

Preventing *and Mitigating Stress in the Workplace*

by | **Bobbi Kloss**

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Employers have a duty to provide a safe workplace for employees. The author discusses preventive measures employers can take to reduce the risk of workplace violence and create a psychologically healthy work culture.

Violence



It is not uncommon now to turn on the TV, read online or receive an alert on a mobile device describing a mass shooting at a place of employment. Last May, 12 people lost their lives at a municipal building in Virginia Beach, Virginia following an attack by an alleged disgruntled worker. In August, a Marriott hotel worker in Long Beach, California reported that a disgruntled employee had threatened to shoot staff and guests. Thanks to the worker who reported it, the attempt was foiled.

But with the impact of fear that “this could happen to us” due to what can seem to be an escalation of mass homicidal workplace incidents, employers are turning to human resource (HR) professionals for answers for how to prevent this type of situation. While there may not be any guaranteed answers to prevent 100% of potential violent workplace situations, there are preventive measures that employers should adopt to mitigate risks.

What Is Workplace Violence?

The Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA), the regulatory agency with oversight of workplace safety, defines *workplace violence* as “any act or threat of physical violence, harass-

ment, intimidation, or other threatening disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site.” Workplace incidents may include (1) threats, (2) verbal abuse, (3) physical assaults and (4) homicidal behavior. Employers should be aware that workplace violence can also be identified as discriminatory behavior under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Age Discrimination Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act.

OSHA has compiled the following statistics about workplace violence:

- Annually, two million workers report being a victim of some form of workplace violence.
- 18,400 nonfatal workplace assault injuries occurred in 2017.
- Homicide is the fourth-leading cause of fatal occupational injuries in the United States, with 458 fatalities in 2017.

Under the OSHA general duty clause, employers are “required to provide their employees with a place of employment free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm.”¹ OSHA prescribes that employers should maintain a zero-tolerance policy toward workplace violence and that the policy should include a grievance process through which an em-

ployee has the ability to report claims of behavior or safety violations.

Each and every employer should institute a policy that says that they have zero tolerance for such behavior and will discipline employees promptly and appropriately for violating that policy.

A zero-tolerance policy should include not only physical violence and homicide but threats, bullying and verbal abuse as well. These should not be just line items in an unacceptable behavior policy. Best practices would suggest that a separate workplace violence prevention policy be adopted. Policies should include training for supervisors and employees as well as a response plan that is coordinated with building managers, local law enforcement and hospitals so that employees are proactively prepared to respond appropriately.

Company Culture: More Important Than You Think

Is that enough though? Will that stop violence from happening in the workplace? Not necessarily. Employers need to proactively provide and support a positive culture that embodies a workplace where people want to work. Why is this?

The current generations in the workplace are looking for a holistic, positive workplace culture. Terms like *mindfulness*, *thriving*, *well-being* and *peak employee experiences* are adjectives that are being used to describe a 21st century workplace culture and an employer of choice.

An employer can have a considerable amount of control when implementing marketplace solutions for creating these positive environments conducive to attracting and retaining employees, such as a robust compensa-

takeaways

- Annually, two million workers report being a victim of some form of workplace violence.
- The Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) prescribes employers to maintain a zero-tolerance policy toward workplace violence.
- In addition to zero-tolerance policies, employers should work to promote a positive workplace culture that minimizes worker stress, discourages workplace bullying and fosters professional, bilateral communication.
- Comprehensive employee assistance programs (EAPs) can help employees deal with stress as well as violent events that may occur in the workplace or in the community.

tion package, an effective onboarding process, a continuous performance management system and employee engagement tools.

What can an employer do to support a positive workplace culture embodying a “stress-free” atmosphere that can meet the needs of its employees, and why is a stress-free environment so important?

Stress Costs

Workplace stress costs employers billions of dollars in losses due to employees being disengaged and unproductive.² The American Institute of Stress estimates that job stress costs U.S. industry \$300 billion a year in absenteeism; turnover; lower productivity; and medical, legal and insurance costs.³ And a Korn Ferry study finds that workplace stress levels are higher than they were five years ago, with 40% of workers saying their job is very or extremely stressful.⁴

Stress may be inevitable in certain jobs. And, believe it or not, some employees tend to thrive on certain levels of stress when they feel they have control over management of their tasks. However, when a person has no ability to control these situations, a sense of powerlessness arises which, according to the American Psychological Association, is a “universal cause of job stress.” Instances include:

- Loss of job
- Failure to receive a promotion
- Discrimination in the workplace
- Workplace bullying
- Unsafe working conditions
- Unclear and inconsistent supervisor communication and directives
- Too many responsibilities but little authority or control to move the ball forward.

Even the act of assigning additional job duties to someone who is already feeling overburdened could cause stress levels to rise.

Studies have shown that stress can lead to aggressive behavior.⁵ Employers see stress displayed by their employees in many behaviors: good performance deteriorates; increased absenteeism occurs; cooperation with team members erodes; and a once focused employee becomes distracted, potentially creating safety hazards. Supervisors and HR traditionally have dealt with these issues through performance improvement plans up to and including termination of employment. It is important for employers to know their employees so that they

can recognize or unearth the reason(s) behind poor performance if they want to have an ability to retain employees.

Employers—regardless of size or industry—should be aware of warning signs and how to coordinate with HR for taking appropriate action with the employee as well as safeguarding the workplace. Some of the more obvious signs of unhealthy stress levels include:

- Intimidating, belligerent, harassing, bullying, or other inappropriate and aggressive behavior
- Numerous conflicts with supervisors and other employees
- Statements indicating desperation (over family, financial and other personal problems) to the point of contemplating suicide
- Drug/alcohol abuse
- Extreme changes in behavior.

The workplace may not even be a main factor of stress. Employees may be struggling with external events that are affecting them in the workplace. These external events, also called *high-impact life events*, could be traumatic events, such as divorce and domestic violence, but also include events that trigger financial or emotional stress such as preparing for children going off to college, caring for aged parents, and the birth or adoption of a child. While we would all like to be prepared for any event that comes our way, the reality is (1) we are not always prepared and (2) that even when prepared, the actuality of the event happening can still cause stress levels to rise. As the sense of control individuals may feel diminishes, they are sent into stress mode, i.e., fight or flight.

How to Address Stress at Work

Supervisors can ask the following questions to determine whether the worksite is adding to the stress level of employees:

- Is communication professional? Professional doesn’t mean that good-natured conversation cannot occur, but is the communication promoting an atmosphere of respect, or is it demeaning and/or discriminatory?
- Is workplace bullying occurring?
 - 19% of Americans are bullied, another 19% witness it.
 - 63% of Americans are aware of abusive conduct in the workplace.
 - 60.3 million Americans are affected by it.
 - 70% of perpetrators are men; 60% of targets are women.
 - 61% of bullies are bosses.⁶
- Is there bilateral communication where top manage-

ment and employees are sharing information, ideas and feedback?

- Is there a conflict resolution process in place that promotes employees having authority to resolve matters with each other and/or their supervisor and bring them to the attention of HR when needed?
- Is the team adequately staffed and are job duties evenly distributed?
- Are the right people being hired for the right jobs? Does the recruiting process include background checks and assessment testing?
- Are employees paid competitively for the work that they are doing?
- Is there a proper work-life balance culture?
- Can employees take time off for family, school events and doctor's appointments without the fear of being reprimanded?
- Are job responsibilities clearly defined?
- Are the tasks and the management of those tasks communicated to the candidate?
- Are candidates for positions having to show how they will handle the burden of the related job tasks?
- Are employees encouraged to use their paid time off (PTO) and unplug from company communication?
–How does the company view unused PTO? 52% of employees left PTO unused in 2017, which accounted for more than 700 million days that went unused and \$62.2 billion in lost benefits.⁷

- Does the company have a comprehensive employee assistance program (EAP)?
- Is the EAP used in the performance management process? While employees may be going through stressful situations, and employers should have compassion, there is also the reality that quality performance is still required. A supervisor referral to an EAP can include discussion with the EAP on the performance standards that need to be brought up to par. While the supervisor is not a party to the EAP/employee discussions, the supervisor can have check-ins to identify whether workplace performance goals are being achieved.
- Is the EAP used in followup to overwhelming events in the workplace such as a death of an employee, a serious accident occurring, or even a discriminatory or harassing behavior? Events such as these could potentially give rise to an employee suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. This can occur in employees who either personally experience or observe a traumatic event.

Remove the Stigma

More than 50% of Americans will be diagnosed with mental illness at some point in their lifetime.⁸ Stress is a known contributing factor to depression, anxiety and other mental health issues.⁹ Employees should be proactively made aware of the mental health provisions that come with their health insurance benefits not only for themselves but for any dependents on the plan. Many times, only the doctors and hospitals, deductibles and copays are the discussion points.

The EAP should have a visible face to both the employee and the supervisor population, with a representative visiting the workplace. The EAP should conduct supervisor training throughout the year that includes (1) awareness of the EAP, (2) how to effectively communicate with employees, (3) making referrals, and (4) increasing employee awareness of the benefits and availability of the programs offered.

Training for supervisors should cover how to communicate with sensitivity and empathy to employees and still include in the conversation the need to maintain the requirement for productive performance.

An agenda for the employee meetings would include techniques for stress management, building successful teams,

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From the Bookstore

Mental Health and Substance Abuse Benefits: 2018 Survey Results

International Foundation. 2018.

Visit www.ifebp.org/mentalhealth2018 for more information.

diversity in the workplace and preventing harassment training. Well-designed EAPs also offer financial wellness education, grief support and substance abuse counseling. The EAP should become a familiar face to all.

In Conclusion

If workplace violence occurs in other communities, employers should be vocally sympathetic and empathetic, recognizing that it could happen in their place of business or in their community at any time. Employers should inform employees regularly that they take such situations very seriously and use opportunities to review the workplace violence prevention policy with employees periodically. Employers can also provide a reminder of the EAP and mental health provisions of their health plan. If workplace violence has occurred in their community, the EAP should be brought on site to help employees through the emotional upheaval through both overview meetings and confidential one-on-one meetings.

While there is no guarantee that they can prevent workplace violence, employers can adopt the following best practices to decrease the risk.

- Develop, train and maintain a workplace violence prevention policy and weapons policy.
- Coordinate a response plan with building owners, local police department and hospitals.
- Follow state/local procedures for conducting background checks on all applicants.

bio



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- Conduct preemployment assessments.
- Have a performance management system that is communicated clearly.
- Communicate with employees about mental health benefits, including EAPs.
- Maintain a holistic culture of well-being that focuses on the physical, financial, emotional and social well-being of employees. 📌

Endnotes

1. See www.osha.gov/laws-regs/oshact/section5-duties.
2. See www.coloniallife.com/about/newsroom/2019/march/stressed-workers-costing-employers-billions.
3. See www.stress.org/42-worrying-workplace-stress-statistics.
4. See www.kornferry.com/institute/workplace-stress-motivation.
5. See www.apa.org/monitor/nov04/hormones and www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2004/10/feedback-cycle.
6. See <https://workplacebullying.org/multi/pdf/2017/2017-Survey-Flyer.pdf>.
7. See www.ustravel.org/research/state-american-vacation-2018.
8. See www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/learn/index.htm.
9. See www.mqmentalhealth.org/posts/stress-and-mental-health.

