

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and the Workplace

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a psychiatric disorder that can occur following an experience or witnessing a life-threatening event such as military combat, natural disasters, terrorist incidents, serious accidents, serious altercations or physical or sexual assault PTSD can arise from something like bullying or harassment in the workplace as well. PTSD doesn't necessarily look the same in any two people; people experience things individually and may not express the same symptoms as others.

Anyone can get PTSD and it can occur at any age – an event or experience that triggers PTSD doesn't have to occur directly to the individual, but can be the result of witnessing an event or even experiencing the loss of a loved one. PTSD symptoms can be delayed in showing themselves for weeks or sometimes months.

Some symptoms of PTSD literally intrude on an individual's life. The re-experience the symptoms, or could feel like the trauma is happening all over again and have the similar feelings or reactions they did at the actual time of the incident. Flashbacks, nightmares, body memories and frightening thoughts can all be symptoms of PTSD.

Hyper-arousal is a symptom that means the body gets into a heightened state of alert. Feeling tense or 'on edge', hyper-vigilance, excessive anxiety or worry, angry outbursts, or startling easily are all symptoms of hyper-arousal. This symptom causes a person to feel continually stressed and agitated; this can frustrate a person's daily living and make it difficult to complete routine tasks like concentrating or sleeping.

Avoidance is when you have unwanted thoughts or feelings and can trigger a natural fight or flight feeling. With PTSD the individual experiences the "flight" feeling; which can cause them to avoid places or people associated with the trauma, have loss of memory, loss of interest in activities that were once important to them, difficulty falling asleep, being distant or bringing harm onto one's self. This symptom can cause a person to change the way they live their life; for example, someone who has been in a bad car accident may avoid driving or riding in a car.

In the workplace these symptoms can be triggered or intensified by the environment. Some key symptoms that can occur in the workplace that you may notice from an individual that suffers from PTSD could be a change in their known personality or reactions, memory problems, lack of concentration, difficulty retaining information, feelings of fear or anxiety, physical problems, poor interaction with fellow employees, absenteeism, trouble staying awake or panic attacks.

It is important for an employer, supervisors and coworkers to be educated on PTSD and its symptoms, especially in certain workplace environments with a high risk for PTSD to occur (i.e. first responders) This will help the workplace be able to understand and accommodate the employee that is suffering from it. There is no one way of dealing with this. No individual is the

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same and different routes of actions may work better than others. Some ways of beginning to take action and making accommodations are:

- Add in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder into your Policies and procedures. Having a small section in your health and safety program can shine some light on the topic and educate everyone in the workplace.
- Know how you can help. The best way of finding out what exactly you their employer can do to help them is to ask. Make sure that the individual knows you are there for them and if they need anything they are more than welcome to come to you.
- Have knowledge of support programs for the individual outside of the workplace like an Employee Assistance Program so that they have options to obtain help.

Ontario has begun to put into place some new initiatives to help prevent and/or mitigate the risks or PTSD arising out of some specific jobs such as first responders. First responders can be:

- Police personnel
- Firefighters
- Paramedics, etc.

If your organization has a routine risk of exposure to traumatic stressors, your workplace should provide good mental health supports in the workplace and provide training on the risks of PTSD that arise out of the nature of their job. It is important to remember that PTSD can be a result of something like experience workplace bullying and/harassment or workplace violence or sexual harassment; it is imperative to keep the workplace a friendly and harassment/violence free one. PTSD falls under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) and so needs to be accommodated in the workplace.

Contact Beyond Rewards for assistance with development of Health & Safety policies or Accommodation policies and training at 519-821-7440 or info@beyondrewards.ca .

Resources:

<http://www.giftfromwithin.org/html/PTSD-Workplace-What-Employers-Coworkers-Need-To-Know.html>
<https://news.ontario.ca/mol/en/2016/02/ontario-announces-new-ptsd-strategy-for-first-responders.html>
<https://bbrfoundation.org/frequently-asked-questions-about-post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd>