Understanding PTSD and its impact on work

Many people encounter nasty situations, some of which can be a lot worse than others. Our reactions to them can differ, but there are instances where the after-effects are life-changing and last a long time.

These effects are often referred to as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

While frequently associated with military, law enforcement, firefighting and emergency medical personnel, PTSD can affect workers in just about any vocation.

PTSD is considered to be a mental illness. It can be triggered by large-scale ordeals, such as terrorism attacks and natural disasters, or by highly personal events such as a car accident, losing a job or business, divorce, failing to achieve a goal, loss of a loved one, seeing or hearing of a death, personal injury, workplace bullying or childhood trauma.

The Canadian Mental Health Association says there still is no clear indication what causes PTSD in some people and not in others, but likely is linked to many different factors.

“This includes the length of time the trauma lasted, the number of other traumatic experiences in a person’s life, their reaction to the event, and the kind of support they received after the event.”

According to the PTSD Association of Canada, people who experience the disorder can have a variety of symptoms, including:

• A deep sense of helplessness.
• Abnormal fear.
• Feelings of devastation.
• Flashbacks from the event.
• A feeling of emotional numbness.
• Aversion to social contact.

Additional responses can include depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, panic attacks, irritability, anger outbursts, difficulty with concentration or memory, feelings of vulnerability, fear of normal everyday activities, or feeling overwhelmed by the smallest of tasks.

All of these can seriously diminish performance at work.

Employers should understand that PTSD can have serious medical, psychological and emotional consequences.

The advice of a qualified professional should be sought if you think one of your team members might have PTSD or if symptoms seem to worsen.

Symptoms can start within three months of a traumatic event, but sometimes might not appear until years afterward — and these often are the ones that cause significant problems in work or social situations and in relationships.

It is estimated that about half of people with PTSD recover fully within months of symptoms developing. Others can experience symptoms for years.

Left untreated, PTSD symptoms can become worse, and result in:

• Drug or alcohol addiction.
• Chronic pain, hypertension and other physical problems.

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- Relationship problems and divorce.
- Self-injury.
- Treatments involving medications and psychotherapy can help deal with the disorder.
- Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) is the non-medical approach used most commonly for treatment of PTSD. This approach focuses on helping the individual come to terms with the traumatic event and regain a more realistic perspective of the risks and dangers in the world. A key aspect of this treatment approach involves helping the person face the situations they avoid due to anxiety.
- This is one of the greatest challenges for him or her, since the instinctive reaction is to keep distant from what is feared.
- Antidepressant medications often are used in combination with CBT or as an alternative treatment approach.
- Support groups also can help as a place to share thoughts and feelings of the traumatic event, and gain confidence in coping. In some cases, treatment may be required for many years to prevent relapse.
- If a person is in immediate need (such as expressing suicidal thoughts), call 911 or your local emergency number. If necessary and if safe to do so, stay with the person or take them to the hospital emergency room.
- If they need to talk to a professional urgently, contact a crisis centre in your area. The Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention (http://suicideprevention.ca/need-help) offers a list of crisis hotlines by province or territory.
- To reduce the risk of PTSD, employers (especially those in vulnerable occupations) can offer programs aimed at preventing, mitigating and managing the effects of stress.
- These programs can help increase overall awareness of mental health issues, decrease the stigma of PTSD, and build the resilience of workers exposed to traumatic situations.
- Early intervention after a traumatic event is critical. Employers should plan ahead to ensure that affected workers receive appropriate information and support, and early access to treatment.
- Bear in mind, though, that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to managing someone with PTSD. The key is to remain flexible. The more information you have, the more you can do to help.
- The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS) suggests that organizations in which workers are at higher risk of experiencing or witnessing traumatic events might wish to conduct an assessment to identify potential risks and hazards.
  - “Where necessary, policies, procedures and programs can be established to address PTSD specifically. Focus on organizational commitments to establish, implement and maintain the program. Involve employees in this process.”
  - From an individual standpoint, the CCOHS suggests supervisors, managers and co-workers can do the following to support people experiencing PTSD or any other mental health issue:
    - Address their observations, try to have an open discussion, and offer support if you recognize signs or symptoms.
    - Recognize that withdrawal and anger are part of the PTSD disorder.
    - Ask how to support them, even if they are not ready to talk about it.
    - Help them find support.
    - Encourage them to talk to someone they trust.
    - Let them know it is healthy to reach out and accept support.
    - Take care of yourself as well and make your own health and safety a priority.

“Workplaces can further help by providing access to support services, as well as the time needed to attend such support. People returning to work after an event may need to transition back through less demanding tasks.”

“Remember,” the CCOHS adds, “that no one who sees a traumatic event is untouched by it. Common reactions are grief, anger, sadness, and anxiety.

“By acknowledging these feelings and using appropriate support or coping strategies, individuals can move forward.”

The material contained in this document has been prepared from sources believed to be accurate and reliable. Application of this information to a specific worksite should be reviewed by a safety professional. Anyone making use of the information set forth herein does so at their own risk and assumes any and all liability arising therefrom. Specific medical advice should be obtained through consultation with a physician or other trained health care practitioner.
Too many workers still put themselves at risk by working improperly with or near energized systems or by neglecting to follow their organization’s lockout/tagout procedures.

Equipment energy can be a killer

Electricity is just about everywhere we live and work. It powers our appliances, tools and toys; it lights up and warms our lives. It can also kill us in an instant.

Those who work around energized equipment take their lives in their hands if they ignore or are unaware of the dangers. Exposure to an unexpected electrical energy release could result in electric shock, burns, a serious fall or an explosion.

Even the voltage of electricity and the available current in regular businesses and homes has enough power to cause death by electrocution.

Too many workers still put themselves at risk by working improperly with or near energized systems or by neglecting to follow their organization’s lockout/tagout procedures. Failure to comply with those procedures is among the country’s leading occupational safety violations every year.

There are numerous situations in which training and qualification are required to work on or near energized equipment. Examples include confined or enclosed spaces and overhead power lines.

In other circumstances, no qualification is required, but knowing the hazards is essential. For instance, workers sometimes must handle long objects, such as ducts and pipes, in areas with exposed energized parts.

In such situations, they must put work practices in place such as insulation, guarding and material-handling techniques that will minimize the hazard. Here some general tips for staying safe:

- Treat all electrical devices as if they are live or energized.
- Inspect portable cord-and-plug connected equipment, extension cords, power bars and electrical fittings for damage or wear before each use. Repair or replace damaged equipment immediately.
- Disconnect the power source before servicing or repairing electrical equipment or responding to an emergency. If an individual comes in contact with a live electrical conductor, do not touch the equipment, cord or person. Disconnect the power source from the circuit breaker or pull out the plug using a leather belt.
- Use only tools and equipment with non-conducting handles when working on electrical devices. Never use metallic pencils or rulers, or wear rings or metal watchbands.
- When touching equipment that is plugged in, be sure hands are dry and, when possible, wear non-conductive gloves, protective clothes and shoes with insulated soles. Do not wear loose clothing or ties near electrical equipment.
- Be aware that unusually warm or hot outlets may be a sign of unsafe wiring conditions. Unplug any cords or extension cords to these outlets and do not use until a qualified electrician has checked the wiring.
- Always tape extension cords to walls or floors when necessary. Nails and staples can damage extension cords, causing fire and shock hazards.
- Do not store highly flammable liquids near electrical equipment.
- If water or a chemical is spilled onto equipment, shut off power at the main switch or circuit breaker and unplug the equipment.
- If areas that are wet or damp, install ground fault circuit interrupters (GFCIs), which shut off electric power circuits when they detect that current is flowing along an unintended path, such as through water or a person.
- Disconnect equipment producing a “tingle” and report it promptly for repair.
Most of us can learn from our mistakes. If we choose to ignore the lesson, though, there’s a very good chance we’ll make a similar mistake in the future.

So it is with incidents that cause injury and property damage in the workplace. Most can be prevented, but when they do happen it is essential that they be investigated properly to determine not only what occurred, but also how and why.

The information gained can prevent one of the more annoying and costly aspects of occupational safety and health: Recurrence of similar or perhaps more disastrous incidents.

There is rarely a single cause. Work environment, job constraints, and supervisory or worker experience can all play a part. These factors must be examined to determine what role each had.

Incidents that could have resulted in injury or damage but didn’t — commonly referred to as close calls or near misses — also are very worthy of investigation.

The process usually involves these steps:
- Report the occurrence to a designated person within the organization.
- Provide first aid and medical care to injured person(s) and prevent further injuries or damage.
- Investigate the accident.
- Identify the causes.
- Report the findings.
- Develop a plan for corrective action.
- Implement the plan.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the corrective action.
- Make changes for continuous improvement.

It’s important for management and supervisory personnel to be aware of the regulations in their jurisdiction that govern what must be investigated and reported.

An organization’s health and safety program should identify who does incident investigations and the training requirements. It should also identify who reviews the investigation report and who ensures that follow-up is done regarding any corrective actions and deficiencies that were found.

Job safety analysis (JSA) is part of many prevention programs. In general, it breaks a job into basic steps and identifies the hazards associated with each step. A JSA also prescribes controls for each hazard. If a JSA was conducted for the job involved in an incident, it should be reviewed during the investigation.

Preventing recurrence depends not just on incident investigation. It’s a shared responsibility.

Employers have a legal duty to take every reasonable precaution to ensure the workplace is safe. That includes training employees about any potential hazards, how to safely use, handle, store and dispose of hazardous substances, and how to handle emergencies.

Employers must supply personal protective equipment (PPE) and ensure that workers know how to use it properly. They must also appoint competent supervisors who ensure safe work practices are always observed.

Employees have a responsibility to comply with health and safety laws and regulations, use required PPE and clothing, report workplace hazards and dangers (including close calls) and follow established safe work practices.

Measures to prevent recurring incidents also can include comprehensive surveys and periodic self-inspections to identify existing (and perhaps previously unknown) hazards. Worker orientation and training should be thorough. The health and safety program itself should be subject to regular review and revision where necessary.

If everyone does their part, the organization’s bottom line will benefit and employee morale is likely to increase with the knowledge that the work environment is being maintained as free as possible from all recognized hazards.
Trenching and excavation work is inherently dangerous, creating hazards that include cave-ins, struck-by injuries, electrical contact, and slips, trips and falls.

By definition, an excavation is a hole left in the ground as the result of removing material. A trench is an excavation in which the depth exceeds the width.

There are three basic methods of protecting workers against trench cave-ins:

- Sloping.
- Shoring.
- Trench boxes.

Most serious incidents occur on small jobs of short duration, such as service connections and excavations for drains and wells. Too often people think these jobs are not hazardous enough to require safeguards against collapse.

Occupational health and safety regulations across Canada say otherwise. Unless the walls are solid rock, workers are not to enter a trench deeper than 1.2 metres if it is not properly sloped, shored, or protected by a trench box.

Supervisors must be familiar with the safety requirements contained in the regulations, which identify the various types of soils that can be encountered and specify the type of shoring and timbering to be used for each. They also spell out requirements for trench support systems, which must be designed by a professional engineer.

Failure to follow the rules can be costly for employers.

Take the use — or non-use — of trench boxes, for example.

A recent high-profile case in Ontario saw a fine of $75,000 levied as the result of an incident in which a worker died in a trench that collapsed. The company was engaged in the installation of water and sewer lines at a residential construction site.

A backhoe operator dug a trench from each of two residences, joining into a single trench in a Y configuration leading to the municipal water and sewer main lines. The sides of the excavation were not sloped, and excavated material had been piled about a metre from the edge of the trench. A trench box was available, sitting on a flatbed trailer a short distance from the excavation, but its dimensions were not sufficient to shore the excavation, which was about 3.2 metres deep.

One of the workers entered the unshored and unsloped trench to clear away dirt that had fallen onto the pipe, despite other workers' urging to the contrary. At that point the supervisor was sitting in a truck completing paperwork, and did not see or instruct the worker about entering the trench.

The side of the excavation collapsed, burying the worker in the trench up to the chest. Attempts were made to free the trapped worker; but the commander of the responding fire department ordered everyone out of the excavation. Moments later a second cave-in completely buried the worker, who died as a result of the trench collapse.

An investigation found that the company had no documented training of that crew relating to the hazard of working in trenches or of the legal requirement for entering an unsloped trench.

Keeping your people safe means researching the type of protection that is suited best for the soil conditions on the jobsite.

Here are some more points to consider:

- No matter what protection system you choose, it needs to be inspected regularly.
- Keep the trench accessible. Workers must be provided with ladders so they can enter and exit trenches safely.
- Watch the soil. Soil types can change quickly depending on a variety of factors. It's vital to reassess the soil at a jobsite regularly, especially when weather has changed.
- Never allow workers to enter a trench, even a protected one, alone.
- Have emergency plans in place. Rescuing a worker trapped in a cave-in is a race against time. The weight of the soil in a typical collapse is hundreds of kilograms, and it takes less than 20 kg of pressure on the average human chest at a sustained level to prevent them from breathing.
Avoid problems with overhead lines

The best way to stay safe around overhead power lines is to avoid working close to them. Easily said, but do you know how close is too close? If you don’t know, it’s worth checking out before you arrive at the jobsite. Recommended distances can vary by jurisdiction and/or utility company. Contact both before working, driving, parking or storing materials closer than 15 metres (49 feet) to overhead power lines.

If your vehicle comes into contact with a power line:

• Do not get out of your vehicle.
• Call 911 and your local utility service for help.
• Wait for the electrical utility to come and they will tell you when it is safe to get out of your vehicle.
• Never try to rescue another person if you are not trained to do so.
• If you must leave the vehicle (if it catches on fire, for example), do so by jumping as far as possible — at least 45 to 60 cm (1.5 to 2 feet). Never touch the vehicle or equipment and the ground at the same time. Keep your feet, legs, and arms close to your body.
• Keep your feet together (touching), and move away by shuffling your feet. Never let your feet separate or you may be shocked or electrocuted.
• Shuffle at least 10 metres (30 feet) away from your vehicle before you take a normal step.
• Do not enter an electrical power substation, or other marked areas.

Forklift-pedestrian safety tips

Forklifts often operate in busy places and people who encounter them on foot can easily be at risk. Here some precautions to help minimize the risk:

• Separate the pedestrian and forklift traffic by creating designated walkways or travel ways.
• Restrict people from entering areas where the forklift is operating.
• Keep a safe distance from the forklift whenever possible.
• Pedestrians should always let the driver know they are in the area. Make eye contact with the driver to ensure your presence is known.
• Ensure the area is well lit and there are no obstructions.
• Be cautious near blind corners, doorways, and narrow aisles. Sound the forklift horn at intersections.
• Use high-visibility clothing, where appropriate.
• Limit forklift travel speed.
• Do not walk near or under raised forks.
• Do not load the forklift in a way that restricts the driver’s viewing area.
• Avoid driving forklift near areas where pedestrian traffic is high, such as lunch rooms, time clocks, entrances/exits.

Lights affect ‘true’ colours

The colour of an object actually depends upon the colour composition of the light itself, as well as the colours of the light that the object reflects and absorbs.

Natural sunlight is made up of all the colours of the rainbow (spectrum): red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet. Most electric lights do not "make" of all these colours even though the lights appear to be emitting "white" or "normal" light. In fact, different lights give different colour rendering characteristics.

As a result, the true colour of an object can only be determined when viewed under sunlight or under lighting, such as full spectrum lighting, that has the same spectral composition as sunlight.

For most work situations, colour rendering is not an issue. However, full spectrum lighting may be needed when colour judgement is important; for example, in a fabric manufacturing or sewing environment.

A strong business case

The cost of injury prevention is far less than the cost of an injury. A safe and healthy workplace attracts and retains quality employees. It’s an asset to a community, operates more efficiently and enjoys a healthy bottom line. The business and the workers thrive in a safe, healthy, respectful and caring environment.

Such workplaces:

• Have more satisfied, productive workers who produce higher quality products and services
• Return to work more quickly after an injury or illness.
• Feel loyal to the organization.
• Are desirable places to work.
• Retain employees.
• Establish positive community relations.
Work-related stress is a serious problem for many people. Although a certain amount can be helpful on the job, too much stress can have very negative effects on a person’s health — both mental and physical.

Stress can arise for a variety of reasons, from one’s personal life, work, or a combination of both. It can be caused by a traumatic accident, death or emergency situation. It can also be a side effect of serious illness or disease.

In the workplace, common causes of stress include (but are not limited to):

- Too much or not enough work.
- Insufficient pay.
- Poor communication between management and staff.
- Job insecurity caused by downsizing or cutbacks.
- Physical environment (noise levels, air quality, limited work space etc.).
- Little or no job satisfaction.
- Lack of autonomy or control over how a job is performed.
- Tension between work and home responsibilities.
- Bullying and other forms of harassment.

Stress can affect physical health in many ways, producing such problems as headaches, chest pain, chronic back pain, fatigue, insomnia, shortness of breath, indigestion, constipation and diarrhea.

Signs and symptoms of mental health problems include anxiety, irritability, anger, mood swings, apathy, depression, and feelings of helplessness, hopelessness or being trapped.

A person’s behaviour can also change dramatically. He or she might eat too much or lose appetite, become impatient, quick to argue, and increase use of alcohol, drugs and tobacco.

Job performance can suffer, through inattention and neglect of responsibility.

Just as the causes of workplace stress vary greatly, so do the strategies for reducing or preventing them.

If the physical environment is a problem (too loud or cramped, for example) control measures can be implemented. Ergonomics can play a role, with steps taken to reduce stress caused by uncomfortable working positions or tasks that cause repetitive strain on muscles, hands, legs, arms and feet.

There are many other things an employer can do to deal with the causes of workplace stress, from easing onerous performance demands and providing adequate training and resources, to treating everyone fairly and respectfully.

From an individual standpoint, stress management can take numerous forms. Here are some suggestions:

**Try to relax.** This can include deep breathing, yoga, meditation, massage therapy, listening to soothing music and reading a book.

**Make time for yourself.** Set aside 15 minutes a day to do simple things you really enjoy — and don’t put off taking a vacation.

**Get more sleep.** Seven to nine hours a night can work wonders for tackling problems and reducing risk of illness.

**Eat properly.** Fuel up with a good balance of fruits, vegetables and proteins. Your body will be glad you did.

**Get more exercise.** Being in good physical condition can help keep you mentally fit.

**Lighten up.** Laughter is a great way to reduce stress. When you find humour in situations, on television, online or in a joke, savour it, and don’t hesitate to share it.

**Get professional help.** There might be a point where you need a therapist to help deal with stress and the problems it creates. Your family doctor can probably recommend someone to you. Whatever the causes of your stress at work — and there are many — the key seems to be balance. There needs to be a balance between the demands of your job and your own satisfaction; you must balance the time taken for work and personal activities; your diet should be balanced — and you need to balance the things you can change with the things you cannot change.
Stress costs companies billions of dollars a year due to accidents on the job, absenteeism, employee turnover, diminished productivity and direct medical, legal and insurance costs. Employers need to assess their operations for the risk of stress and determine what can be done to deal with it. Here are some suggestions from the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety:

- Treat all employees in a fair and respectful manner.
- Take stress seriously and be understanding to staff under too much pressure.
- Be aware of the signs and symptoms that a person may be having trouble coping with stress.
- Involve employees in decision-making and allow for their input directly or through committees, etc.
- Encourage managers to have an understanding attitude and to be proactive by looking for signs of stress among their staff.
- Provide workplace health and wellness programs that target the true source of the stress.
- The source of stress at work can be from any number of causes – safety, ergonomics, job demands, etc. Survey the employees and ask them for help identifying the actual cause.
- Make sure staff have the training, skills and resources they need.
- Design jobs to allow a balanced workload. Allow employees to have control over the tasks they do as much as possible.
- Keep job demands reasonable by providing manageable deadlines, hours of work, and clear duties as well as work that is interesting and varied.
- Provide access to Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) for those who wish to attend.

The Quiz

These questions are meant to help you remember what was discussed today — not to test your patience or challenge your intelligence. The answers are at the bottom of the page. Cover them up, and complete the quiz as quickly as you can.

1. The negative effects of stress can be both mental and physical.
   TRUE ____ FALSE ____

2. Can stress be a side effect of serious illness or disease?
   YES ____ NO ____

3. Which of the following are causes of workplace stress:
   A. Insufficient pay.
   B. Job insecurity.
   C. High levels of noise.
   D. Bullying.
   E. All of the above

4. Chronic back pain and shortness of breath are NOT among the many physical symptoms of workplace stress.
   TRUE ____ FALSE ____

5. Which of these measures can an employer take to ease stress among workers:
   A. Eliminate uncomfortable working conditions.
   B. Reduce job performance demands.
   C. Require that employees arrive early and work late.
   D. Provide adequate training and resources.

6. Name one cause of stress at your worksite
   __________________________________________

7. Which of the following is NOT a good way to cope with stress at work:
   A. Practice relaxation techniques.
   B. Make sure you make good use of vacation time.
   C. Drink more alcohol.
   D. Share jokes with friends and co-workers
   E. Seek professional help.

8. Does your company offer help to employees suffering from stress?
   YES ____ NO ____ DON’T KNOW ____