



# Creating a Trauma Informed Workplace

Empowering organisations and employees to navigate the impacts of trauma with practical, effective strategies.



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# Table of Contents



|                   |   |           |
|-------------------|---|-----------|
| <b>PAGE 3-7</b>   |   |           |
|                   | Introduction to trauma in the workplace                     | 03        |
| <b>01</b>         | <b>Employer Toolkit</b>                                     | <b>08</b> |
|                   | <b>PAGE 9</b>   |           |
| i                 | Employer Toolkit overview                                   | 09        |
|                   | <b>PAGE 10-13</b>   |           |
| ii                | Direct trauma: How can employers respond?                   | 10        |
|                   | <b>PAGE 14-18</b>   |           |
| iii               | Proactive support: Addressing trauma early in the workplace | 14        |
|                   | <b>PAGE 19-25</b>   |           |
| iv                | Prevention: Creating a supportive environment               | 19        |
| <b>02</b>         | <b>Employee Toolkit</b>                                     | <b>26</b> |
|                   | <b>PAGE 27</b>  |           |
| i                 | Employee Toolkit overview                                   | 27        |
|                   | <b>PAGE 28-30</b>   |           |
| ii                | Understanding trauma  | 28        |
|                   | <b>PAGE 31</b>  |           |
| iii               | Signs and symptoms of trauma                                | 31        |
|                   | <b>PAGE 32</b>  |           |
| iv                | What happens after trauma                                   | 32        |
|                   | <b>PAGE 33</b>  |           |
| v                 | What can I do?  | 33        |
|                   | <b>PAGE 34-36</b>   |           |
| vi                | Self-care strategies  | 34        |
|                   | <b>PAGE 37-38</b>   |           |
| vii               | Prevention  | 37        |
| <b>PAGE 39-42</b> |   |           |
|                   | References  | 39        |

# Introduction to trauma in the workplace

## What is Trauma?

Trauma is a state of heightened arousal that occurs when a person encounters an event or series of events that are physically or emotionally distressing, life-threatening, or overwhelming. The experience of trauma affects an individual's ability to cope, and can result in significant psychological, emotional, social, and physical consequences [1].

Trauma is not only defined by the event itself but also by the lasting effects it has on an individual's wellbeing [1]. Two employees may experience the same distressing event but process and express their emotions associated with the event differently. Each employee's experience of trauma may present with unique symptoms, thus an individualised approach to supporting an employee is essential.

## Trauma in the workplace

The impact of trauma on the workplace is often overlooked, as it is frequently considered only at the individual level. This limited perspective overlooks workplace trauma's broader influence on productivity, workplace culture, service quality, and organisational sustainability [2].

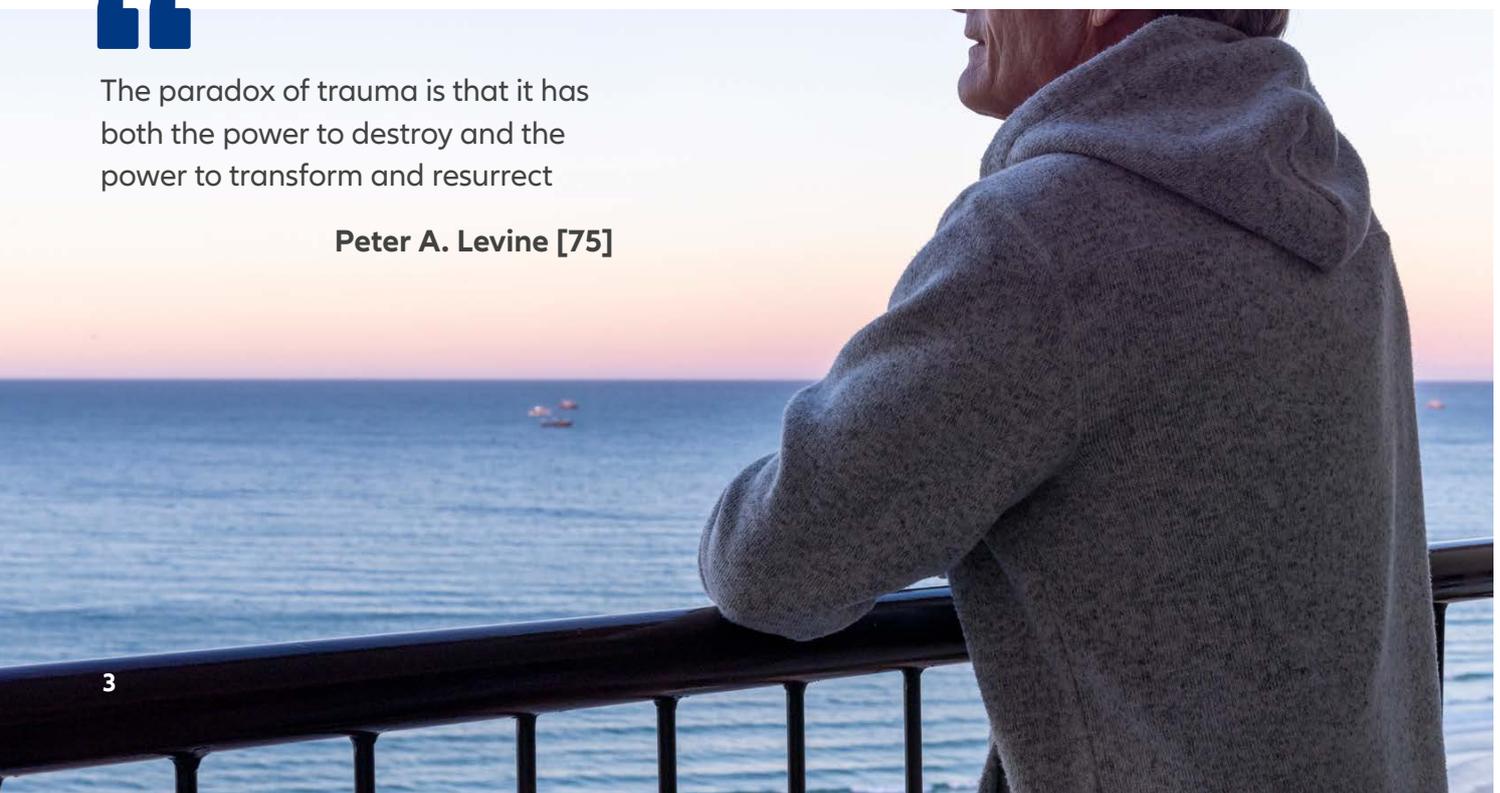
### Workplace risks include: [2]

- Compromised service delivery and work quality.
- Degraded team culture and collaboration.
- Increased risk of bullying and disharmony.
- Degraded organisational reputation.
- Increased employee turnover, reducing service capacity and increasing costs.
- Increased workers compensation costs and legal risk.



The paradox of trauma is that it has both the power to destroy and the power to transform and resurrect

**Peter A. Levine [75]**



## Six principles of a trauma-informed approach [3]

A trauma-informed workplace recognises the impact of trauma and integrates structured strategies to create a safe, supportive, and psychologically secure environment. This approach applies six core principles to ensure that employees feel respected, valued, and supported in their roles.

By embedding these principles, organisations strengthen employee wellbeing, reduce the risk of re-traumatisation, and improve workplace culture. Trauma-informed care is effective because it enhances communication, builds resilience, and ensures that both employees and leadership understand how to respond to trauma in a way that promotes recovery and retention.

|   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
|  <h3>Safety</h3> <p>Building trust by being consistent, reliable, and transparent in actions.</p>                                  |  <h3>Peer Support</h3> <p>Encouraging employees to share experiences and support one another, creating a workplace culture that reinforces wellbeing through mutual understanding.</p> |  <h3>Empowerment</h3> <p>Operating from a position of power-with rather than power-over. Be flexible, acknowledge the employee's needs may change overtime.</p> |
|  <h3>Trustworthiness</h3> <p>Trust is built through clear communication, consistent actions, and transparent decision-making.</p> |  <h3>Collaboration</h3> <p>Promoting teamwork and shared decision-making between employers and employees, ensuring all voices are valued.</p>   |  <h3>Diversity</h3> <p>Ensuring workplace policies and interactions respect diverse backgrounds, identities, and experiences, promoting cultural safety.</p>   |

## Who is involved in developing a trauma-informed workplace?

Developing a trauma-informed workplace requires collaboration between employees and leadership, using guiding principles and practical strategies.

This Toolkit addresses both employer and employee perspectives, ensuring that organisations can implement trauma-informed practices at both levels. While leadership plays a key role in sustaining these initiatives, every team member has the ability to contribute to meaningful change.



When using this Toolkit, look for the tool bucket icons to find valuable resources.

## Trauma informed phases

Organisations can integrate trauma-informed approaches in various ways, depending on their type of business.

One framework that provides a clear pathway for implementation is the Missouri Model of trauma-informed care. This offers four phases to help organisations progressively embed trauma-informed practices into the culture and operations [7].

### 1. Awareness



The organisation becomes aware of how prevalent trauma is and its impact on workers, clients, and business outcomes.

### 2. Sensitivity



An organisation begins to understand trauma-informed principles, causes, expressions, and possible ways to overcome problems that affect workers and business.

### 3. Response



The organisation begins to implement changes that affect culture, routines, and human resource processes to eliminate triggers.

### 4. Informed



The organisation begins to implement trauma-informed practices and monitoring the impacts of changes made to policies and practices [8].



Resource on implementing the trauma informed phase model into the workplace [8].

## The Trauma-informed approach

This Toolkit offers a structured approach to integrating trauma-informed strategies into the workplace by addressing key areas of organisational response:

1. How organisations can effectively support employees experiencing direct or indirect trauma.
2. Identify early signs of trauma and implement workplace adjustments.
3. Adopt proactive measures to monitor trauma impacts while preventing re-traumatisation.



### [Return on investment calculator](#)

- Every \$1 invested in a mentally healthy workplace returns \$2.30 in benefits [9]

## Who is at risk of trauma in the workplace?

Trauma exposure is not limited to specific industries; it can occur in any workplace where employees interact with others. While the listed examples highlight high-risk sectors, roles in customer service, education, and construction, among others, can also involve exposure to direct and indirect trauma.

## Indirect trauma in the workplace

Vicarious Trauma and Secondary Traumatic Stress occur when employees are indirectly exposed to trauma through firsthand accounts or detailed narratives of others' traumatic experiences. While both concepts relate to indirect trauma exposure, they differ in their impact.

- Secondary Traumatic Stress is an immediate response that arises when an employee witnesses or hears about an employee's or service user's trauma [2].
- Vicarious trauma is a negative shift in an employee's wellbeing resulting from empathic engagement with trauma survivors and their experiences, coupled with a strong sense of responsibility to support them [76]. It is not a sign of weakness or personal failure but rather an occupational risk inherent in certain roles.

## Direct trauma in the workplace

Primary trauma experienced firsthand by an employee, either subject to or as someone involved in an incident, including both physical and psychological harm in the workplace.

## The impact

Both indirect and direct trauma presents a significant risk to workers' mental health and capacity to engage in the workplace. A key challenge for Australian organisations is finding effective strategies to manage this risk.



## Some industry examples include



### **Medical and healthcare professionals:**

Doctors, nurses, and mental health workers treating patients with trauma or severe illness may develop heightened anxiety about their own and their loved ones' safety.



### **Legal professionals:**

Family lawyers working with clients experiencing abuse may sometimes become overly protective of their loved ones.



Employee checklist to identify risk of vicarious trauma in your workplace [4].



### **Emergency Services:**

A paramedic experiencing direct exposure to the death of a patient, or violence.



### **Customer Service:**

Admin assistant that is directly threatened or verbally abused by an aggressive customer.

## Understanding the impact of trauma in the workplace

The table below highlights symptoms employees experiencing trauma may present with [2]. Recognising the impact of trauma in the workplace is the first step for organisations to adopt approaches that support employee wellbeing and organisational resilience.

| Domain                      | Employee symptoms  | Manifestations in the workplace  |
|-----------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Physical</b>             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hyper or hypoarousal</li> <li>• Weakened immunity</li> <li>• Poor sleep</li> </ul>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased absenteeism</li> <li>• Reduced work quality</li> <li>• Fatigue-related errors</li> </ul>            |
| <b>Cognitive</b>            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impaired memory and concentration</li> <li>• Negative thoughts</li> </ul>             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduced productivity</li> <li>• Increased mistakes</li> <li>• Reduced problem-solving capacity</li> </ul>     |
| <b>Intrusive recall</b>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flashbacks</li> <li>• Unwanted memories</li> <li>• Trigger reactions</li> </ul>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shutting down at work</li> <li>• Outbursts</li> <li>• Increased conflict and reactivity</li> </ul>            |
| <b>Avoidance behaviours</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoidance of triggers</li> <li>• Avoidance of further exposure</li> </ul>             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased presenteeism</li> <li>• Task avoidance</li> <li>• Reduced engagement</li> </ul>                     |
| <b>Adverse mood</b>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Irritability and anger</li> <li>• Reduced motivation</li> </ul>                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Degraded workplace culture</li> <li>• Increased negativity</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Social</b>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Withdrawal</li> <li>• Distrust in others</li> <li>• Empathic strain/apathy</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduced collaboration</li> <li>• Reduced empathy for service users</li> <li>• Reduced collegiality</li> </ul> |

### This leads to ...

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <div data-bbox="95 1538 778 1863"> <h4>Productivity loss</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> <b>38.4 weeks</b> – Median time lost for psychological injury claims [5].</li> <li> <b>154%</b> higher performance losses in distressed employees [6].</li> </ul> </div> | <div data-bbox="810 1538 1495 1863"> <h4>Impact on organisational cost</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Estimated cost per affected employee: <b>\$6,309</b> per year [5].</li> <li> Employees experiencing psychological distress take <b>43%</b> more sick days per month [6].</li> </ul> </div> |
|--|--|

# 01

# Employer Toolkit



# Employer Toolkit Overview

## Overview

The employer's guide within the Trauma-Informed Workplace Toolkit is designed to help organisations create a supportive work environment that effectively recognises, responds, and prevents trauma among employees. It outlines best practices for promoting a trauma-informed approach in the workplace and ensuring employee wellbeing.



## What the employer's guide covers

### Direct trauma: Employer response strategies

- Psychological First Aid (PFA): Immediate support for affected employees.
- Effective communication: Trauma-informed language and approaches.
- Providing workplace adjustments: Task modifications, flexible hours, and workload management.
- Guidelines for referral and support services.

### Proactive strategies for addressing indirect trauma

- Recognising Secondary Traumatic Stress and Vicarious Trauma.
- Early intervention approaches to prevent long-term psychological injury.
- Employer conversation guides for sensitive discussions with employees who are experiencing trauma.

### Preventing workplace trauma

- Creating a supportive culture: Leadership commitment and workplace policies.
- Environmental adjustments: Safe spaces, flexible work options, and employee training.
- Trauma prevention strategies: Reducing exposure risks and mitigating workplace stressors.

### Monitoring & evaluating trauma-Informed practices

- Organisational assessments and readiness evaluations.
- Tracking employee wellbeing and workplace trauma-informed transformation.

This guide ensures that employers have the tools and knowledge to foster a resilient workforce while addressing trauma in a structured, evidence-based manner.

# Direct trauma: How can employers respond?

## Purpose

This section outlines responsive strategies that employers can implement to support an employee who has directly experienced a traumatic event. The goal for an employer effectively engaging with an employee who has experienced primary trauma is to ensure immediate safety, and provide effective workplace supports moving forward.

## Psychological First Aid

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is an evidence-based strategy that employers can implement to provide immediate and compassionate support to employees who have experienced direct trauma [10].

PFA offers a structured approach to removing the employee from the source of trauma (ensuring immediate safety), providing safety, and continuous support for recovery. Psychological first aid can be broken down into 3 steps:

### Step 1: Look [10]

Look refers to how employers can identify and address the immediate needs of the employee.

**Address immediate needs: Assess for immediate basic and practical needs**

**Ensure physical and psychological safety**

- Escort the employee to a quiet, private space away from the scene.
- Minimise exposure to the source of distress.
- Offer a calm and reassuring presence – avoid pressuring them to talk.

**Address immediate physical needs**

- Provide water, food, or a warm drink to help regulate their nervous system.
- Allow them to sit down, rest, or take deep breaths if they appear shaken.
- Assess whether they require medical attention for signs of distress (e.g., dizziness, nausea, headaches).

**Assist with immediate practical arrangements**

- Offer a break or early leave if needed, ensuring a safe way home (e.g., arranging transport).

### Step 2: Listen [10]

Listening is a key part of the process and refers to how you support employees that are distressed.

**Some things you might consider saying to someone that has just experienced a traumatic accident**

**Examples**

- “I understand that what happened was really difficult. I want to make sure you feel safe and supported right now.”
- “You don’t have to go through this alone – we’re here to help.”

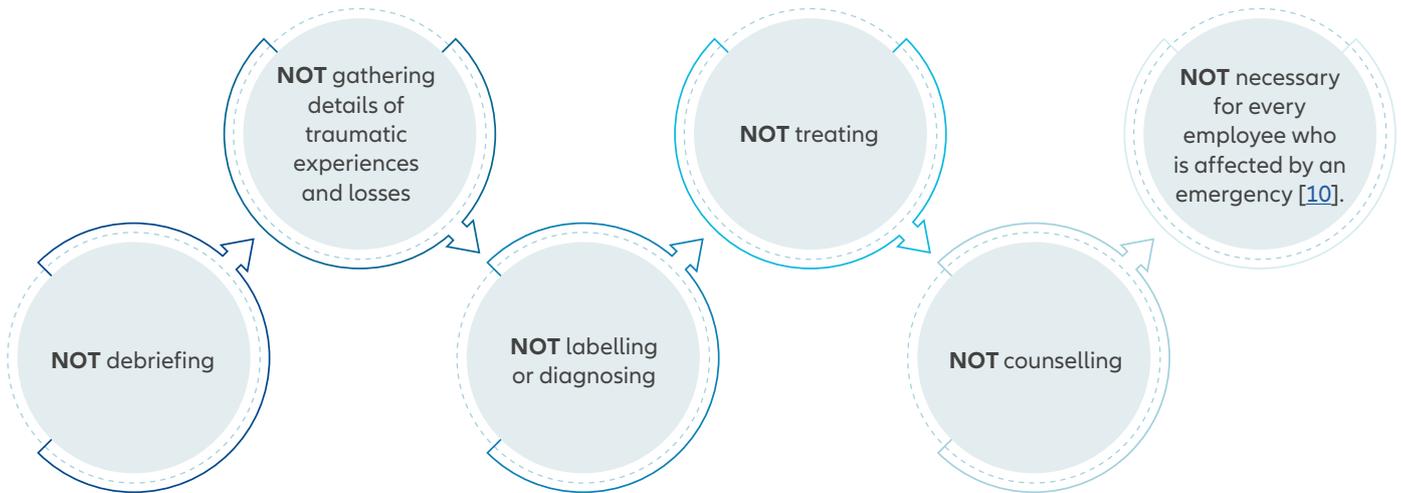
**Listen to their current needs and provide the employee choice**

- “Do you have someone at home who can support you right now?”
- “Would you prefer to take some time in a quiet space, or have a colleague stay with you for support?”
- “Would it help to have some time before making any decisions about the rest of your shift/day?”
- Reassure them that they do not have to relive or explain the details of the incident.

**Listen actively and validate the employee’s response**

- “It’s completely understandable to feel shaken after something like this.”

## What Psychological First Aid isn't



### Trauma informed language

Trauma-informed language refers to the way an employer can effectively communicate with employees who have experienced trauma. Some key points to keep in mind when communicating [\[11\]](#):

- Use person-first language.
- Highlight their strengths.
- Avoid blaming or triggering language.
- Provide validation, empathy, and active listening.
- Be mindful of power dynamics.

| What not to say  | What to say  |
|--|--|
| <b>Don't</b> refer to an employee as a "trauma victim", or talk about 'symptoms' or a 'diagnosis'.                                       | <b>Do</b> refer to your employee as "a team member who has experienced trauma" and focus on their professional strengths.      |
| <b>Don't</b> focus on the employee's limitations, weaknesses, or what is wrong with the person.  | <b>Do</b> emphasise the employee's skills, abilities, and contributions to the workplace.                                      |
| <b>Don't</b> use words or phrases that could trigger distress or traumatic memories. Avoid unnecessary details of traumatic experiences. | <b>Do</b> ask "Is there any language or approach that would make you feel more comfortable?" when discussing sensitive topics. |
| <b>Don't</b> ask "What is wrong with you?" in response to an employee's behavioural changes.   | <b>Do</b> ask "How can we support you?" or "Would you like to discuss any workplace accommodations that might help?"           |
| <b>Don't</b> minimise an employee's experience by saying "It's just workplace stress" or "It's not a big deal."                          | <b>Do</b> acknowledge their experience by saying "That sounds like a challenging experience – how can we support you?"         |
| <b>Don't</b> assert authority through closed-off body language (e.g., crossing arms, standing over an employee).                         | <b>Do</b> be mindful of power dynamics – maintain open posture and use active listening.                                       |

The language guide in the table above has been adapted from the recovery orientated language guide [\[11\]](#). Words matter and can impact an employee's mental health. The guide demonstrates how to become an effective trauma-informed communicator and can be used when an employee has experienced direct trauma.



Refer to this tool to understand debriefing strategies to mitigate re-traumatisation [\[12\]](#). It is important for the employer to be aware that asking an employee to recount a traumatic experience can retraumatise the individual.

### Step 3: Link to support [10]

Providing workplace support to an employee after witnessing a traumatic incident is crucial for their long-term wellbeing and recovery.

#### Encourage next steps for support

- “Before you head home, is there anything we can do to help you feel more settled?”

#### Provide non-work support services within 24 hours

- Provide access to workplace supports such as Employee Assistance Programs [14].
- Be aware of the local professional support services such as their General Practitioner, who can organise a Mental Health Treatment Plan [13].
- Refer to employee self-care strategies in the Employee Toolkit for trauma.

#### Signs to monitor over the coming weeks

- Ongoing distress, fear, or emotional upset beyond one month post-incident?
- Is the employee avoiding workplace responsibilities or social interactions that were a part of their usual routine.
- Is the employee showing signs of emotional exhaustion, burnout with less capacity to manage workplace stress, or ongoing low mood.

#### When should the person seek professional help?

- It is normal for an employee to experience temporary challenges in work performance when recovering from a traumatic event. However, if after 2 weeks post-incident, the employee continues to experience signs of distress and challenges in returning to normal functioning, including making efforts to return to work, professional help should be engaged to aid their recovery.





### Next steps in supporting employees that experienced a traumatic event?

- Keeping in touch with the employee following a traumatic experience allows us to remain connected with them and informed about their recovery. If the employee is comfortable, suggest keeping in touch over the coming days and seek their preference and comfort level about the mode (i.e., phone, email, text message) and frequency of communication [23].
- Returning to normal functioning and routines, including returning to work, is an important aspect of recovery from a traumatic experience. However, this needs to be paced and done within the employee's comfort level [24].
- Refer to National Return to Work Strategy 2020-2030 for guiding principles [25].



### Once the employee is supported, managers should also ...

- Incidents will require completion of relevant incident reports to identify the cause of the event and explore ways to minimise future risk. Access SafeWork Managing Risks resource for incident report templates and relevant action plans [21]. Be conscious of involving the affected employee in this process too soon, as it may cause re-traumatisation.
- Take action to analyse the traumatic event and what can be done to minimise or eliminate future risks. Refer to Comcare's Code of Practice in managing psychosocial hazards to assist with this process [20].
- Apply the "Person-centred and Trauma-informed Approaches to Safe and Respectful Workplaces" factsheet by the Australian Human Rights Commission [22].



### External trauma support resources for employees

- Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636 [15].
- Phoenix Australia – Trauma resources [16].
- SANE Australia (info about mental illness and referral): 1800 18 SANE (7263) [17].
- Lifeline – 13 11 14 [18].
- Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467 [19].



# Proactive support: Addressing trauma early in the workplace

## Purpose

Employers play an essential role in proactively identifying and addressing Secondary Traumatic Stress and Vicarious Trauma to prevent long-term psychological harm. By recognising early signs, employers can help employees manage stress, maintain resilience, and sustain their ability to perform effectively. A proactive approach ensures that secondary and vicarious workplace trauma does not go unaddressed, protecting both employee wellbeing and organisational stability.

## Recognising the early signs of Secondary Traumatic Stress and Vicarious Trauma

A key characteristic of a trauma-informed approach is the employer’s ability to recognise and respond to the signs and symptoms of indirect trauma in employees. By being sensitive to these indicators, employers can take proactive steps to support employees, prevent long-term complications, and create a work culture that prioritises wellbeing and resilience.

The following table outlines symptoms that employees may experience as a result of indirect trauma.

| Category   | Signs to look for  |
|--|--|
|  <b>Physical</b>  | Frequent illness (e.g., colds)   |
|  | Persistent fatigue or low energy   |
|  | Noticeable changes in appearance or attire                                       |
|  | Sudden weight fluctuations   |
|  | Complaints of physical discomfort such as headaches or migraines                 |
|  | Tiredness and fatigue  |
|  <b>Emotional</b> | Increased frustration or irritability  |
|  | Heightened sensitivity to feedback   |
|  | Reduced confidence or self-assurance   |
|  | Loss of sense of humour or enthusiasm  |
|  | Employee expressing emotional detachment from their work or client               |
|  | Over-identifying with certain clients or cases, blurring professional boundaries |

| Category  | Signs to look for  |
|---|--|
|  <b>Cognitive</b>          | More frequent errors in work tasks   |
|   | Difficulty making decisions  |
|   | Trouble focusing or staying on task  |
|   | Declining work performance and efficiency                                    |
|  <b>Behavioural</b>        | Arriving late or leaving early   |
|   | Skipping breaks or avoiding time off   |
|   | Withdrawing from team conversations  |
|   | Struggling to meet deadlines   |
|   | Significant changes in social engagement (more withdrawn or overly outgoing) |
|   | Acting in ways that are out of character                                     |
|  <b>Workplace Impact</b> | Taking on excessive responsibility, refusing to delegate tasks               |
|   | Increased absenteeism  |
|   | Higher employee turnover   |
|   | Longer working hours without improved productivity                           |
|   | Decreased motivation and engagement  |

## Employer conversation guide

Effectively engaging with employees after recognising the early signs of indirect trauma is essential within a trauma-responsive workplace. Engaging in conversations ensures employees feel supported, helps prevent long-term psychological distress, and allows for timely interventions. Proactive dialogue fosters trust, resilience, and a workplace culture where employees feel safe and valued. The conversation guide is adapted from the “Staff R U OK? Guide” [26].

### Step 1: Preparing for conversation

Preparing for a conversation with an employee ensures a smooth conversation, and a positive outcome.

- **Be ready:** Are you in the right headspace to listen without distraction? Can you genuinely engage and give as much time as needed?
- **Be prepared:** You won’t have all the answers, and that’s okay – listening is key. Conversations about personal struggles can be difficult, and the employee may become emotional, embarrassed, or upset.
- **Prepare a private space:** Choose a quiet, informal, and private setting. Find a time that works for them and allow at least an hour in your schedule. If they’re unavailable, ask when they’d prefer to talk.

## Step 2: Starting the conversation

For the employer, active listening is key to understanding the employee's experience, ensuring effective solutions.

- **Start with a simple question:** Ask, "How are you going?", "I've noticed you're not quite yourself lately". Approach the questions casually – like speaking to a friend.
- **Listen without judgement:** Take what they say seriously, don't interrupt or rush the conversation. If they need time to think, give them that time, even if it creates a moment of silence in the conversation."
- **Encourage next steps:** Ask, "Where do you think we can go from here?", "What would be a good first step we can take?", "What do you need from me? How can I help?"
- **Follow up:** Check in later to show ongoing care and support.

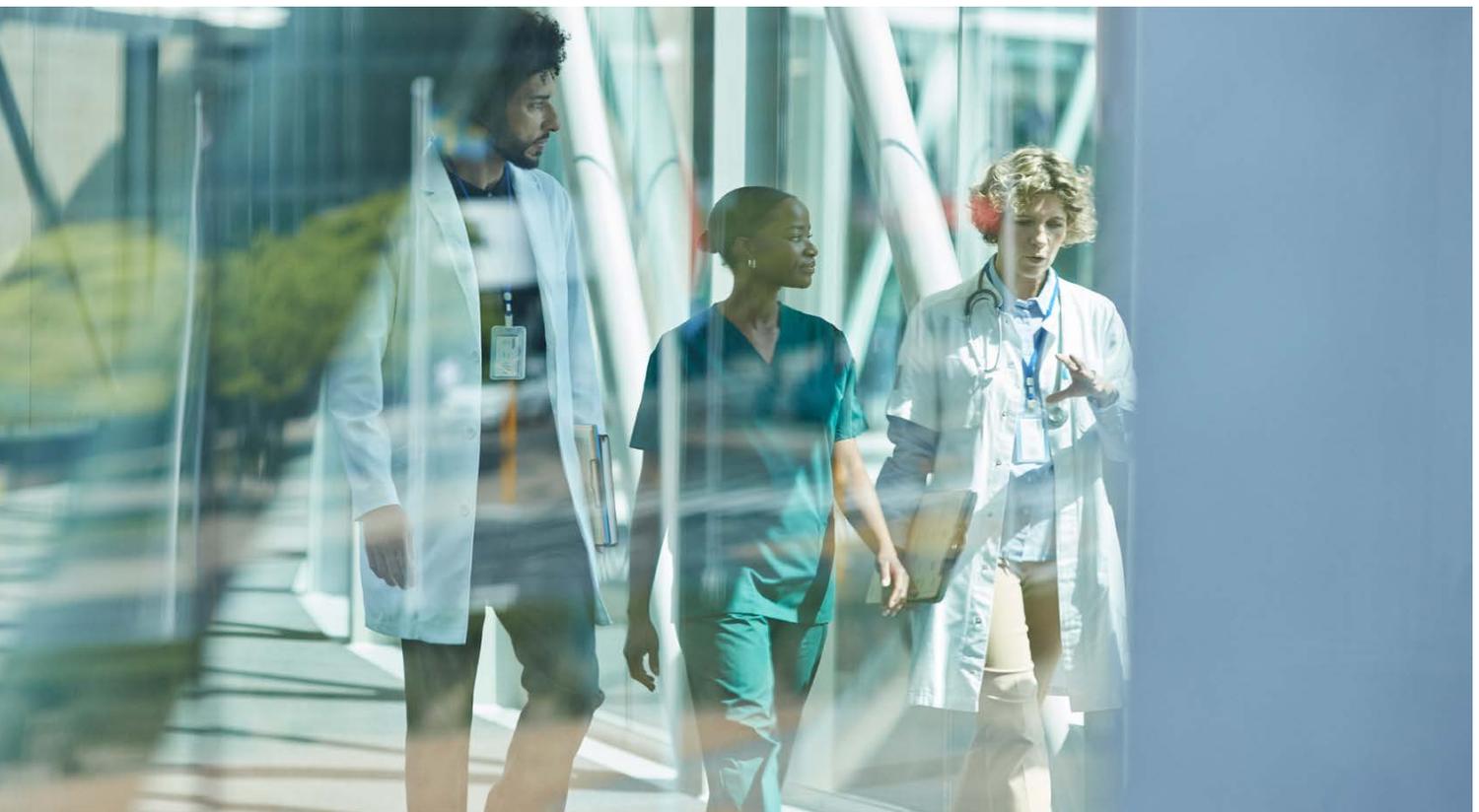


- Adapted from the "Staff R U OK? Guide" [26].
- Low Impact Debriefing Toolkit [27].

## Modifications to the workplace

If an employee is experiencing distress due to ongoing exposure to trauma, adjusting their work tasks can help mitigate stress and reduce the risk of emotional exhaustion. Through open conversations, managers can gain insight into the causal factors contributing to trauma exposure and proactively discuss workplace adjustments that support the employee's wellbeing.

These modifications should be collaborative, balancing the employee's needs with organisational requirements. Most adjustments are practical, temporary, and cost-effective, making them a proactive strategy to help employees manage their workload while preventing burnout and psychological strain.



## Reasonable modifications examples: [28]

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <h3>Modify work hours</h3> <p>Adjust start, finish, or break times to accommodate employees struggling with fatigue or heightened stress due to trauma exposure.</p>                   | <h3>Change work location</h3> <p>Relocate employees to a quieter space or an alternative worksite to minimise exposure to triggering environments.</p>                                    |
| <h3>Reduce/gradually increase workload</h3> <p>Temporarily reduce work hours or tasks to ease emotional burden and allow for progressive reintegration after trauma-related leave.</p> | <h3>Assign confidence-boosting tasks</h3> <p>Provide tasks that reinforce competence and control, helping employees rebuild confidence after distressing experiences.</p>                 |
| <h3>Modify task exposure</h3> <p>Redistribute tasks that involve frequent exposure to distressing material (e.g., reviewing trauma-related cases, handling crisis calls).</p>          | <h3>Adapt communication methods</h3> <p>Adjust how instructions and feedback are delivered to ensure clarity and minimise stress triggers.</p>  |
| <h3>Encourage psychological safety</h3> <p>Ensure employees remain connected to their team while avoiding isolating work conditions that may worsen distress.</p>                      | <h3>Provide targeted training</h3> <p>Offer additional training on managing emotional impact, resilience strategies, or trauma-awareness techniques.</p>                                  |
| <h3>Increase autonomy &amp; flexibility</h3> <p>Allow employees greater control over their workload and pace to manage emotional regulation more effectively.</p>                      | <h3>Assess &amp; mitigate role stressors</h3> <p>Identify specific work demands that heighten trauma exposure and explore practical solutions to reduce ongoing psychological strain.</p> |

## Early intervention supports

### Employee Assistance Programs

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are confidential services offering assessment, short-term counselling, and referrals for various personal and work-related concerns. EAPs can address issues such as stress, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and family problems. Implementing an EAP encourages early intervention and supports employees in managing challenges effectively.

### Mental health education and training

Investing in preventative mental health initiatives not only improves employee wellbeing but also enhances productivity, prevents burnout, and reduces absenteeism. Prioritising education and awareness ensures that mental health is approached proactively rather than reactively, creating a more resilient workforce.



- EAP providers list [\[29\]](#).
- Headspace: early intervention training resources [\[30\]](#).
- Monitoring EAP service tool [\[31\]](#).
- Practical guide for managers to support employees with trauma [\[32\]](#).
- How to keep your team healthy [\[33\]](#).
- Employee directed self-care action plan [\[34\]](#).



# Prevention: Creating a supportive environment

## Purpose

The strategies so far have focused on creating a trauma-aware and trauma-responsive workplace that recognises and responds effectively to trauma when it happens. Moving beyond this, the transition to a trauma-informed workplace requires implementing preventive measures to minimise or eliminate the risk of re-traumatisation.

### Preventive measures aim to:

1. Prevent re-traumatisation – Ensuring that workplace policies, interactions, and environments do not inadvertently trigger or reinforce past trauma.
2. Prevent the onset of new trauma – creating a psychologically safe workplace that minimises the risk of employees experiencing new trauma due to workplace culture, incidents, or lack of supportive structures [35].

A trauma-responsive workplace acknowledges trauma and reacts appropriately to support affected employees, whereas a trauma-informed workplace proactively integrates trauma-awareness into policies, leadership, and organisational culture to prevent harm before it occurs.

## Overview



An **organisational culture** where trauma-informed principles are embedded in all operations, shaping policies, practices, and interactions as a fundamental way of working rather than a standalone initiative.

**Leadership** at all levels that understands, drives, and inspires trauma-informed change, embodies key principles, and ensures accountability for long-term improvement.



Employees who feel their **wellbeing** is valued and prioritised, with time and space to access proactive, protective, and reactive wellbeing supports.

Incorporate **feedback loops** from those accessing, working in, and collaborating with the organisation, driving continuous improvement.



Routine and meaningful **sharing of power with people with lived experience of trauma**, ensuring services and systems are collaboratively designed and delivered around their needs rather than those of organisations and systems.

Employees have the **knowledge, skills, confidence, and capacity** to recognise and respond to trauma through role-specific training and implementation support.



**Policies and processes** that acknowledge the prevalence and impact of trauma, embedding a trauma-informed approach into all aspects of the organisation.

A **budget** that prioritises and sustains a trauma-informed and responsive approach, ensuring long-term commitment and sufficient resources.



A commitment to ensuring **every aspect of a person's service experience** – from first contact to employee interactions, environments, communication, referrals, and assessments – is grounded in safety, choice, trust, collaboration, and empowerment.

Adapted from National Trauma Transformation Programme [35].

## Stage 1: Assessment and planning for a trauma-informed organisation [36]



### Organisational assessments

- **Initial assessments** conducted early in the process to identify organisational needs and capability gaps, evaluate readiness, and assess capacity for systemic change.
- **Ongoing assessments** carried out throughout the change process to measure successes and barriers, adjust Trauma Informed Approach (TIA) implementation as needed, and prioritise areas for improvement.



**An organisation's readiness and capacity assessment is the first step for organisational-level change.** Assessments aim to establish baseline competencies with the purpose of evaluating an organisation's readiness to change.

#### The aim:

- Help organisations determine key areas for improvement and areas of strength across all organisational levels.
- Allow organisations to assess capacity, targeted training resources and strategic planning.
- Provides data to validate trauma-informed needs and assess the organisation's readiness for trauma-informed implementation.

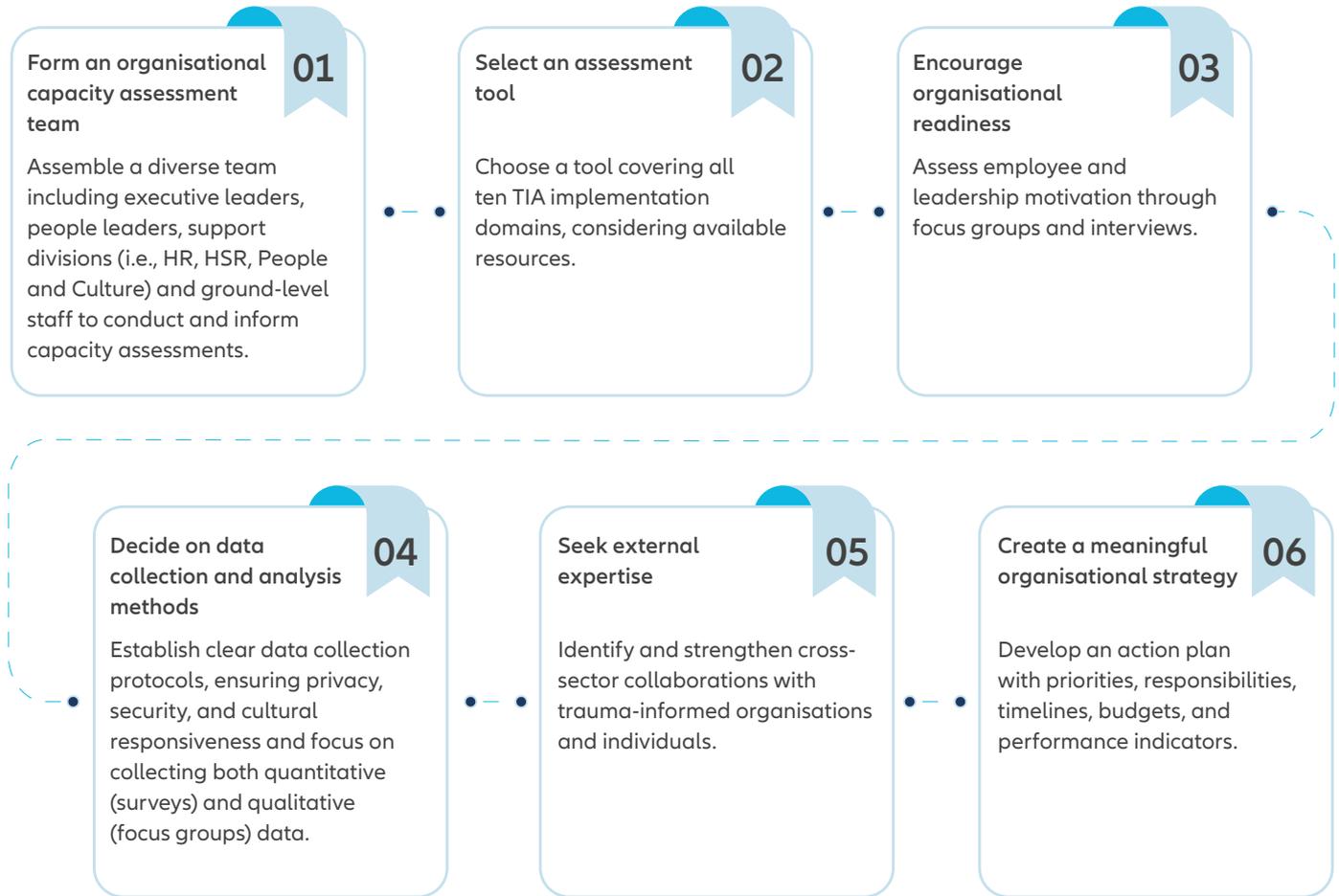


**Tip: Baseline assessments are essential for trauma informed organisational implementation**

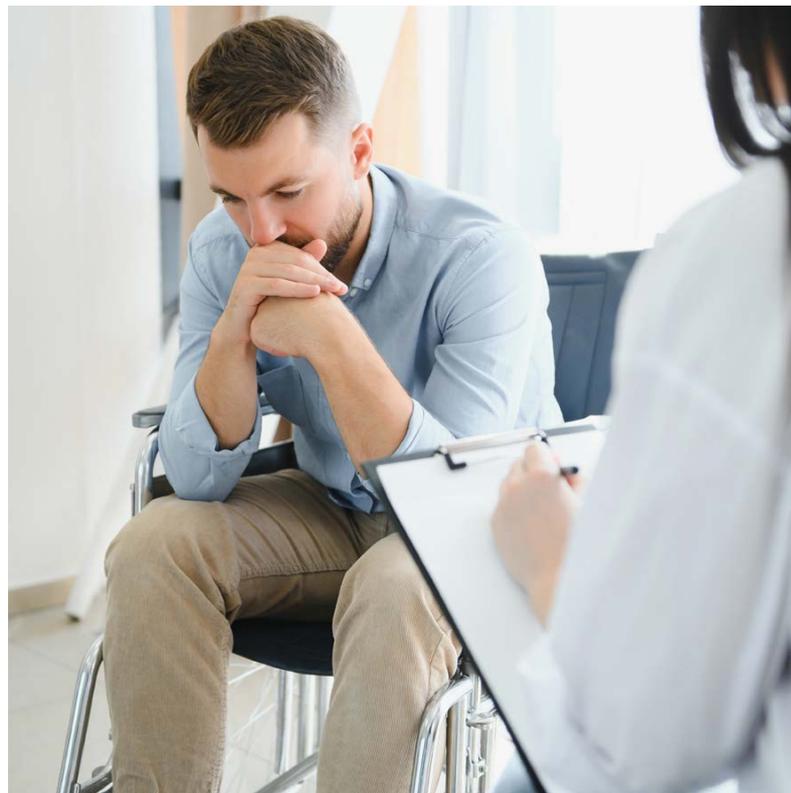
A baseline assessment provides a benchmark for measuring progress and improvement. It reviews current organisational competencies, identifies areas that need to be addressed, and forms a reference for monitoring and evaluation.



## Steps in conducting a baseline assessment: [36]



- Trauma-Informed Care Project Agency Self-Assessment [37]  
Provides a guide on how to interpret results. If questions are answered “strongly agree” or “strongly disagree” this can flag potential areas for change. Questions answered “don’t know” suggest lack of clarity, practice, or different perspectives across various levels of the organisation.
- Building a Multi-system Trauma-Informed Collaborative tool [38].
- Oregon Trauma Informed Screening Tool [39].



## Stage 2: Implementing a trauma-informed approach



Once the organisation has completed a baseline assessment for readiness and capacity to implement a trauma-informed approach, they are ready to move to the implementation stage.

| Category                                  | Importance   | Resource   |
|---|--|--|
| <b>Governance and leadership</b>          | A trauma-informed approach relies on strong leadership that prioritises transparency, trust, and inclusion of individuals with lived experience in decision-making.  | TIPCOT Trauma Informed Leadership Guide [40].  |
| <b>Training and workforce development</b> | Training resources for employees are essential in preventing re-traumatisation, and strengthening a trauma-aware culture.  | BlueKnot offers webinars and training around trauma-informed practice for organisations with a variety of training options [41].   |
| <b>Funding</b>                            | Australian organisations can sustain trauma-informed approaches through diverse funding sources and strategic alignment with existing programs.  | Depending on the relevant state or federal initiatives, there may be funding available for trauma-based programs. Employers are encouraged to investigate their local resources. |
| <b>Environment</b>                        | <p>Promoting physical safety:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Well-lit and monitored spaces, clear sightlines, low noise levels, welcoming signage, and seating arrangements that allow for personal space. Secure entrances/exits, and private de-escalation areas.</li> </ul> | SAMSHA has various examples of trauma informed environmental strategies [36].  |



## Stage 3: Monitoring progress [36]



Implementing a Trauma-Informed Approach (TIA) is an ongoing process requiring continuous quality improvement. Establishing clear structures for tracking progress ensures accountability and long-term success.

### Key strategies for monitoring progress

#### Set clear goals & performance indicators

- Define action steps and measurable outcomes before implementation.
- Use findings from organisational assessments to guide goal-setting.

#### Establish a dedicated monitoring workgroup

- Assign a team responsible for tracking progress and adjusting goals as needed.

#### Use a range of indicators

- Track employee and client satisfaction, engagement levels, and health outcomes.
- Recognise that some outcomes, like client wellness and trust-building, may be harder to quantify.

#### Collect & integrate ongoing feedback

- Regularly assess transparency, safety, and trust through surveys, listening sessions, and suggestion boxes.
- Dedicate employee meeting time to reflective discussions on progress and areas for improvement.



## Stage 4: Evaluation and sustainability [36]



Sustainable implementation of trauma-informed approaches requires organisations to evaluate their initiatives, adapt policies and procedures, and ensure long-term integration for continued success and replication of positive outcomes.



### Policy

- Here is an HR Policy template that guides effective policy [43].



Written policies and procedures are essential for sustaining a trauma-informed approach by embedding trauma-informed principles into an organisation's mission, operating policies, and bylaws. Formalising these policies ensures continuity, even with changes in leadership and employees.

- **Review & modify policies:** Ensure guidelines prioritise trauma-informed services, safety, confidentiality, and reducing re-traumatisation.
- **Embed trauma-informed principles:** Integrate trauma-informed values into mission statements, bylaws, and operating policies; share successful policies with partners to improve alignment.
- **Engage lived experience:** Define leadership and decision-making roles for individuals with lived trauma experience.
- **Strengthen collaboration:** Clearly communicate the organisation's commitment to TIA with stakeholders.
- **Support employee wellbeing:** Address emotional impacts with peer support, mental health days, and employee assistance programs.

## Evaluation

### Key takeaways

Consider questions to help plan a TIA evaluation:

- What is the purpose of the evaluation?
- How will data be collected, managed, and analysed?
- From whom will the information be collected?
- What target outcomes will you focus on and how will you report them?

|   | Tool  | Use   |
|---|---|---|
|   | Trauma Informed System Change Instrument [44]                     | Assesses employee understanding of trauma-informed practice, implementation of safety plans, and perceptions of their organisation’s formal TIC policies.   |
|  | Trauma-Informed Practice (TIP) Scales [45]                        | Evaluates client perspectives on trauma-informed practices across six domains: agency environment, access to trauma information, connection opportunities, strengths-based approach, cultural inclusivity, and parenting support. |
|   | The Attitudes Related to Trauma- Informed Care (ARTIC) Scale [46] | Measures employee attitudes toward trauma-informed care, readiness for implementation, training impact, and the sustainability of trauma informed efforts.  |
|   | TICOMETER/TIC Scale [47]  | Evaluates an organisation's capacity for trauma-informed care, identifying areas for improvement and monitoring progress over time.   |



# 02

# Employee Toolkit



# Employee Toolkit

## Overview

The Employee Toolkit is designed to help employees understand, manage, and seek support for work-related trauma. Trauma can happen to anyone, at any time and any place – including the workplace. Whether it’s a single event, repeated exposure, or the stress of supporting others through difficult situations, trauma can **affect** employees’ mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing. Even if trauma didn’t occur at work, the workplace could still play a crucial role in either supporting recovery or contributing to re-traumatisation. A trauma-informed workplace fosters a **safe** and **supportive** environment that reduces stress, minimises re-traumatised triggers, and empowers employees to navigate challenges more effectively.

### What the Employee Toolkit covers

#### Understanding trauma in the workplace

- Definitions of trauma.
- Different types of trauma in workplace.
- Examples of work situations with higher trauma risks.
- Examples of occupations with higher trauma risks.
- How to identify the difference between burnout, compassion fatigue and trauma in workplace.
- Recognise symptoms from exposure to traumatic experience.

#### What happens after trauma

- “You are not alone.”
- It’s normal to feel “not ok” when you experience trauma.
- Things can and will get better.

#### What can I do

- Recognising and responding to trauma.
- Ways to support yourself.

#### Self-care strategies

- Physical wellbeing.
- Sleep strategies.
- Emotional and mental wellbeing.
- More resources on self care.
- Shifting thinking & perspective.

#### Prevention strategies

- Workplace adjustments you can request.
- Finding it difficult to talk about stress with your manager?
- How to navigate crucial conversations: A guide for employees.



Trauma can have lasting effects, but with the right awareness and strategies, you can take steps toward a healthier life and a more supportive work environment.

You are not alone we are here to help!

# Understanding Trauma

## What is trauma? What is workplace trauma?

Usually, **trauma** results from an [event](#), series of events, or set of circumstances that is **experienced** by an individual and is physically or emotionally **harmful** or life-threatening and has lasting **adverse effects** on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual wellbeing. **Witnessing, investigating** or being **exposed** to [traumatic events or materials](#) is a psychosocial hazard in the workplace [48].

## Different types of trauma in workplace

Trauma can affect employees in different ways, and sometimes, its impact may not be immediately obvious. Some people may be exposed to it directly, while others may be affected indirectly by witnessing distressing events or repeatedly being exposed to traumatic content. Recognising these different types of trauma can help employees become more aware of their own experiences, understand their emotional responses, and seek appropriate support when needed.

### Primary trauma – Direct exposure

When employees are **directly exposed** to a traumatic event, such as being involved in an incident, including both physical and psychological harm in the workplace. If it is experienced firsthand, it may lead to primary trauma.

### Secondary trauma – Indirect exposure

When employees are exposed to **someone else's** traumatic experience, such as witnessing or hearing about others' experience of trauma, it may lead to secondary trauma.



### Vicarious trauma – Indirect exposure

When employees are subject to **repeated exposure** to distressing materials or stories, resulting in profound emotional and psychological changes over time. For example, processing sensitive material, such as court documents outlining cases of sexual abuse.

## Examples of work situations with higher trauma risks

- Handling cash, drugs or valuables.
- Working in the community and working at night.
- Providing services to distressed, highly agitated or incarcerated people.
- Enforcement activities.
- Responding to emergencies.
- Working in areas where you or others may be exposed to distressing or traumatic events, for example, health care, community work, counselling, funeral services, protective services, legal services, high-risk work where injuries may occur [49].

## Examples of occupations with higher trauma risks

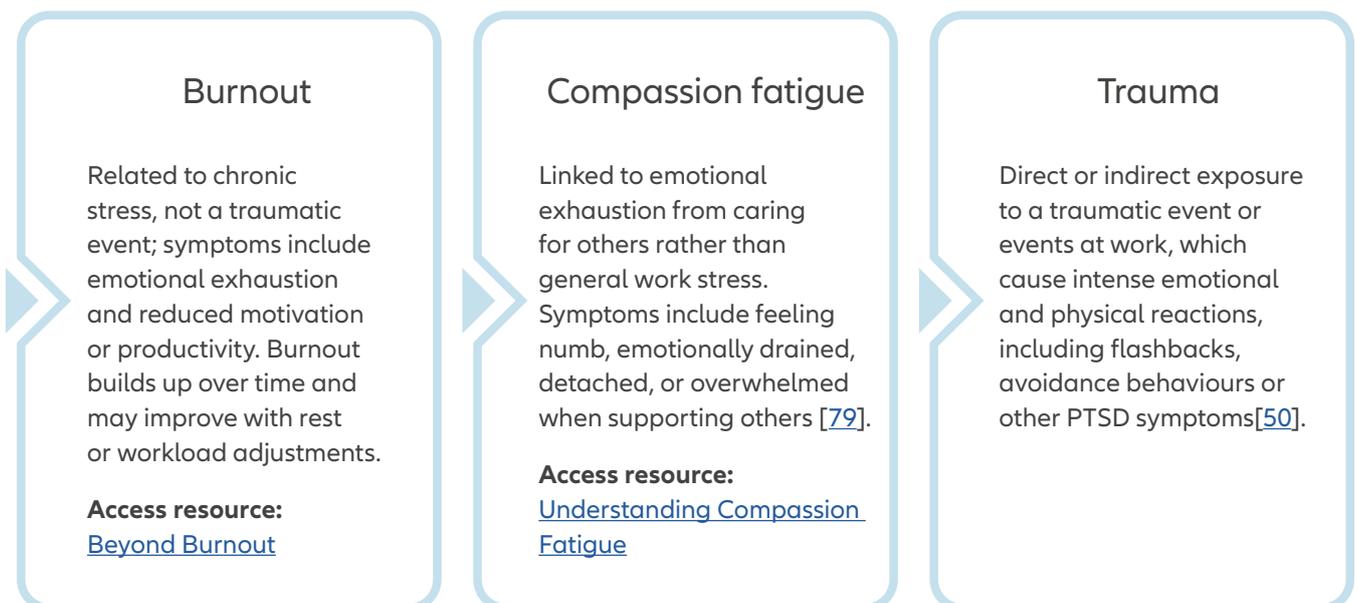
Anyone can experience trauma at work, but some jobs come with a higher risk. Below are some occupations where trauma exposure is more common:

- **Primary trauma:** Direct exposure to a traumatic event, such as witnessing a fatal incident while on duty. This is common among firefighters, police officers, and emergency responders.
- **Secondary Trauma:** An acute emotional response resulting from direct interaction with a traumatised individual. This is often experienced by emergency responders and child protection workers.
- **Vicarious Trauma:** The emotional impact of processing sensitive or distressing material, such as court documents detailing cases of sexual abuse. This can affect lawyers, mental health workers, nurses, and social workers.

### Work can be stressful, but not all work stress leads to trauma

Different types of workplace stress can result in different psychological impacts. For example, chronic stress or lack of support may leave one person feeling exhausted and disengaged, leading to **burnout**. Another person may feel emotionally drained from constantly supporting others, which can develop into **compassion fatigue** [79]. In more severe cases, exposure to a distressing or harmful event in the workplace may result in workplace trauma [80].

### Trauma differentials



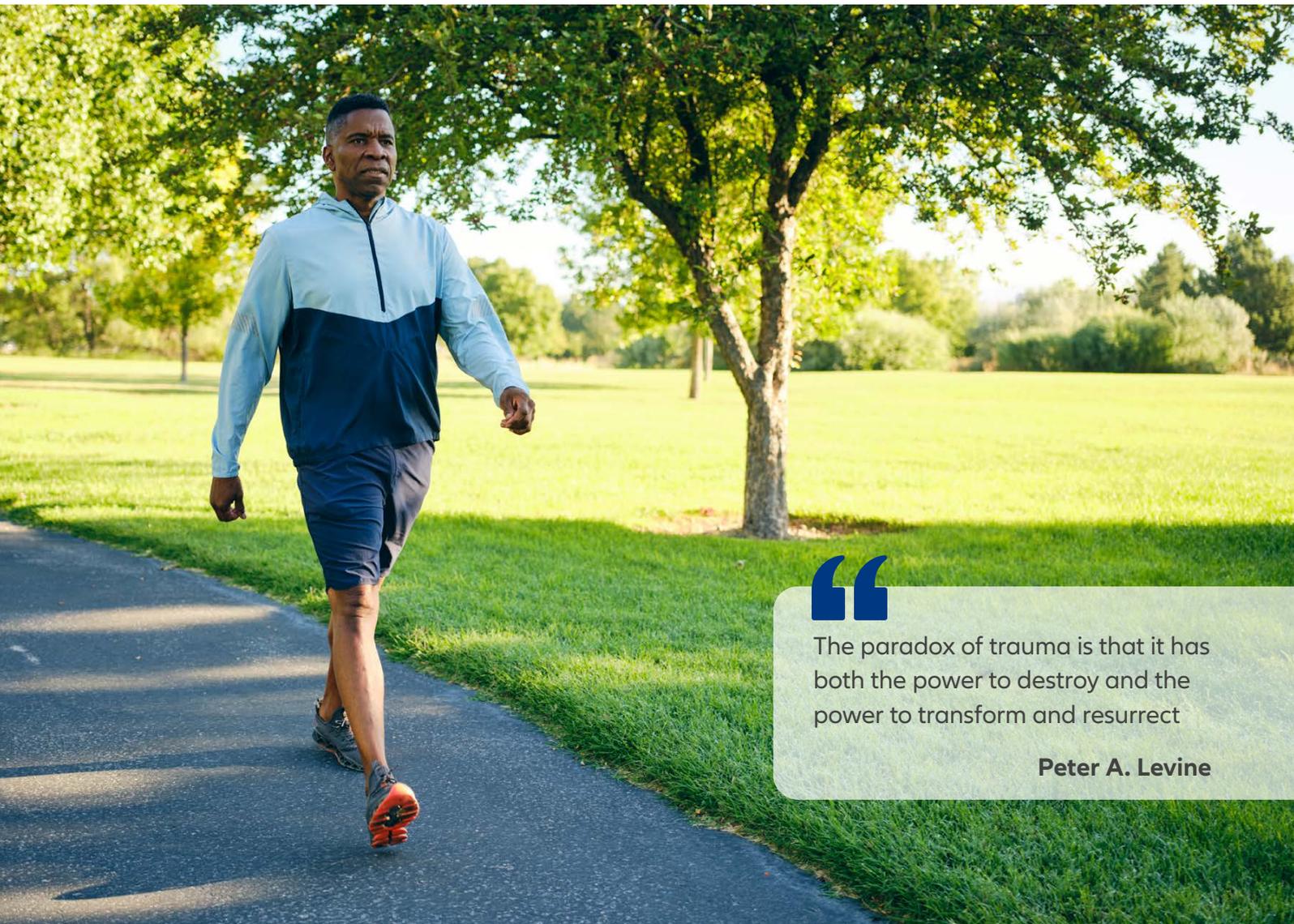
## Trauma impact and recovery

Unfortunately, traumatic events happen without prediction, and many people experience them at some point. In some cases, these events can also occur in the workplace, impacting employees' mental health and ability to work. While we cannot control what happens to us or change the past, we can choose how we respond. **With the right support and effective coping strategies, we can minimise the impact of trauma and move forward with strength and resilience.**

Recognising the signs of trauma early can help you **take steps** to manage its impact and seek support when needed. **Trauma affects everyone differently – Some people may notice changes right away, while others may not realise its effects until much later.** These reactions can be emotional, physical, or behavioural, and they may interfere with your ability to focus, perform daily tasks, or interact with others at work.

How people react to traumatic experience depends on several factors, including the nature of the experience, their resilience, their age and personality, their support system and usual coping methods, how much time has passed since the time of the event, and previous experiences.

Next, we will explore common trauma [symptoms](#) and provide a self-assessment tool to help you reflect on your experience. Identifying these symptoms early can empower you to practice self-care strategies and seek the right support when needed.



The paradox of trauma is that it has both the power to destroy and the power to transform and resurrect

**Peter A. Levine**

# Signs and symptoms of trauma

If you find yourself struggling with these symptoms, trauma may be impacting you [50].



## Unwanted thoughts that feel out of your control

- Flashbacks or reliving a traumatic event as if it were happening again.
- Bad dreams or nightmares related to the traumatic event.
- Intrusive thoughts such as repeated, involuntary memories.



## Avoidance

- Trying not to think or talk about a traumatic event.
- Feeling the need to stay away from work, certain places, activities, or people that bring back memories of a traumatic event.
- Struggling to meet deadlines or complete tasks.



## Physical changes

- Sweating
- Rapid breathing or shortness of breathing.
- Fast heartbeat.
- Shaking or trembling.
- Fatigue, low energy or trouble sleeping.
- Headaches or muscle tension or stomach discomfort.
- Sudden weight fluctuations.



## Negative changes in thinking and mood

- Negative thoughts about yourself, other people or the world.
- Being easily startled, frightened or anxious.
- Always feeling unsafe.
- Ongoing negative emotions of fear, blame, guilt, anger or shame.
- Memory problems, including not remembering important aspects of a traumatic event.
- Feeling disconnected from family and friends.
- Not being interested in activities you once enjoyed or feeling low motivation.
- Having a hard time feeling positive emotions.
- Trouble concentrating.
- Feeling emotionally numb.
- Feeling hopeless or powerless.
- Feeling overwhelmed.



## Behavioural changes

- Self-destructive thoughts or behaviours, such as drinking too much or driving too fast.
- Irritability, angry outbursts or aggressive behaviour.

# What happens after trauma

## No matter when it happens, support is always available.

Exposure to traumatic experiences can **affect** different aspects of life, including work performance, relationships, and overall wellbeing, sometimes in ways you may not expect. You might notice emotional ups and downs, difficulty concentrating, or even physical symptoms like fatigue or headaches. For some, these changes happen **immediately**, while for others, they emerge **over time**.

Understanding how trauma affects you is an important **step in** minimising the impact of it. In this section, we will explore common responses, reassure you that you're not alone, and provide guidance on finding support. No matter where you are in your journey, recovery is possible.

## You are not alone

- You are not alone. Many people go through **similar** responses, though they vary from person to person.
- Talking to your **manager** can provide workplace **support** and guidance.

## Understanding your experience

- These **reactions** are **normal** – your body and mind are adjusting, and there is no “right” or “wrong” way to feel after a traumatic event.
- It's normal to experience these **symptoms**, even strong emotional distress, numbness, fear, or difficulty concentrating. Your body and mind are adjusting, and these feelings may come and go.
- It is possible to live without being constantly affected by trauma, and over time, most people regain stability and control.

## Things can and will get better

Recovery takes time. Trauma is in the past, and **it will not define your future** – you can build a life beyond it. In the following pages, we offer detailed strategies for coping, including practical self-care strategies, workplace adjustment options, and support options that can help you navigate the recovery process. Everyone's recovery journey is unique, so take your time and explore the approaches that work best for you.

Remember: Recovery is not about forgetting what happened, but about regaining control and finding ways to move forward in a way that feels right for you.



# What can I do?

## Recognising and responding to trauma

**Everyone responds to trauma differently, and healing takes time.** Recognising these signs early can help you take small steps to care for yourself and regain balance. If you find yourself struggling with these symptoms, it's important to remember that **you don't have to go through this alone.**

## Ways to support yourself

### 1. Talk to someone you trust

This could be a colleague, manager, friend, or family member. Sharing your feelings can bring relief, and connecting with others can help reduce feelings of isolation. You don't have to go through this alone.

### 2. Seek workplace support

If available, Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) can provide confidential counselling. If your workplace doesn't have EAP, there may be other mental health resources available through your organisation or industry networks.

### 3. Consider professional support

If symptoms persist or feel overwhelming, speaking to a GP, psychologist, Occupational Therapist (OT) or trauma specialist can help you explore further support options at your own pace. It's okay to seek help – taking care of your mental health is just as important as physical health.



Phoenix Australia provides many useful tips to help you find your way after experiencing trauma: Helping yourself after a traumatic event [[53](#)].

The Royal College of Psychiatrists also provides strategic knowledge on coping after a traumatic event [[81](#)].

Recovery takes time, and it's okay to ask for help. Support is available, and you are not alone. There are some practical self-care strategies on the following pages to help you take care of your wellbeing.

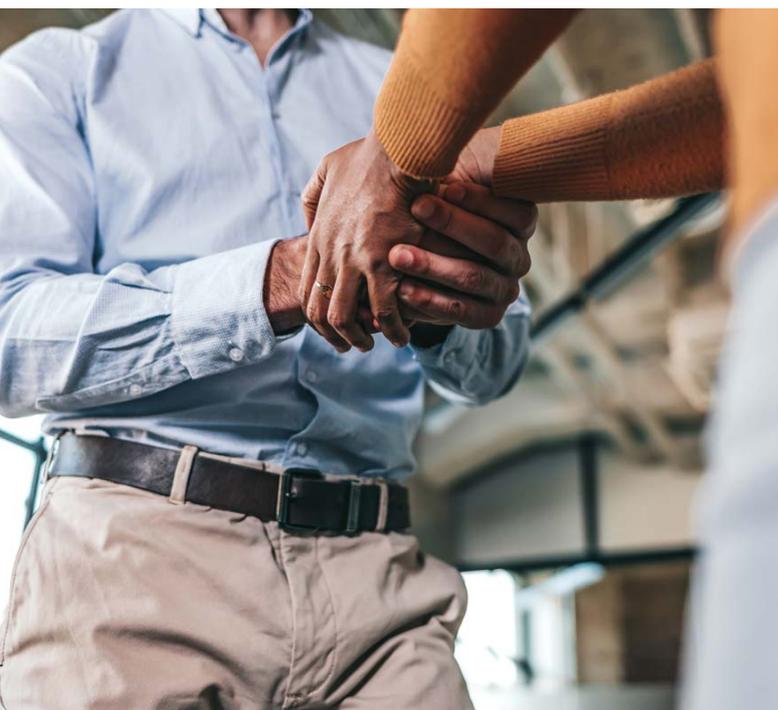
# Self-care strategies

Try these easy practice techniques, they may help!

Taking care of yourself is not a luxury – it’s an essential part of maintaining health and wellbeing. If your role involves exposure to trauma or distressing content, it is crucial to engage in regular and targeted self-care to manage stress, rebuild resilience, and maintain balance in daily life. Everyone copes differently, so it’s important to find what **works best for you**.

Exposure to trauma can often impact our sleep patterns and quality. Here are some strategies that might **help maintain a healthy sleep cycle**:

- A comfortable, quiet, and dark sleeping **environment**.
- Lower the room **temperature**: Maintaining a room temperature ranging between 15.6°C and 19.4°C may help keep your body temperature low and help you fall and stay asleep [54].
- Avoid looking at your **clock**.
- Turn off all **electronic devices of entertainment**.



## Physical wellbeing

- Get enough **sleep**.
- Maintain a consistent **routine**.
- Engage in **exercise** you like or even some light physical activity, like stretching, yoga, or walking.
- Eat **nutritious** meals that fuel your body and mind.
- **Take regular breaks** during the workday to rest and reset.

### More resources available



- 19 Simple Tips to Help You Fall Asleep Quickly [55]
- How to Fall Asleep Fast: 5 Tested Strategies [56]
- How to Fall Asleep in 10, 60, or 120 Seconds [57]
- Some knowledge about Sleeping well [58]
- Can’t sleep? Overthinking? How thought blocking can help [59]



Beyond physical wellbeing, taking care of your emotional and mental health is just as important – Keep reading for more strategies.

## Emotional and mental wellbeing

- Practice mindfulness or breathing exercises to stay grounded, there are some easy practice strategies below [\[60\]](#) [\[61\]](#).
- **Allow yourself to feel emotions without judgment** – healing takes time.
- **Express your thoughts** through journaling or creative outlets like art, music, and writing.
- Set **healthy boundaries** to protect your time and energy.

### Mindfulness practice

Mindfulness means paying attention to the present moment instead of worrying about the past or future. It helps you feel calmer and more in control.

#### When to use it:

- When feeling overwhelmed or anxious.
- When struggling to focus on tasks.
- When you need to reset your mind and emotions.

Try this simple exercise: Take a few deep breaths and focus on your senses:

- 5 things you can **see**
- 4 things you can **feel**
- 3 things you can **hear**
- 2 things you can **smell**
- 1 thing you can **taste**

### Quick relaxation methods

Quick relaxation techniques are simple, effective methods that **help reduce stress and tension in a short time.**

#### When to use them:

- Before or after a stressful event.
- When you need to calm down quickly.
- During short breaks to quickly recharge.

#### Try this simple exercise:

##### Counting ten breaths

- Allow yourself to relax and disengage, counting each breath slowly from 10 to 1.
- With each count, allow yourself to feel heavier and more relaxed.
- With each exhale, allow the tension to leave your body.

## More resources available

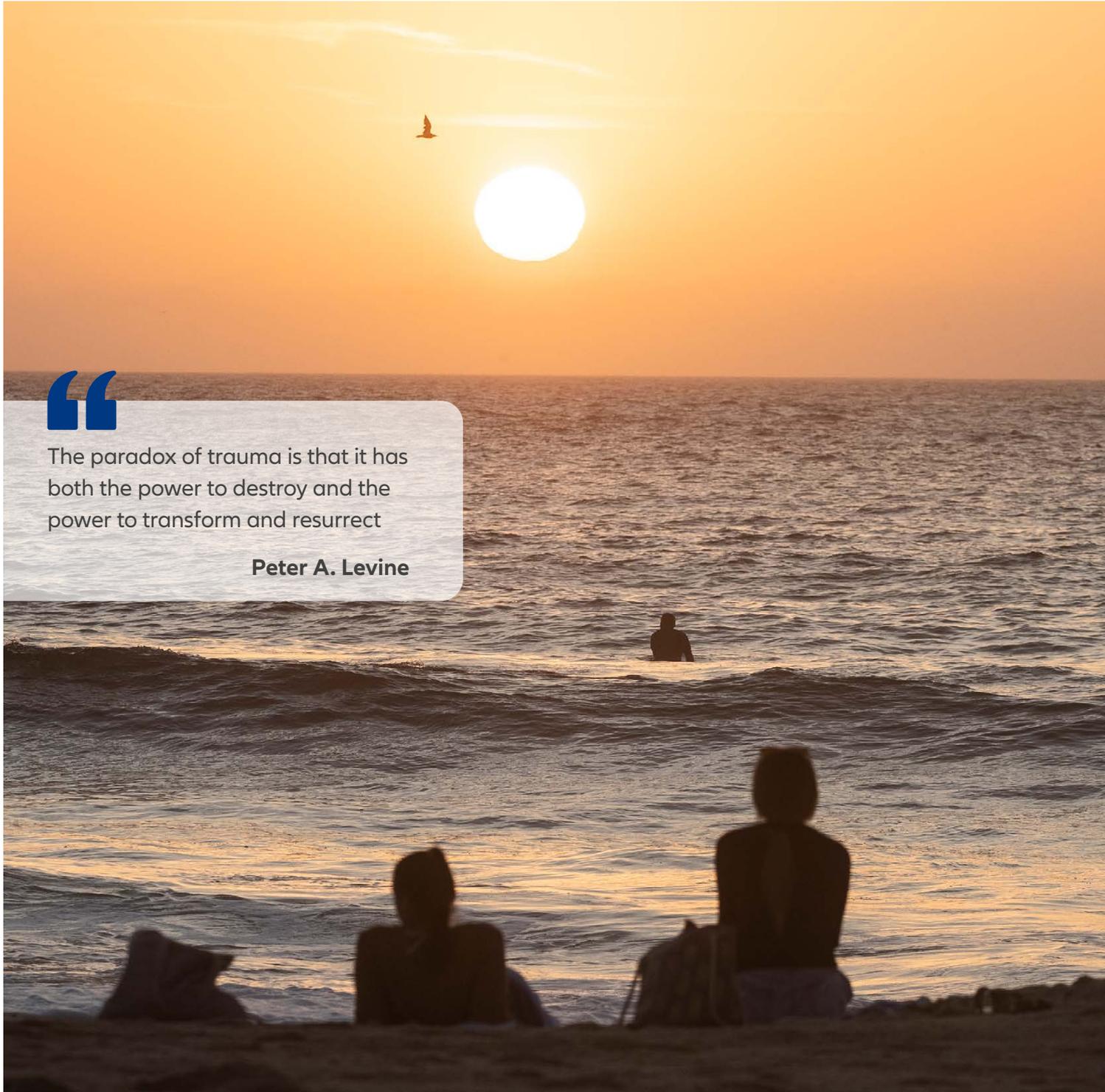


- Mindfulness, Traumatic Stress & Best Practice Guidelines [\[77\]](#)
- 2-Minute Mindful Movement Practice for Strengthening the Mind and Body [\[63\]](#)
- Conscious Breathing and the Vagus Nerve | Dr. Arielle Schwartz [\[78\]](#)
- Mindfulness in everyday life [\[65\]](#)
- Quick relaxation techniques [\[66\]](#)
- Wellbeing Toolkit – Red Cross [\[67\]](#)
- Six Ways to Improve Employees’ Physical and Mental Wellbeing [\[64\]](#)
- Mini-relaxation exercises: A quick fix in stressful moments [\[66\]](#)
- Strategies for Men – breaking negative thinking and managing anger [\[69\]](#)
- Work stress management techniques [\[70\]](#)
- Calming techniques – breathing training [\[71\]](#)
- Relaxation techniques: Try these steps to lower stress [\[72\]](#)
- Beyond Blue Guide to relaxation exercises [\[73\]](#)
- Self-care for mental health and wellbeing [\[62\]](#)

## Thinking & perspective



- Shift your **focus** to what you can control rather than what you can't.
- Challenge negative thoughts with **self-compassionate reframing**.
- **Break tasks** into small, manageable steps to avoid feeling overwhelmed.



The paradox of trauma is that it has both the power to destroy and the power to transform and resurrect

**Peter A. Levine**

# Prevention

Repeated exposure to traumatic events or prolonged stress can increase the risk of PTSD. However, with the right strategies and support, managing stress and identifying psychosocial hazards in the workplace is possible. After experiencing a traumatic event, taking proactive steps to minimise further distress is essential. Prevention involves recognising potential risks, developing effective coping strategies, and utilising workplace adjustments to support wellbeing. Remember, you are not alone – help and resources are available to assist you in maintaining your health in the work environment.

## Prevention strategies

- **Identify** psychosocial hazards – Be aware of stressors in your workplace, such as high workload, lack of control over tasks, or interpersonal conflicts. If you notice these, report them to your manager or seek support from HR.
- Discuss ways to **minimise exposure** – Work with your employer to adjust your tasks or environment to reduce stress or exposure to traumatic material where possible.
- Adopt **self-care strategies** – Maintain work-life balance by setting boundaries, taking breaks after difficult situations, and using stress-reduction techniques such as mindfulness or deep breathing.
- Set **realistic** expectations – Understand that challenges in the workplace are normal, and perfection is not required. Focus on what is achievable rather than aiming for unrealistic standards.
- Know **when** to seek help – If stress becomes overwhelming, reach out to workplace support services, employee assistance programs (EAPs), or mental health professionals.
- **Check** in with yourself – Take breaks, [practice self-care](#), and explore strategies that help you feel grounded. Ask yourself:
  1. How am I feeling today, emotionally and physically?
  2. Am I avoiding certain places, people, or activities because of how I feel?
  3. What small steps can I take today to take care of myself?



## Workplace adjustments you can request: [28]

- **Request modified work hours:** Ask for adjusted start, finish, or break times to better manage fatigue and stress.
- **Ask for reduced or gradually increased workload:** Request temporary workload adjustments to ease emotional stress and support resettlement.
- **Request adjustments to task exposure:** Discuss modifying work tasks to minimise exposure to distressing materials or triggers.
- **Engage in team activities:** Seek opportunities to work with colleagues to build support and reduce isolation.
- **Discuss task flexibility:** Explore alternative ways of completing tasks that better suit personal coping strategies.
- **Request a change in work location:** Ask to relocate to a quieter space or an alternative worksite to reduce stressors.
- **Seek confidence-boosting tasks:** Request assignments that reinforce competence and control to support recovery.
- **Communicate preferences for instructions & feedback:** Discuss preferred ways of receiving guidance to reduce stress.
- **Engage in training provided at work:** Seek or actively engage in training on self-care strategies, emotional management, or trauma awareness.
- **Identify & address role stressors:** Assess job demands that increase stress and explore solutions with the manager.

## Finding it difficult to talk about stress with your manager? Try these steps: [74]

1. **Prepare** in advance: Write down key points about how you're feeling.
2. Use "I feel" **statements:** "I have been feeling overwhelmed with my workload".
3. Suggest **realistic** solutions: When proposing solutions, consider what is feasible within the company's resources and policies. For instance, instead of requesting a complete workload change, ask for temporary adjustments or support in prioritising tasks.
4. Manage your **expectations:** Not all requests can be granted immediately, but small changes can lead to meaningful improvements. Stay **open** to compromise and ongoing discussions.
5. **Follow up:** If no immediate action is taken, check in after a reasonable period to revisit the conversation and assess progress.



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