How to Manage a Team Member with PTSD

Think about the last time you had to cope with stress in the workplace. You probably felt anxious, and maybe even a little afraid. But, in all likelihood, you resolved the situation and moved on, and maybe even felt a little wiser for the experience.

Now imagine being burdened by stress and fear for weeks, months or perhaps even years. There are people who have seen or been involved in events that are so harrowing, they are seared into their minds for the rest of their lives. They could be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD for short.

It is possible that, unknown to you, someone on your team could be fighting a private battle with this debilitating condition. For them, the workplace can seem to be a hostile, confusing environment, and your compassion and understanding is vital to helping them be a valuable member of your team.

PTSD is most commonly associated with military veterans who have witnessed the horrors of combat. But anyone who has been exposed to a traumatic event can suffer from it. For example, due to an accident, injury, disaster, or physical or sexual abuse. In this article, you'll learn how to identify the symptoms of PTSD, and discover strategies to support your team members and help them succeed in their role.

What Is PTSD?

PTSD is a serious condition that can occur after a person experiences or witnesses an extremely traumatic event. According to the National Center for PTSD, seven to eight percent of the U.S. population will suffer from it during their lifetime, and it affects 5.2 million American adults a year.

It's normal to be upset after any kind of trauma but people with PTSD may suffer from severe distress, depression or anxiety, which can last from several months to several years. These symptoms may appear immediately following the trauma, or many months or years afterwards.

Common Symptoms of PTSD

In general, the symptoms fall into three main categories: intrusive, arousal and avoidance. Note: Not everyone will experience every type of symptom, and sometimes these symptoms do not appear in any specific order.
• **Intrusive:** people with PTSD often experience flashbacks and nightmares about their trauma. These intrusive thoughts can be triggered by situations or conversations that remind them of the event, and make them feel as if they are reliving it.

• **Arousal:** people with PTSD may feel a heightened state of tension or alarm, called "hyperarousal." This manifests itself in symptoms such as insomnia, an inability to concentrate, persistent fear, or being easily startled.

• **Avoidance:** people with PTSD may try to shut out their feelings about their trauma. They shun the people, places or situations that remind them of their ordeal. They may lose interest in activities that they used to enjoy. They might also feel depressed, guilty or worried. It's common for them to feel emotionally numb and cut off from their friends and family.

### How to Identify PTSD in the Workplace

People with this condition may show various symptoms at work. Here are some of the most common ones to help you to identify anyone in your team suffering from PTSD:

- Memory problems, and difficulty retaining information.
- Lack of concentration on tasks.
- Fear and anxiety.
- Physical difficulties.
- Poor relationships with co-workers.
- Unreasonable reactions to situations that trigger memories.
- Absenteeism.
- Trouble staying awake.
- Panic attacks.

### Strategies for Managing a Team Member With PTSD

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to managing someone with PTSD, so the key is to remain flexible. Good communication is vital as the more information you have, the more you can do to help. The following approaches may be useful.

1. **Maintain a Dialog**

   It's important to keep lines of communication open. People with PTSD may feel embarrassed to ask for help, so take the initiative and ask them how you and other team members can support them.

   Use empathic listening and pay close attention to what they say. If they're reluctant to talk, wait for them to open up, and don't interrupt them when they do start to speak. Be patient, and remember that giving people an opportunity to talk about their concerns can be therapeutic in itself. If they are more comfortable communicating in writing, have the conversation through email.
2. Meet Their Needs
Start by simply asking what changes you could make that would improve their work environment.

Here are some ways that you can handle various issues and symptoms:

- **Difficulty concentrating:** offer them a quiet part of the office with few, if any, distractions. They might also benefit from using noise-canceling headphones to listen to white noise or soothing music while they work. If their role includes a lot of meetings, have someone take notes and share minutes afterwards, or record the meeting so they can revisit it later.

- **Poor memory:** create a list of projects, and provide written instructions on how they should perform each task. Set up a calendar or an electronic reminder that alerts them to approaching deadlines.

- **Time and project management:** break up large assignments into smaller, more manageable steps with incremental goals. Create daily or weekly To-Do Lists, and have them check off each item as they complete it. Set up weekly one-on-ones to discuss their progress towards any assigned goals. You could also appoint a mentor to support them.

- **Stress:** There are a number of coping strategies for handling work-related stress. Try to remove any triggers in the workplace that might cause flashbacks or other reactions. Another way to reduce pressure on people with PTSD is to allow them to take breaks from work. This might require you to extend their workday so they can accomplish all of their duties. Constructive feedback and positive reinforcement can help them feel engaged. If a particular duty or task causes too much stress, you could restructure their job so it includes only the most critical functions. Offer them time off for counseling, or to attend your company's employee assistance program. Also, introduce them to mental and Physical Relaxation Techniques, if they don't already use them.

- **Anxiety:** If someone with PTSD is startled by people around them, consider moving their office or desk to a place where they can see people approaching them.

- **Absenteeism and lateness:** Offer them a flexible work schedule. If they have to take time off work because of their condition, allow them to make it up.

- **Dealing with colleagues:** Encourage them to walk away if discussions with other team members get too heated, and to talk about their situation with their colleagues when things have calmed down. This can help to improve relationships and understanding within the team.

3. Deal With Problems Promptly
It's important to deal with issues as soon as they arise. If people are not performing well, or are having a hard time at work, speak to them directly, and ask them what you can do to help. At the same time, firm but constructive feedback will enable them to understand what they must do to complete their tasks successfully.
4. Provide Training for the Team

Raising awareness of PTSD and its symptoms within your team is likely to inspire members to find new ways to work with anyone who has the condition. They may be more patient and sensitive to colleagues’ needs if they have a better understanding of what they might be going through. To avoid singling out people with PTSD, you might want to offer this training as part of a more comprehensive human resources program.

Keep in mind that PTSD can have serious medical, psychological and emotional consequences. Seek the advice of a qualified professional if you think that you or one of your team members may have PTSD, or if symptoms seem to worsen.

Post-traumatic stress disorder can affect anyone who has experienced a severely stressful event, such as war, serious injury, physical or mental abuse, or the death of a loved one. Its symptoms often include nightmares and flashbacks, stress, fear, depression, and panic attacks. People with PTSD will likely try to avoid people or situations that remind them of their trauma.

Good communication is key to managing a team member with PTSD. Offer them appropriate concessions to reduce their stress and anxiety at work. Deal with any problems promptly, and train other members of your team to treat those with PTSD with greater understanding.

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