

# Breaking the Silence on Workplace Trauma

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I will never forget the day I saw a coworker crying in the ladies restroom. There she was, her face red and cheeks stained with tears.

“What’s wrong, Tamela?” I asked, startled. “What happened?”

Tamela was the administrative assistant for a department head at our company. She had years of experience as an assistant, having worked for C-suite executives at her previous job. She had only been with us a few months, so I was shocked at seeing her so upset at work. I assumed something personal must have happened.

“I can’t do this anymore,” she sobbed, “I can’t work for her.” Through her tears, Tamela explained how her boss, Wendy, constantly belittled her and snapped at her for every little mistake. Wendy would even stand over her shoulder while she typed, watching every keystroke to make sure documents were error-free.

“I want to quit so badly,” Tamela admitted, “but we just moved here, and I need the paycheck.” I’ve been an assistant for 15 years — I’m good at my job. But this place has me questioning everything. I can’t sleep at night because I’m dreading the next day. Every time I see her leave her office, I freeze because I’m terrified she’s coming over to scream at me again.”

Wendy’s behavior was no secret; she had a reputation. In fact, she averaged two new assistants a year during her 15-year tenure. When I asked my coworkers why HR had not stepped in, why they were not holding Wendy accountable, or requiring her to complete training, I was told, “She has leverage.” Wendy brought in too much money for the company and they didn’t want to risk losing her.

Unfortunately, this story is not unique. I have changed the names and modified a few details, but it is based on actual events from a company I once worked for. It is a story that could have been told by any number of employees. It is an example of something many endure but few talk about: workplace trauma.

# What is Workplace Trauma?

Workplace trauma refers to incredibly stressful or harmful experiences that occur in a work environment, affecting an individual's mental and emotional state. It is the type of trauma that can affect anyone, at any time, in any industry, regardless of age, gender, race, income, or education level.

There are a number of factors that can cause workplace trauma. Examples are: [\[1,2\]](#)

- Racism, including microaggressions and overt discrimination
- Bullying, as a means of control and intimidation
- Gaslighting, undermining an employee's confidence and perception of events
- Firings and major layoffs, creating a fear of job instability
- Sexual harassment and abuse
- Violence, including physical assault or threats of harm

## The Impact of Workplace Trauma

The impact of workplace trauma can extend well beyond the moment it happens. It can have lingering psychological effects on individuals, erode the success of organizations, and increase healthcare costs.

### The Mental and Emotional Impact on Employees

There is no universal response to workplace trauma as each individual reacts differently. However, clinical psychologist and founder of Stella Nova Psychology, Dr. Maya Borgueta, writes in a [blog post](#) that individuals who have experienced workplace trauma often show signs of traumatic stress, and in some cases, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

These signs can include: [\[3\]](#)

- Constantly feeling on guard, hyper focusing on how others perceive you and any signals they may give off
- Being withdrawn or checked out from work, avoiding certain projects, or taking frequent days off to get away from the office
- Becoming noticeably nervous when new situations remind of you of past bad experiences
- Increased anxiety, irritability, pessimism, or feelings of helplessness.

The toll of workplace trauma not only chips away at employee health, but it also begins to undermine the health of the company.

## The Financial Impact on Businesses

When company leadership ignores or fails to directly address workplace trauma, it can have a profound financial impact.

In a 2022 Harvard Business Review (HBR) [article](#), Katharine Manning explains a company's failure to protect employees traumatized at work can further traumatize them through what's known as institutional betrayal, a term she acknowledges was first coined by psychologist Jennifer Freyd.

She writes: "When we are in a period of crisis, many of us look to our institutions to support and protect us. If they fail to do so, or if they take steps that we fear will harm us or those we care about, that can create a second injury, called an institutional betrayal."

The double burden of workplace trauma and institutional betrayal cannot be overlooked. The weight makes it difficult for employees to focus on their work (leading to reduced productivity) or to even be in the environment where the trauma took place (increasing absenteeism).<sup>[2]</sup>

Ultimately, this burden results in disengaged employees, contributing to the \$8.8 trillion global cost of employee disengagement, according to a [2023 Gallup report](#). As the report highlights, actively engaged employees benefit companies with 23% higher productivity, 18% lower turnover in high-turnover organizations, and 43% lower turnover in low-turnover organizations.<sup>[4]</sup>

Addressing workplace trauma, then, is not just about protecting employees; it is a strategic investment in the long-term success of the business.

## The Economic Impact on Mental Health Services

In 2023, 76% of employees reported mental distress due to their work environment.<sup>[5]</sup> Many seek help to manage the psychological and emotional effects of their experiences, but struggle to access the help they need.

One reason for this is the cost. Some companies do not offer employee assistance programs or insurance benefits that cover mental health services, pushing individuals to choose between paying out-of-pocket for therapy or forgoing it entirely. As one study on workplace bullying found, employees who experience this form of trauma spend twice as much money on mental health care than those who have not been bullied.<sup>[6]</sup> This added financial stress can compound the emotional and psychological effects those dealing with workplace trauma are already experiencing.

Another reason accessing mental health services is challenging is the lack of availability. The unfortunate reality is the United States is facing a shortage of mental health providers, with

one in three people living in an area where there is a known shortage.<sup>[7,8]</sup> Limited providers strain the healthcare system, leading to longer wait times, heavier client loads, and poorer quality of care — increasing the overall cost of mental health services.

## What Leaders Can Do to Make Work Feel Safe

We all have a role to play in creating a healthy work environment, whether it is calling out toxic behavior or avoiding perpetuating that behavior ourselves. The onus, however, is on company leadership. You, as leaders, have the responsibility of setting the tone for what is tolerated in the workplace.

Here are 4 ways leaders can foster safer work environments:

1. **Maintain an open door policy.** Allow employees to discuss work-related concerns, and make it easy for them to report harmful behaviors anonymously.
2. **Enforce zero tolerance policies.** Take reports of harmful behaviors and conversations seriously. Don't ignore or treat them as annoyances. Investigate them and take appropriate action.
3. **Raise awareness through regular training** for both employees and leaders. No one enjoys training, but it's important everyone is clear on the behaviors that can cause workplace trauma.
4. **Hold your colleagues accountable** when you see them demonstrate behavior that could cause trauma. Remember, unchecked power only perpetuates the problem!

As a leader, you may not be able to prevent all instances of workplace trauma, but you can cultivate a culture where employees can feel safe, reducing the mental health burden they carry and empowering them to thrive.

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