma in the workplace isn't well studied by management researchers, Stackhouse says.

As an organizational psychologist with experience in corporate culture, Stackhouse sees value in considering how stress and trauma impact employee well-being and workplace functioning.

"It's a very real issue, and a lot of organizations are just not looking at it," she says. "This is something we need to address to make workplaces less toxic and more positive."

TIPS TO BUILD SUPPORTIVE WORKPLACE CULTURES

1. Normalize conversations about stress and trauma. Understand that trauma will happen, and people's reaction to it is natural.
2. Create systems to support employees by offering counseling, leadership training, cultural development, or even activities such as yoga or bringing dogs into the workplace for stress relief.
3. Expect a return on the investment. Employee assistance and organizational programs can foster trauma resilience and recovery and may return $3-7 for every dollar spent, primarily through reduced absenteeism, turnover, and health care costs.

Groundbreaking Findings

In research published in the *Academy of Management Annals*, widely considered the premier journal in management, Stackhouse conducted a comprehensive review of more than 1,517 research papers across health care, social sciences, and behavioral sciences that addressed trauma's impact on the workplace. Only 9% appeared in business and management journals. "This really speaks to just how little this topic exists in the business research conversation and, as a result, in leadership and management practice," she says.

Her interest in the topic was sparked after hearing family members and co-workers discuss varying degrees of workplace abuse. But trauma on the job can take other forms too. For instance, medical or law enforcement personnel may witness chronic occurrences of violence, injuries, or death. Other employees may experience sudden critical events, such as mass shootings, industrial accidents, or widespread layoffs. Still others may have personal difficulties at home, such as domestic abuse, health problems, or financial challenges that impact their work.

Now working with Ph.D. student Emily Belew to interview people about their personal experiences, Stackhouse is finding poignant examples.

One hospital nurse cared for a child who ultimately died from stab wounds inflicted by his mother. But she didn't receive a lot of support from her employer. "You can't let on that anything's wrong," she says. "And so, you carry like this burden ... holding it all in until probably a later time when you can either talk to a coworker or on break, or even after shift."

Another nurse recalled a shooting with mass casualties. "That one stayed with me and really affected me," the nurse says. While the organization initially encouraged staff to talk about the situation and seek help, the help did not last. "I do feel like there could have been more resources offered. They kept adding to our responsibilities and did not work with us on scheduling or anything."

One doctor Stackhouse and Belew interviewed quit the profession before age 40. Two nurses are looking for new jobs; others are considering leaving; and many are experiencing anxiety, insomnia, depression, burnout, other health issues.

The Way Forward

Stackhouse says that how trauma is processed matters a great deal, and asking employees to "deal with traumatic events and move on" is not an effective strategy. If poorly managed, trauma can lead to career difficulties and psychological derailment. But with adequate workplace support and some proven effective strategies *(see sidebar)*, recovering from trauma can spur long-term resilience and growth. For example, Stackhouse's review found that CEOs who rebound from traumatic experiences tend to make better decisions. And employees who effectively manage stress after a layoff might respond better when faced with future cuts.

"The main thing is just thinking of people as human beings and not just human resources that we need to use for whatever we can," she says. "Businesses traditionally focus on the bottom line, and while that may seem to be a good, short-term strategy, in the long-term, it really is not."

Stackhouse hopes to eventually work with local health care organizations as they begin to address psychological trauma. She also strives to share these learnings with her students in organizational behavior, organizational psychology, cross-cultural management, and human resource management classes.

"At the end of the day, we're really talking about people's lives and how organizations can help people maintain their well-being during these stressful times," she says. "My hope is that by teaching business people to think more this way, we can ultimately have positive effects on people as well as the bottom line." ■

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