

The Compassionate Manager:

A Trauma-Sensitive Approach to Managing in the Era of Covid-19



Pandemic Life is Taking its Toll

"Good mental health is critical to the functioning of society at the best of times. It must be front and centre of every country's response to and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The mental health and wellbeing of whole societies have been severely impacted by this crisis and are a priority to be addressed urgently." ([UN Policy Brief: "Covid-19 and the Need for Action on Mental Health," May 13, 2020](#))

Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have been closely monitoring the impact of this crisis on our mental health. In early May, we released our in-depth [assessment of the situation](#) and the role that organizations will need to play on the front lines of what some people have called a second pandemic.

The pervasive threat of becoming sick, the isolation, fatigue, fear, loss, and grieving, each take their toll. People's coping mechanisms have been stretched; the stress brought on by broken routines and the unpredictability of what lies ahead can be debilitating.

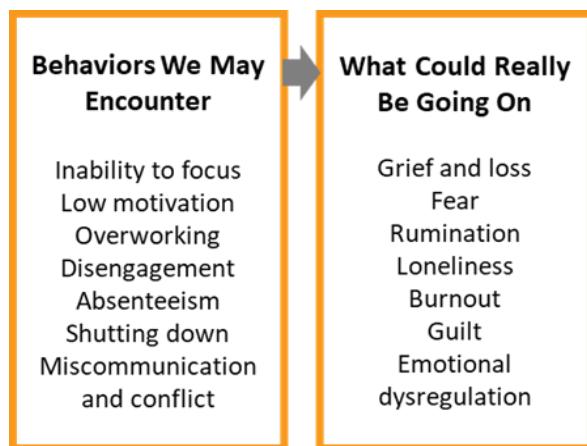
For most people, overextended as they might be, this experience will prove a challenge. It will be damaging, but fortunately, for them, not debilitating. For others, however, the long-term stress and anxiety will cut deeper.

It is crucial, however, to understand that we are skillful and resourceful coping beings. We are well

equipped to handle a wide range of stressors. Some types of stress - when perceived as a challenge - can actually "raise our game." In these cases, our executive functions amp up, motivation, energy, and focus unite in full force to respond. Then, there is bad stress. This tension presents as a perceived or real threat. In these situations, the brain switches into survival mode, it dials down our problem-solving skills while increasing our likelihood of knee-jerk reactions, causing us to act before thinking.

The pandemic represents the worst elements of bad stress. It is amorphous, pervasive, disruptive, and chronic. Scarier still, it confiscates our fundamental coping mechanisms: routine, structure, and social fabric. Without these anchors in place, regulating our emotional state and making productive choices can feel more like staring down a massive concrete wall, rather than sizing up a hurdle to conquer.

How can this experience not show up at work? The pressures of navigating our pandemic lives are starting to mount. They are compounding our already compromised coping systems and are manifesting in a host of complicated behaviors.



Now that work-from-home is settling in as the likely reality for millions of people for the foreseeable future, and return-to-office is going to be fraught with safety precautions and harsh reminders of our pandemic reality, organizations are confronting intense decisions about how to balance employee safety, engagement, and productivity with their bottom lines.

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The Road Forward: Managers Play a Crucial Role

Managers translate strategy into tactics, they drive productivity and performance, they lead change, address personnel issues, support career development, drive motivation and morale, and they build and sustain culture.

Make no mistake: whether or not you train and buoy your managers to help support staff mental health, they will be thrown into doing this work. The truth is: they should play this role. They have the potential to make the largest impact on the health and performance of your teams. It is unfair, and unrealistic, however, to expect your managers to rise to this challenge without providing some key top-down support, training, and structure.

Our Covid-19 workplace (office and virtual) is going to become an even more integral part of how individuals and communities recover and heal. We will need employers to solve the immense logistical, physical, and psychological safety challenges that will allow us to settle into our version of the new normal. At the same time, we will be leaning heavily on managers to be completely committed to their evolving role.

Managers will need to anticipate and address the current and latent effects of stress and trauma. It is a mistake to relegate these concerns as issues for HR to handle on a case-by-case basis, or as a monolith to be processed unilaterally through corporate policy. This is an historical moment where we can and should reimagine and rebuild our organizations as healing entities. We must prepare everyone, especially managers, with the tools necessary to support one another.

The good news is that human beings possess a strong instinct to stabilize. **Trauma is not destiny.** We can rewire our brains and reset our coping and self-regulation capacity. It takes time and

does not necessarily follow a singular smooth path to healing, but it is possible.

Managers are already positioned across our organizations with the most direct access to each employee. If we want our organizations to withstand the long-term effects of Covid-19, and help our employees find their new normal, we must train our managers to become **trauma-sensitive**.



What they need is the knowledge, set of skills, and support to fulfill this crucial role. Our managers are not becoming social workers, nor should they think that is their role. However, to be successful, they will need to bring a new level of inquiry, empathy, and care to their team and their work.

Compassionate managers believe:

- The effects of prolonged stress manifests differently in different people.
- People are doing the best they can.
- Challenging or confusing behavior often tells a complex and nuanced story.
- Genuine inquiry is the pathway to connection and understanding.
- The work itself can heal.

A huge upside of compassionate managing is that it builds on skills that are core to what great managers do, no matter the situation. A trauma-sensitive approach is fostered through genuine connection, building competences, relinquishing control, and helping each employee contribute to a greater good. People heal people; it is time to invest in those who are most poised to make the biggest difference for your employees and the entire organization: your managers.