

HR Strategies for Picking Up the Pieces After the Pandemic.

A three-part series focused on supporting your employees when they need it most.



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Strategy 1 – Stress, Burnout & Trauma ... Know the Difference

White Paper by Vicki Hess

Picking Up the Pieces After the Pandemic.



Picking Up the Pieces After the Pandemic is a three-part series featuring insight and information from Human Resources expert Vicki Hess to help you support your employees when they need it most. Here, we will explore Hess' first strategy, which focuses on knowing the difference between stress, burnout and trauma. The two other papers in this series center on additional strategies: *Tap into Your Own Empathy to Support Others* and *Create Powerful Connections*.

➤ **Strategy 1** **Stress, Burnout & Trauma ... Know the Difference**

Strategy 2 Tap into Your Own Empathy to Support Others

Strategy 3 Create Powerful Connections

Team members in healthcare organizations are all at different levels when it comes to getting back to “normal” following the impact of Covid-19. As Human Resources professionals, it’s important to continue to learn and evolve to support those that need your help.

This is part 1 of a three-part series which shares helpful information about the difference between stress, burnout and trauma. The next time someone reaches out, you’ll be ready to assist. For the purposes of our discussion here, I’m sharing key hallmarks of each one so that you can make better decisions about how to help folks who come to you in need of assistance.



**Recognize stress
and proactively
offer solutions.**



Work-related stress is defined by the [World Health Organization](#) as “the response people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope. Stress occurs in a wide range of work circumstances but is often made worse when employees feel they have little support from supervisors and colleagues and where they have little control over work or how they can cope with its demands and pressures.”

As we all know, one person’s stress is another person’s excitement. Think of when you went to an amusement park and you were getting ready to ride the big roller coaster. Depending on how you feel about rides like this you might have been stressed or you might have been excited. The same thing happens at work. Picture an emergency room nurse who feels fulfilled and gratified when the emergency department is bustling with patients and he is able to contribute at his highest level making a difference in many people’s lives. That’s what I call Professional Paradise™.

As work demands increased during the pandemic, picture what I just described happening day after day after day. The ER nurse is now working shift after shift after shift without any days off. Now you start to understand how stress is created from a situation that otherwise wouldn’t have been considered stressful. One key element when helping staff deal with stress is to help people focus on WC² which stands for “What Can We Control?”.

One way to feel more empowered and more in control is to focus on elements that we can impact. For example, the emergency room nurse can control how prepared he is to work, his response to difficult situations, and the picture that he paints of the work that he’s doing. He can control what he eats and drinks, who he spends time with and how he relaxes when he’s not at work. Even though the world around him is changing rapidly and is filled with uncertainty, there are still many things he can control. Focusing on those helps us feel empowered and less stressed.

Being safe and feeling safe are not the same.



One other important thing to remember when it comes to stress and safety is that being safe and feeling safe are two very different things. Team members can be in the same situation yet based on past experiences, one employee might perceive it as safe while the other doesn't. Think back to the roller coaster. Presumably the amusement park management is making sure we are safe on the ride but that doesn't mean that someone riding doesn't feel safe, hence the increase in stress.

As a human resource professional, you can help employees manage their stress by openly talking about stress and sharing stress reduction tools and resources. One great idea is to share how to shift challenges to more positive outcomes. You can visit www.ProfessionalParadise.com to download more information and free tools.

The other really important thing to remember is that we want to take the services to the staff to help them reduce their stress. Don't make people work to deal with their stress. That's the opposite of what they need. And ... most importantly let folks know that it's okay to utilize the services that our organization provides without shame or recrimination.



Provide the understanding and tools to cope with burnout.

Burnout occurs when someone has ineffective coping strategies for the stress in their life or the stress builds and builds and the external circumstances become very challenging.

Examples of ineffective coping strategies would be starting smoking again, eating lots of sugary foods, wanting to sleep all day, and checking out from day-to-day activities. According to the Mayo Clinic, burnout is evidenced by:

- Excessive stress
- Fatigue
- Insomnia
- Sadness, anger or irritability
- Alcohol or substance misuse
- Heart disease
- High blood pressure
- Type 2 diabetes
- Vulnerability to illnesses

Sharing signs and symptoms of burnout with team members is very helpful so that folks recognize when they need professional assistance. Remember it's great to have an employee assistance program, but we have to make sure that it's easily accessible to team members. Make sure your department is taking the services to the staff and as mentioned earlier let them know it's okay to use them.

Identify the impact of trauma and provide assistance.



There are two types of trauma that often get confused. PTS is Post-Traumatic Stress; PTSD is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

As the name implies the disorder is when the trauma impedes your ability to execute activities of daily living. During the pandemic, Nurses of Instagram regularly had posts about stress, burnout and trauma. One post in particular that was very eye-opening was this: *“We asked health care workers to share any new symptoms of anxiety they’ve experienced since working during the pandemic, and this is what they said:*

- **Palpitations while sleeping**
- **Panic attacks**
- **I dread going to work every single day because I’m unsure of what it will hold for me**
- **Had a straight panic attack putting my M95 on. Needed to clock out for a few hours**
- **Difficulty getting to sleep at night, can’t sleep unless I have the TV on to quiet thoughts**
- **Troubled breathing and I find it difficult to sleep**
- **Anger, I get mad over the littlest thing and just snap. Or has not been fair to my family**
- **Panic attacks, exhaustion, easily agitated**
- **PTSD and had to go on meds and now see psychiatrist and therapist regularly”**

This makes sense since according to the Mayo Clinic trauma affects people’s daily life through intrusive memories, avoidance, negative change in thinking and mood, changes in physical and emotional reaction.



If someone reaches out to you who's experiencing these symptoms, it's very important to help them get professional help.

According to the Mayo Clinic, employees should get help when:

		
<p>Disturbing thoughts and feelings last longer than one month</p>	<p>Reactions are severe</p>	<p>They can't get their life back under control.</p>

It's good to know what to look for as you take services to staff and make sure they know that it's okay to use them.

You now have a more complete understanding of stress, burnout and trauma. What does your HR department need to do next to support your employees moving forward?

More About Vicki Hess

Vicki works with healthcare organizations and associations nationwide to mitigate the root causes of employee disengagement. While constantly monitoring industry trends, and doing research on her own, Vicki zeros in on what's working (and what's not) and customizes solutions to complement each organization's culture and place on the engagement journey. She works with organizations and associations across the country to positively impact employee engagement through consulting, workshops, retreats and keynote presentations.

Her unique views on patient and employee engagement are evidence-based, relatable and real world. Organizations that implement Vicki's ideas experience increased productivity, safety, quality, retention, client satisfaction, creativity and more.

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