



# How Trauma-Informed Communication Improves Workplace Culture

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You may have seen it happen in your workplace: Someone flies off the handle with little provocation, lashing out verbally or physically. You may have wondered, “What’s wrong with that person?”

Today, we have a better understanding of why some people lose control of their emotions more easily than others. Often, it’s not because something is *wrong* with them; it’s because of what has *happened* to them.

Studies show that severe or ongoing exposure to highly stressful or threatening events can greatly impact a person’s ability to function in a socially acceptable manner.

This white paper is intended to explain how such exposure can impact a person’s physical, emotional and behavioral health. It’s also intended to provide helpful communication techniques for creating a healthier workplace environment and culture.

## Understanding Trauma

The term “trauma” refers to a variety of experiences that cause intense physical and psychological stress reactions. This can be a single event or multiple events or circumstances that are physically or emotionally harmful and leave lasting adverse effects on an individual’s physical, social, emotional or spiritual well-being.<sup>1</sup>

There are different types of trauma:

- **Acute trauma** results from a single incident, such as an accident, natural disaster or act of violence.
- **Chronic trauma** is repeated and prolonged, resulting from situations such as domestic violence or abuse.<sup>2</sup>
- **Complex trauma** is exposure to varied and multiple traumatic events, often of an invasive, interpersonal nature. These events are severe and pervasive, such as abuse or profound neglect, and often occur with a caregiver.<sup>3</sup>
- **Historical trauma** is multigenerational and experienced by a specific cultural, racial or ethnic group, often related to major events that oppressed a group of people, such as slavery, the Holocaust, forced migration or violent colonization.

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We may experience one, some or all these traumatic stresses during our lifetime.

1 <https://www.samhsa.gov/trauma-violence>

2 <http://www.imedpub.com/scholarly/chronic-trauma-journals-articles-ppts-list.php>

3 <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/complex-trauma>

# How Trauma-Informed Communication Improves Workplace Culture

## Early trauma often causes lasting harm

Two decades ago, researchers uncovered a relationship between early exposure to traumatic experiences and negative health outcomes in later life. This is now referred to as the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study.<sup>4</sup>

About 17,000 adults participated in the study by completing a questionnaire asking whether they were exposed to the following 10 ACEs during their formative years:<sup>5</sup>

1. Emotional abuse
2. Physical abuse
3. Sexual abuse
4. Emotional neglect
5. Physical neglect
6. Mother treated violently
7. Household substance abuse
8. Mental illness in a household
9. Parental separation or divorce
10. Incarcerated household member

The most significant results of the study emerged when researchers compared the participants' ACE scores with their current health records and discovered that those who experienced the most ACEs also had the greatest negative health outcomes as adults.

Researchers also noted the prevalence of trauma: Nearly two-thirds of the respondents were exposed to one or more ACEs while one in eight was exposed to four or more. Only a third reported no ACEs.

Researchers also saw that ACEs affected people in all socioeconomic groups; however, when a child had at least one caring adult in their life, the impact of ACEs was lessened.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond ACEs, many adults contend with traumatic stress injuries obtained through military combat, sexual assault or exposure to horrific accidents or violence.<sup>7</sup> Serious loss, such as the death of a loved one or losing one's home or health, can also cause traumatic stress injuries.

*Two decades ago, researchers uncovered a relationship between early exposure to traumatic experiences and negative health outcomes in later life.*

4 <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/trauma-toolkit/trauma-concept>

5 [http://www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/HTML\\_LargeReports/ACEs\\_2018\\_32691.pdf](http://www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/HTML_LargeReports/ACEs_2018_32691.pdf)

6 <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/resilience/>

7 <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress/art-20046037>

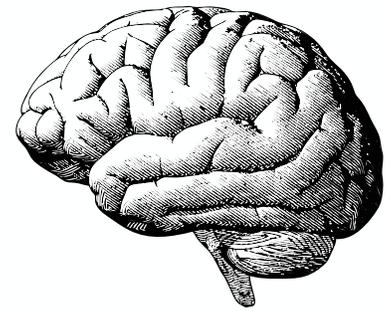
# How Trauma-Informed Communication Improves Workplace Culture

## How trauma affects the body

Our bodies react to ACEs and traumatic stress by releasing a surge of stress hormones. This is known as our flight, fight or freeze response. The most prevalent stress hormones are adrenaline and cortisol. Adrenaline increases our heart rate, elevates blood pressure and provides a surge of energy. Cortisol communicates with the regions of the brain that control mood, motivation and fear.

Once a perceived threat has passed, our hormones, heart rate and blood pressure should return to normal. However, when we experience recurring or constant stress and fear, our stress hormones remain activated. This long-term stress response can impact us neurologically, psychologically, physically and socially.<sup>8</sup>

- **Neurologically**, this prolonged stress response may adversely affect the prefrontal lobe (responsible for language), causing problems with communication. It can also shrink the hippocampus (responsible for memory), leading to poor memory and concentration.
- **Psychologically**, a prolonged stress response can lead to depression, anxiety, fearfulness, panic attacks, flashbacks, obsessive and compulsive behaviors, extreme anger, enhanced startle response and emotional numbness. It can also cause some people to develop harmful behaviors as coping mechanisms, such as eating disorders, substance abuse, self-injury, violence and high-risk sexual behaviors.
- **Physically**, a prolonged stress response can lead to digestive problems, heart conditions, headaches, sleep disturbances, low energy, weight gain, sexual dysfunction and chronic or unexplained pain.
- **Socially**, prolonged stress may cause some people to withdraw from normal routines and relationships, which can increase other psychological conditions and disorders.



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## Trauma-informed care and communications

Trauma-informed care was introduced in response to the ACE Study to promote recovery and resiliency. Because we don't always know what kinds of experiences our employees, co-workers or

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/>

# How Trauma-Informed Communication Improves Workplace Culture

clients may have had, it's helpful to employ the techniques of trauma-informed care in all workplace interactions.

Communication is a primary focus of trauma-informed care. Communication and trauma are tied together because trauma affects our brain and communication is a brain-based activity. Trauma-informed communication is vital to improving a person's physical, mental and emotional well-being and should be integrated into all workplace policies, procedures and activities.

Many of the communication techniques used in trauma-informed care can be viewed as traditional, common-sense manners. As individuals, it's helpful to employ the following techniques to create healthy workplace environments:

- **Communicate respectfully.** Speak with a normal, controlled voice and avoid shouting or losing control of your emotions. Your tone of voice can greatly impact how people receive and react to messages. Remember the adage, "It's not *what* you say, it's *how* you say it." When situations become stressful, it's especially important to speak respectfully and invoke a sense of calm.
- **Be respectful of others' life experiences.** Recognize that someone's mental health issues, substance abuse or physical health concerns may stem from "what has *happened* to them" and not because "something is *wrong* with them." It's also helpful to be aware of our own traumatic life experiences and how they may affect our emotional and physical well-being.
- **Build healthy relationships.** When interacting with others, treat people with dignity and respect. Express kindness, patience and acceptance. Put your phone away. Use your break times to have meaningful conversations with colleagues. Focus on what you have in common and not on your differences.
- **Be an active listener.** In our multitasking, listen-to-respond culture, it's important to help others feel that they are heard. Use engaging eye contact and positive body language. Ask open-ended questions that answer the who, what, when, where and how of topics being discussed. Avoid interruptions, judgment and trying to fix things.
- **Focus on behaviors and not the person.** When there's a need to address performance issues, say something like, "I noticed that this is the fifth time you're late this month." Avoid comments that attack the individual, such as "Why can't you be on time?" Managers and supervisors are encouraged to address performance issues with employees in private but compliment in public.

# How Trauma-Informed Communication Improves Workplace Culture

- **Use proper body language.** Avoid confrontational body language, such as putting your hands on your hips, crossing your arms, getting too close to others or backing them into a corner. This can cause already stressful situations to escalate. It's better to respect personal space and minimize physical touching. If you do need to place your hands on someone, communicate this ahead of time or ask permission.
- **Increase self-awareness.** If you find yourself more anxious than others or overreacting to certain situations, it may be helpful to reflect on what's impacting these behaviors. To identify personal triggers, you can speak with a professional counselor or therapist. Once you're aware of what makes you feel unsafe, you can take steps to manage your triggers. Positive self-talk, good nutrition and exercise are helpful starting points.
- **Increase your resilience.** If you aren't as resilient as you'd like to be, you can take steps to increase your capacity to bounce back more quickly after stressful events. Focus on remaining calm and fostering a sense of optimism about situations you have little or no control over. Leaning into empathy, flexibility and self-confidence can also lead to a higher sense of resilience.

Organizations can take the following steps to improve workplace relationships and environments:

- **Provide awareness training.** Educate your workforce on the effects of stress and trauma and how these experiences can have a lasting impact on people's lives. When employees have a better understanding of trauma and its effects, they can relate better to those who have been impacted. Better relationships increase happiness, which increases an employee's ability to handle stress. Safe and positive workplaces also promote employee resilience and bolster productivity.<sup>9</sup>
- **Encourage people to use their employee assistance program (EAP).** All too often, people are hesitant to use their organization's EAP, thinking it will reflect negatively on them. It's helpful to reassure employees that using this benefit is confidential and can provide tremendous support for those facing stressful life events. Organizations that have a strong partnership with their EAP see increased leadership confidence, healthier workforces and a more positive workplace culture.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.fastcompany.com/3048751/happy-employees-are-12-more-productive-at-work>

# How Trauma-Informed Communication Improves Workplace Culture

- **Establish and enforce sensible policies and procedures.** Ensure rules and policies prioritize people's needs and not those of the organization. Streamline procedures so people do not have to jump through needless hoops. Be consistent in enforcing rules and transparent in documenting digressions. Continually seek feedback from clients and employees.
- **Offer mindfulness and breathing training.** Being present and knowing how you feel can help reduce the effects of toxic stress. Many organizations offer their employees mindfulness training. Others encourage their employees to practice breathing techniques to reduce stress and boost serotonin, which is the brain chemical that regulates mood. In either case, business leaders are wise to help their employees build resilience.
- **Promote work-life balance.** Employees who are facing many stresses tend to have a higher risk for injury, mistakes and decreased productivity. Allowing employees to use their breaks and vacations helps increase productivity, improve morale and reduce attrition rates. It is in an organization's best interest to encourage, promote and allow work-life balance among employees.<sup>10</sup>
- **Create safe and comfortable spaces.** Make sure offices and waiting rooms are clean and calming and not congested or cluttered. Signage should be clear, understandable and accommodating, especially for those who speak different languages or are visually impaired.

## The FEI Difference

The techniques used in trauma-informed care are redefining how people in the workplace communicate and interact with each other.

FEI Behavioral Health has a 40-year history of providing employees with the resources necessary to help them continue working at high levels of engagement. FEI partners with The Mandt System to enhance our trainings on trauma-informed approaches to building relationships and reducing disruptive incidents in the workplace. The Mandt System offers a comprehensive, integrated approach to preventing, de-escalating and intervening when the behavior of an individual poses a threat to themselves or others.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://acestoohigh.com/2016/12/01/business-leaders-in-the-ace-and-resilience-movement-a-different-kind-of-bottom-line/>

# How Trauma-Informed Communication Improves Workplace Culture

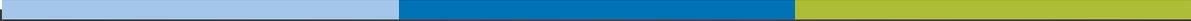
FEI also provides training opportunities to assist organizations in maintaining workforce resilience and driving employee well-being. The following are some of the many development sessions in our [training catalog](#) that help employees be their personal best:

- Effective Communication
- Managing the Impact of Trauma in the Workplace
- There is an “I” in Team

In addition to training, FEI's EAP services can help both managers and employees address workplace relationships and performance. Our EAP has helped employees alleviate emotional stress, enhance interpersonal relationships, navigate life transitions and become resilient in the face of traumatic events. Further, we offer services in the areas of work-life assistance, wellness coaching, legal and financial guidance, as well as manager consultation.

As employee well-being becomes increasingly important in recruitment and retention, now is the best time to build employee resiliency by employing trauma-informed principles in your workplace. This critical skill set is becoming the foundation of modern workplaces and meets the evolving needs of a diverse, multigenerational workforce that prioritizes safety and well-being.

The time is now. Begin shaping your trauma-informed organizational best practice with FEI and show employees you're invested in supporting their ability to handle stress, trauma and conflict in healthy, resilient ways.



# fei workforce resilience



*FEI has a 40-year history in enhancing workforce resiliency by offering a full spectrum of solutions, from employee assistance programs (EAPs) and organizational development to workplace violence prevention and crisis management. One of the most successful social enterprises in America, FEI was created by the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities, a national network of social sector organizations working to achieve its vision of healthy and equitable society.*



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