



# EAP SUPERVISOR ENHANCEMENT NEWSLETTER

September 2023



## DEER OAKS PRESENTS

### Supervisor Excellence Webinar Series

#### *Presentation Skills for Supervisors*

When: October 16, 2023 at 1:00 PM CDT

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# THE EFFECTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESSORS IN THE WORKPLACE (PART 4)

## Psychological Stressors at Work: How Employers Can Respond (cont.)

### Organize trainings, workshops; provide opportunities for growth and development.

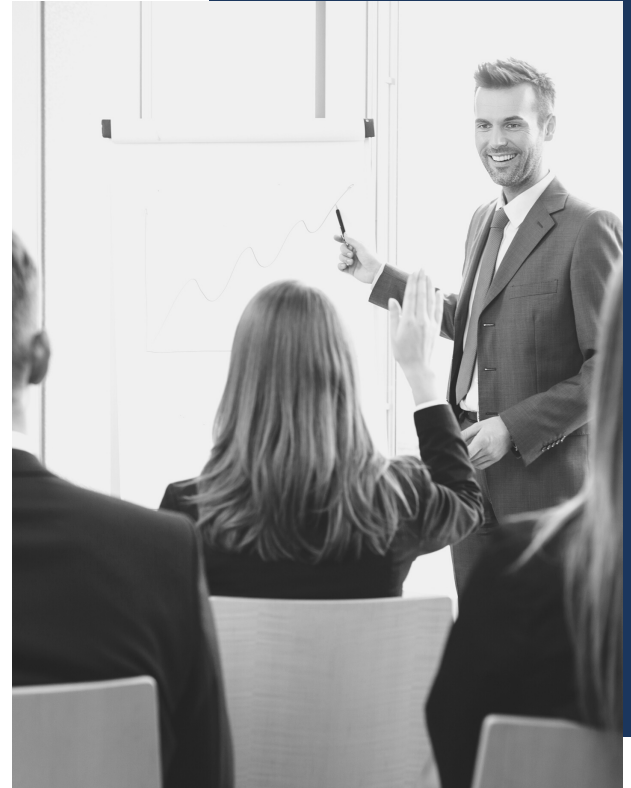
As employers face ongoing job shortages in both blue- and white-collar industries, while new survey data reveals that seven in 10 employees lack confidence in their career prospects as a result of perceived failure to master the skills needed for their jobs,<sup>1</sup> another great way to prevent workplace stress for both employees and leaders is by offering trainings, workshops, and skills development opportunities. In fact, doing so can even help leaders to improve employee retention, as new findings from Gallup indicate that lack of growth and progression is one of the main factors affecting voluntary turnout.<sup>2</sup>

Some of the most common types of training currently sought after by most employees include those for hard skills,<sup>3</sup> including:

- Computer skills
- Technical skills
- Management skills
- Marketing skills
- Analytical skills
- Writing skills
- Design skills
- Accounting skills

As well as soft skills,<sup>4</sup> like:

- Leadership skills
- Critical thinking and decision-making
- Project management
- Adaptability
- Continuous learning and creativity
- Interpersonal skills: communication, team building, empathy
- Accountability
- Self-awareness



Such training programs, workshops, or other development opportunities should be provided both in person and online to maximize accessibility and engagement; this may even include offering stipends for employees to use for external training or providing time during working hours for trainings. Ensuring that blue-collar workers in particular have the opportunity for skills development and access to such opportunities will be essential to their survival as demand for workers continues to rise<sup>5</sup>—as well as demands for new industry-specific skills.<sup>6</sup>

Experts also find that acknowledging workers' achievements and mastery of new skills serves as a prominent protective factor against workplace stress.<sup>7</sup> Leaders can celebrate workers' accomplishments by saying a few congratulatory words about an employee during a team or organization meeting, or within internal communications, including weekly or monthly newsletters.

## Lead with clarity and compassion; prioritize safety and wellbeing.

The best step that employers can take toward reducing both stress and stressors in the workplace—and one that many take for granted—is improving both the state and perceptions of their organizational climate through compassionate leadership. Countless studies prove that one's leadership style can have a considerable impact on the presence of work-related stress, with a lack of support or hostile leadership styles being one of the chief causes of workplace stress.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, studies show that workplaces that prioritize employee empowerment and inclusion see significant reductions in stress; as well as increases in worker satisfaction, contentment, and productivity; and improvements in their overall wellbeing.<sup>9,10</sup>

There are multiple avenues through which employers can practice compassionate and kind leadership; **the first of them being leading by example.** The easiest way to measure the current state of the work environment is by examining one's own stress levels. Are supervisors, managers, and top executives under significant stress? If so, is that stress impacting how they behave in the office and how they behave toward each other or their employees? If tensions between leadership and staff are palpable, that's as good an indication as any that the work environment is probably causing undue stress in workers.

Fortunately, leaders can leverage these experiences to improve the current climate at work by talking openly and candidly about their own stress and the symptoms that they've had to manage as a result. This can help to alleviate some of employees' stress, as they learn that they are not alone and, moreover, feel more confident and comfortable about talking about their own experiences to their coworkers and supervisors. Initiating open conversations about workplace stress can also reduce stigma around health issues at work and may also result in higher employee engagement with health benefits and wellness programs.

Along with initiating open conversations with employees about stress, health, and wellness, employers can also demonstrate compassionate leadership by proactively engaging with employees and actively listening to them.<sup>11</sup> This entails regularly checking in on employees to see how they're doing and asking open-ended questions, like "How are you feeling?" "How is work going?" "Is there anything that's troubling you or bothering you?" "Is there anything I can do to help?" After employees answer these questions, leaders should also be conscientious about validating their feelings and expressing sympathy with statements such as, "I understand," paraphrasing the response that they shared, and providing actionable solutions.



Leaders should also be sure to encourage employees to share feedback and suggestions about further improvements that leaders can make to the workplace in order to promote safety and wellbeing. They can further empower employees by designating a task force or committee in charge of monitoring safety hazards and stressors at work.<sup>12</sup>

Another integral part of compassionate leadership is the promotion of work-life balance. Leaders should strive to create a strong separation between work and life by routinely ensuring that employees are adhering to their schedules, breaks, sick leave, or vacation time—making sure that they are not still checking or responding to emails and other work-related communications while they are not on the clock, especially when they are not expected or required to respond.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, leaders should consistently encourage workers to make time for self-care, encouraging them to take breaks throughout the day, and looking for or creating ways for them to take more time off throughout the year.<sup>14</sup>



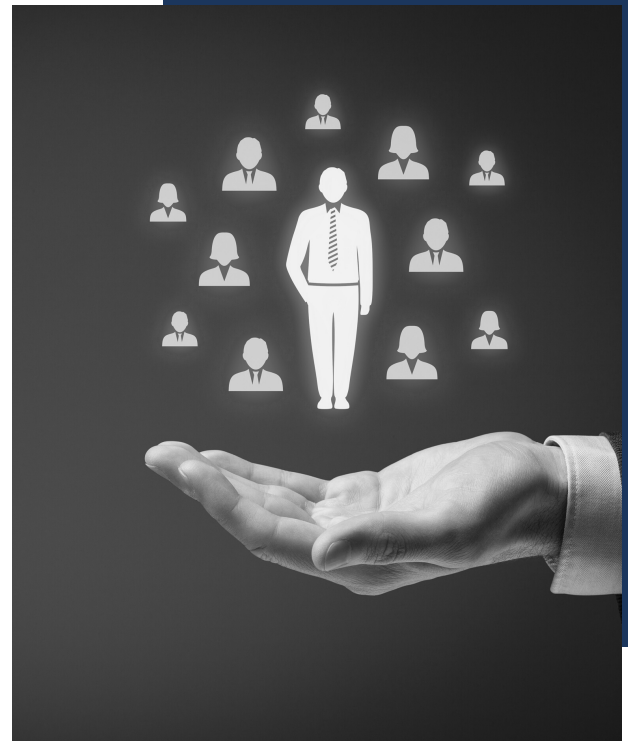
Lastly, in addition to compassionate leadership, employees are also in need of clarity from their leaders as well; specifically, clear benefits communication. For instance, a recent study conducted among public health workers during the pandemic revealed a glaring discrepancy between the percentage of respondents who had access to employee assistance programs (EAPs) through their employer, and the percentage of respondents who thought they did.<sup>15</sup> While EAPs were available to nearly two-thirds of respondents who reported need for such services, only 11 percent of those respondents accessed their employer's EAP, and more than a third admitted not knowing whether their employer offered one, which resulted in nearly one in five of these respondents going without support.

With that said, leaders should come up with comprehensive and visible campaigns to promote the health and wellness benefits that they offer to their workers. This should include organization-wide messages via email, text, internal channels, and social media; physical flyers and handouts; and in-person presentations. Leaders can also tackle both the stigma surrounding mental health and employees' poor awareness of benefits offerings by participating in promotional campaigns throughout the year, such as American Heart Month in February, Nutrition Month in March, Global Employee Health and Fitness Month (GEHFM) and Mental Health Awareness Month in May, and other relevant observances.<sup>16</sup>

For more information on how to practice compassionate leadership, employers can refer to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA's) Supporting Mental Health in the Workplace Checklist for Senior Managers: [https://www.osha.gov/sites/default/files/Checklist-Senior\\_Manager\\_508.pdf](https://www.osha.gov/sites/default/files/Checklist-Senior_Manager_508.pdf).<sup>12</sup>

The following articles also offer more information:

- Accounting and Business (AB) Magazine, "Compassionate Leadership," [Link opens in a new windowhttps://abmagazine.accaglobal.com/global/articles/2023/mar/careers/compassionate-leadership.html](https://abmagazine.accaglobal.com/global/articles/2023/mar/careers/compassionate-leadership.html)
- Human Resources Director (HRD) Magazine Australia, "How to Be a More Compassionate Leader," <https://www.hcamag.com/au/specialisation/leadership/how-to-be-a-more-compassionate-leader/249423>
- The Leadership Sphere, "Importance of Compassion in Leadership," <https://theleadershipsphere.com.au/insights/the-importance-of-compassion-in-leadership>
- [Psychology Today](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ie/blog/empathic-minds/202107/compassionate-leadership), "Compassionate Leadership," <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ie/blog/empathic-minds/202107/compassionate-leadership>



Source: Fournier, E. (2023, March 28). The effects of psychological stressors in the workplace (B. Schuette, Ed.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options (WPO). Retrieved April 18, 2023, from the WPO Blog: <https://www.workplaceoptions.com/news-media/blogs>

Article references are included within the above source.



# WHY SUICIDE PREVENTION MUST FIGURE INTO YOUR EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

**An effective suicide-prevention program must address some common concerns and also be customized for the needs of the organization.**

Most workplaces have an employee assistance program (EAP) or an employee health plan—a program that is designed to offer medical support for their employees. A mental health program or a suicide-prevention program can be integrated with the EAP. Given the stresses of jobs today, all employers must realize the need to include mental health in their health policies. However, there are some organizational scenarios, as per mental health experts, where the inclusion should not be optional, but an absolute must. Some important factors that may indicate potential risks or vulnerabilities are:

- The nature of the industry—What kind of work is carried out, and in what atmosphere? How stressful are the tasks that the employees are required to do? How high are the risks involved in their daily tasks?
- The profile of the employees—Where do they come from? Have they had to make significant adjustments to fit into the company (moving to a new city, staying away from family, etc.)? What are their strengths and weaknesses?
- Cultural and ethnic diversity—Are there some employees who have to try harder to fit into the culture? Are any measures being taken to help them feel welcome?

Each organization's suicide-prevention program, which has to be created in consultation with mental health professionals, will need to be customized keeping these and other specific organization-related factors in mind. Experts recommend that an efficient suicide-prevention plan, created as a part of the EAP, should address the following specific aspects.

## 1. Stigma Reduction

The more stigmatizing a condition, the less likely it is that a person who suffers from it will speak up and reach out for help. With suicide and mental health, the stigma is so strong that people are wary of talking to others about their problems. It's because of this that stigma reduction is ideally the first and most important aspect of any suicide program.



Including the mental health or suicide-prevention plan into the EAP helps reduce stigma around mental health issues. This, in turn, increases the chances of a person reaching out for help when it is needed. Incorporating the mental health program into the organization's health plan offers several advantages:

- Mental health support can be included in the annual health checkups by including mental health assessments or discussions with a mental health professional. This helps in identifying individuals who need help or are vulnerable (to mental health disorders in general and suicide in particular).
- Having access to an in-house mental health professional, just as the organization would have a doctor on call, ensures that employees can easily access care when they need it. It also gives employees an idea about what mental health care facilities will be available to them should they need it.

- An employee mental health support plan also enhances the coping skills of the employees, reduces vulnerability, and prevents suicides by addressing stressors such as work pressure, competition, workplace conflicts, or other issues that affect their wellbeing.
- A clear confidentiality agreement (as would be present in any health assistance program) gives employees a sense of safety.
- By communicating that mental health issues are not vastly different from physical health issues, the employer reduces stigma associated with mental health issues and encourages employees to seek help.

The organization can also encourage employees to speak up about any mental health issues they have faced, and share how they were able to overcome them, as a way of communicating that mental health issues are not taboo and that employees will not be discriminated against if they speak up.

## 2. Sensitization Programs

For employees to have the confidence and trust to reach out, it is important that an organization has a sensitization module for managers, team leaders, and top executive officers. Such a program helps the overall mental health program be more effective in terms of maintaining confidentiality and reducing stigma.

Employees are also reassured when managers or executives from the higher levels share their own experiences relevant to mental health, and particularly suicide. Open discussions about how suicidal thoughts and tendencies are a cry for help make employees more willing to report their own troubles and trust that they will be received in a nonjudgmental way.

## 3. Creating Awareness

Programs can be designed to bring mental health and suicide prevention into conversation at the workplace. This could include fliers, posters, lectures, discussions, movie screenings, or other activities around the theme of mental health or suicide prevention. Encouraging more open communication is likely to indicate to employees that it's perfectly OK to speak about mental health.

It is also important to address common myths about suicide: that a person who has suicidal thoughts is weak or does not want to live; or the misconception that asking a person if he or she has suicidal thoughts can make the person take their own life.

## 4. Recognizing Persons in Distress

Mental health experts say that suicide doesn't happen all of a sudden. There is usually some event or phase that makes a person think of taking their own life. When the organization is able to identify persons in distress, it can act to ensure that



they receive whatever support is needed to help them cope.

Having gatekeepers in the organization can be an effective way of recognizing employees who are in distress. A gatekeeper is a person (who does not necessarily have to be a mental health expert) who is trained to watch out for signs of distress, provide initial emotional support, and refer the person to a mental health professional for additional help. The organization can train its employees to be gatekeepers, and in doing so, create a wider network of people who will be able to pick up red flags, or signs of distress. The program can also provide information relevant to gatekeepers that helps them support their colleagues, if necessary:

- *Practical and helpful information for gatekeepers*—If they discover that a colleague needs help, what do they do next? Whom do they inform? What help is available to the employee?
- *Other information addressing the gatekeepers' possible concerns*—What are the gatekeeper's obligations? What can gatekeepers do when they feel overwhelmed? What support is available for the gatekeepers? What are the limitations that a gatekeeper needs to be aware of?

## 5. Crisis Management

The organization must have in place a protocol or recommended action plan for crisis situations: What can be done when a person is identified as being in distress? What plan can be followed when someone seems to be in a vulnerable state or reaches out for help? What can be done in the event of an actual suicide?

## 6. Referral System and Follow-up Services

An essential part of any mental health or suicide-prevention program would be to have on board a part-time or full-time mental health professional whom employees can contact when they need support. This professional is usually available for consultation and can refer employees to additional support if necessary. He or she can also assist the organization in identifying the more vulnerable groups, or persons in distress, and make sure that they can avail themselves of help as early as possible. The organization can also coordinate with the EAP care provider to include a mental health professional in the EAP system.

The employer can clearly provide information (in the form of posters, handouts, or prominently displayed notices on the intranet; or discussed during manager-employee or employee-HR meetings) about the types of mental health and suicide-prevention support that are available to the employees. This will empower employees who have suicidal thoughts to reach out and seek support.

## 7. Confidentiality Clauses

Employees who want to ask for help may hesitate to do so because they are worried about how discreetly or confidentially their cases will be managed. The suicide plan should feature confidentiality clauses that address the employees' concerns: Whom will the employees' personal information be divulged to? On what grounds will the information be shared? If an employee reports a mental health issue or suicidal thoughts, how will it impact his or her position or job security?

Accurate information on these will reassure employees that their organization cares about them, that the information will be handled with due sensitivity, and that they will not be discriminated against for their mental health issues. This makes them more likely to ask for help when they need it.



## 8. A Module That Addresses the Concerns of Vulnerable Groups

Some of the vulnerable groups in an organization may include

- Employees who suddenly exhibit a change in their work patterns (e.g. drop in efficiency, punctuality, or quality of work)
- Employees who are under threat of being fired or having to cut down on their job responsibilities or pay
- Employees who have migrated from their hometowns, and have trouble fitting into the system and may feel threatened by the environment
- Employees who are in financial or emotional distress, irrespective of whether the cause of distress is directly related to their employment

Organizations in which employees face exposure to factors that increase vulnerability (violence, in the case of the armed forces or security), or access to means of suicide (pharmaceutical companies, or those that use heavy machinery) will need to take these factors into account while creating their plan.



## 9. An Action Plan

In order to be effective, a suicide-prevention program must have a specific action plan. This includes the following:

- The list of activities that are part of the suicide-prevention plan
- Names of employees from within the health, HR, or other departments who are responsible for executing each activity
- A timeline of activities for each year
- Specific resources allotted to the activities, so that the department executing each activity can function independently, without paperwork delays in crisis situations
- A system of monitoring the impact of the plan, ensuring that the activities are planned out in time, and evaluating how efficient or effective their performance is

### About the Article

This article has been curated by White Swan Foundation with inputs from Gururaj Gopalakrishna, head of the epidemiology department at the Indian National Institute of Mental Health & Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS), India, Prabha Chandra, professor of psychiatry, NIMHANS; Seema Mehrotra, additional professor of clinical psychology, NIMHANS; Poornima Bhola, associate professor, department of clinical psychology, NIMHANS; and Senthil Kumar Reddi, associate professor of psychiatry, NIMHANS.

#### About White Swan Foundation

White Swan Foundation for Mental Health is a nonprofit organization that offers knowledge services in the area of mental health. Based in Bangalore, India, it offers information and covers issues that apply to mental health issues globally.

For more information, visit the website at <https://www.whiteswanfoundation.org>.

*Source: Jeurkar, S. (2016). Why suicide prevention must figure in your employee assistance program (B. Schuette, Ed.). Retrieved September 17, 2019, from the White Swan Foundation website:*

*<https://www.whiteswanfoundation.org>*



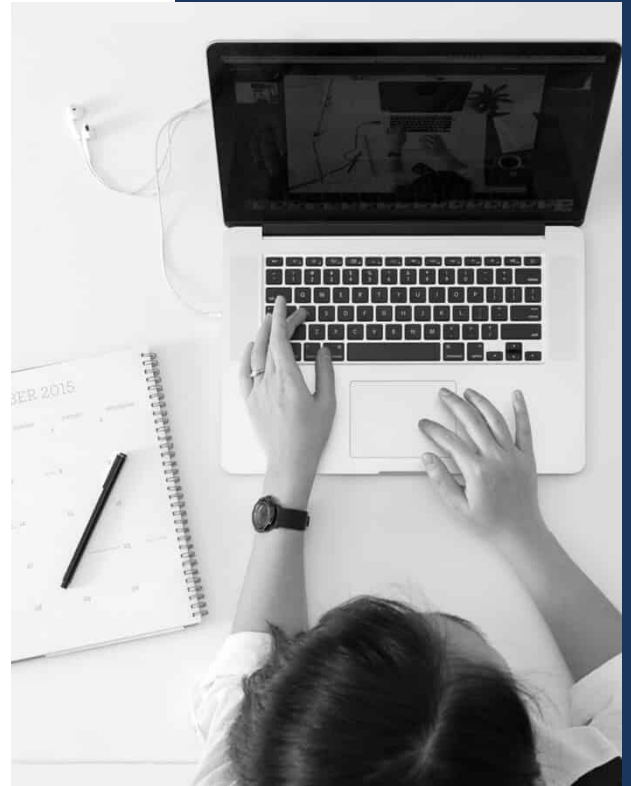
# ASK YOUR EAP!

**Q. I have been a manager for over 20 years, but one thing that bothers me the most is gossip and office politics. It's a difficult thing to manage because you can't catch conversations involving gossip, and one can't read employees' minds. What else can a supervisor do?**

A. Gossiping and office politics may be hard to control, but worse, this behavior can undermine a positive workplace. It can also interfere with your supervisor authority, decisions, and leadership responsibilities. Don't be passive. Be sure to model appropriate behavior, not participate in those behaviors you seek to curtail. Employees do respond to role modeling. Let employees know what you want and expect from them regarding conduct and other behavioral issues. At least once, gather your employees and address the importance of respectful communication and discourage gossip and negative politics. Also, be sure employees feel they can safely come to you with concerns, ideas, and feedback. The inability to do so often fuels workplace divisiveness. When you spot inappropriate behavior associated with negative communication, always address it right away. This also has a strong dampening effect. Talk to the EAP about education, awareness, and respectful communication resources.

**Q. If there is one thing I dread, it's an employee coming to my office to tell me without warning that he or she has decided to quit. What can supervisors do to reduce the likelihood of employees suddenly quitting? Any way to be proactive with this issue?**

A. Not every decision to quit a job is preventable, because many employees have paths for their careers where opportunities emerge and decisions to leave are compelling. Still, the supervisor can influence a work environment to maximize a worker's desire to stay. To reduce being surprised by resigning employees, try scheduling one-on-one meetings with employees so you can provide them feedback and discuss special concerns, understand their goals, and get a feel for how to best meet their needs. These meetings can be short "check-ins" that still give you the information you seek. Typically, employees interested in quitting a job show reduced engagement or verbalize dissatisfaction. Pay attention to these signals so you can address them quickly. There are many things managers can do to create workplaces conducive to employees staying in place for longer periods of time, but the communication model described above will lead you to discover most of them.



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