

Supporting Staff and Teams during Traumatic Events

We spend most of our day, week, month, and year at our workplace, and as such, the workplace is a community. When traumatic events occur at work or within our world, it can affect us all. Incidents like racially motivated shootings, large-scale health crises, or war, are only a few examples of traumatic incidents that affect individuals in the workplace.

Managers can play a role in guiding their staff through these times with empathy and ensure that all employees feel supported. As you work toward a safer and more supportive work environment, remember that the goal is to make sure staff feel heard and supported. Encourage staff members to show up as their full selves at work. Caring for each other's mental health can help with both personal well-being and creating a more intentional and people-centered, as well as productive, workplace.

1. Acknowledge what happened

Address that an event or situation occurred that impacts workers and the workplace. The key to this step is to check-in with individuals and take their lead. Explicitly, let your teams know that you are available to support.

When discussing an event or incident that happened outside of work, acknowledge the incident with an understanding that events outside of work, can also impact worker stress levels and health. Be clear, specific, and factual when describing these events. Acknowledging the incident and sharing the workplace's response could put people at ease because it demonstrates an awareness of what is happening or happened and how the institution is supporting impacted individuals. An example of this would be President Freeman's address to the university about the conflict in the middle east, read [his email here](#).

2. Supportive conversations

Open communication is key. Make time and space for supportive conversations with individual team members and for the team.

1:1 Conversations –

Lean in with empathy rather than sympathy. Let your staff member know that you are here for them and will be supportive in the ways that feel supportive to them. For example, before offering any feedback, or assuming how they might be feeling, ask your employees, **“How are you doing?” “What would be most helpful right now? I am happy to just to listen, or I can explore resources with you.”** Often, to be supportive, supervisors and coworkers may try to help by “fixing,” which can feel invalidating. Try and let go of this solution-oriented mindset and approach with empathy, compassion, and active listening.

Be mindful of toxic positivity. When approaching these conversations, be mindful of “toxic positivity.” Toxic positivity is a behavior in which one pushes a “positive mindset” to the point of erasing or dismissing the struggle at hand. Often, toxic positive statements start with “At least...” or end with a statement encouraging people to, “Be strong” or “Stay positive.” While toxic positivity statements may be shared to help, they often have the opposite effect and can signal that you are not fully present or listening.

Be self-aware. How do you convey and comprehend challenging emotions like shock, grief, and anger? Be mindful of your own emotions to prevent adding to the anxiety or stress. If you are experiencing stress and trauma directly, reach out to your supervisor and peers to support you and your team. You don't have to do this alone.

Check in regularly. Keep a pulse of the general moods and behaviors of staff members and check-in often to provide space for dialogue and supportive 1:1 conversation.

Team Conversations –

Keep polarizing conversations to a minimum to not adversely impact those who may be directly impacted by the event. Work can be a way for some people to take their mind off stressful events and the news cycle. Staying focused on the work and supporting each other with kindness and empathy can be helpful in dealing with stress and anxiety. That said, it is impossible to avoid conversations and discussions amongst team members. If you sense that these conversations are happening, providing a space for folks to share how they are feeling in a safe space.

Establish psychological safety. Be aware that some external events can be polarizing. Share and/or co-create agreements before the start of meetings that set ground rules for respectful and supportive conversations. These agreements also help provide certainty to teams that their views are welcome and the expectation of respect and kindness. If you have established agreements already, this might be a good time to remind folks of them. Here are [sample agreements](#).

Check-in prompts. Use check-in prompts to provide an opportunity for team members to share their feelings. By modeling this practice, we communicate a caring environment where expressing emotion is both acceptable and welcome. It can help to grieve, process, and heal together as a team. Caution – Be mindful of the general mood of the group and individuals. Keep check-in prompts simple. See [The Check-In handout](#) for tips and examples.

In addition, check out these resources for tips for having conversations across differences.

From TeD:

[Cultivating Empathy and Connection](#)

[Leading Others through Conflict](#)

[Listening when it's Difficult to Listen](#)

External Resources:

Green. 2019. *Five Ways to Have Better Conversations Across Differences*. [Greater Good Science Center](#).

Abdou. 2021. How to Navigate Politically Charged work Conversations Through Brain Science. [Hive](#).

Forbes Expert Counsel. 2021. *15 Tips for Navigating Potentially Polarizing Discussions at Work*. [Forbes](#).

3. Provide resources

Ensure employees know what resources are available to them through Boston University. Emphasize information related to physical and mental health as well as company leave policies that are available. Encourage and model taking breaks from work when necessary to promote self-care and well-being. Below are a few resources:

[Faculty Staff Assistance Office](#). [HR Business Partners](#).