

MENTAL HEALTH AND THE WORKPLACE

**Strategies for Supporting Co-Workers with Mental
Illness**

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CONTENT WARNING

EMOTIONS WARNING

ABOUT ME

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 - Chair of UMN Accessibility Ambassadors
- Like running, reading, video games, playing with my dog
- Living with mental illness



MY EXPERIENCE

- Lived with mental illness most of my life
- I'm only an expert in my experience
 - Experiences of others will differ
- There is more to me than my illness

WHAT WE'LL TALK ABOUT

- Terms and concepts to know
- How mental illness can affect teams
- How you can support people with mental illness
- Resources you can use if you want more information or are worried about someone

TERMS AND CONCEPTS

WHAT IS A MENTAL ILLNESS?

- Medical definition from the Mayo Clinic:
 - “disorders that affect your mood, thinking, and behavior... [with] ongoing signs and symptoms [that] cause frequent stress and affect your ability to function”
 - TLDR:
 - A disorder of the mind
 - Ongoing
 - Causes distress
 - Makes it difficult to function
- Are often an exaggeration of very normal mental processes
 - Many causes
 - Mental illness does not equal “broken”

SPOON THEORY

- Based off of this article:
<https://tinyurl.com/spoon-theory2019>
- The basic idea that each task requires an amount of mental and physical energy
- “I don’t have the spoons” = “I don’t have the mental energy for this right now”
- “I need to recover my spoons” = “I need time to recover my energy”
- Self-care

WHY NOT SAY "I'M TIRED"?

"I'M TIRED"

- This phrasing doesn't accurately relate the problem
 - having limited capacity to begin with
- It's more than needing one-time rest
- The problem cannot be permanently solved

TRIGGERS AND "BEING TRIGGERED"

- Aka "activation" or "being activated"
- Please stop using this as a meme
- Triggers/activates a mental illness or trauma
 - "Powering on" the illness
- Can be incredibly distressing
- Most often associated with PTSD

Examples of Being Triggered:

- A person with alcoholism actively desiring a drink
- A person with bulimia actively wanting to binge/purge
- A sexual assault survivor having a flashback to their assault

TRAUMA AND PTSD

- Caused by extreme trauma
- A hyper state of the fight/flight response and information analysis
- Holds onto a traumatic memory to analyze it for more information
 - (ie to “prevent” it from happening again)
 - Can lead to associations between the trauma and unrelated factors
- When triggered, the mind is literally behaving as if the trauma is occurring
- What does having PTSD triggered feel like?
 - a loss of humanity
 - the animal brain taking over
 - the human brain shutting down
 - State of pure instinct and panic
- Can also lead to dissociation as the “lizard brain” takes control
 - Feeling of separation between the mind and body

TRAUMA TRANSFER

(This is my own term)

- The PTSD activation can become default reaction to stress
 - The brain associates stress with this reaction
 - “This is just how we respond to things now”
 - Example: a sexual assault survivor having assault flashbacks after a car accident
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TYPES OF TRIGGERS

Obvious Triggers

- Things that are objectively related to a trauma or mental illness
 - Being around alcohol for a person with alcoholism
 - Images of emaciated bodies for someone with an eating disorder
 - A graphic rape scene in a movie for a sexual assault survivor

Personal Triggers

- Things that are personally associated with a trauma or mental illness, but do not have an objective relation
 - A song that a person with alcoholism associated with their partying and drinking
 - A particular clothing brand or item that a person with an eating disorder felt they needed to change their body to wear
 - A character in a movie that reminds a survivor of the person who assaulted them

TRIGGER WARNINGS

- AKA content warnings
- A warning that content may trigger someone
- A mental “wet floor” sign
 - Gives people enough information to decide whether they are in a good place to handle this
 - *Incredibly important*
- Not the same as censorship
 - The purpose isn't to silence, but to provide adequate information
 - Isn't saying the content makes you a bad person
- Should be specific
- Good example: *The Control Group* podcast
 - “This episode contains depictions of sexual abuse”
- Bad example: *COPS*
 - “The following content may be upsetting to some viewers, viewer discretion is advised”

BUT HOW CAN I GIVE WARNINGS FOR
PERSONAL TRIGGERS?

YOU CAN'T

- Personal triggers are going to be so specific that you can't predict them
- What you *can* do is really listen to someone when they tell you something is upsetting
- You don't have to get it, you just have to respect it

SAFE SPACES

- A lot of misinformation out there
- Isn't about limiting free speech
- Letting people advocate for themselves without fear
- We all have them
 - Your spouse or significant other
 - Your best friend
 - The bar you meet your friends at
 - Your gaming group

BRINGING THIS BACK
TO WORK

HOW MENTAL ILLNESS AFFECTS TEAMS

- Loss of productivity
 - More sick time
 - Harder time getting things done
- Loss of team cohesion
 - Mental illness is isolating
 - Very common to feel like they don't belong
- Don't blame the *person* for this
 - They didn't choose this
 - Be compassionate

IN GENERAL:

1. Listen

- If someone tells you that something is upsetting or triggering, **believe them**
- Ask if they are open to questions and respect if they are not
- Make your team a safe space

2. Be Flexible

- Personal days and self-care days can be necessary
- Be supportive of when teammates take these
- Respect their time off

3. Avoid Pity

- Can feel condescending
- Pity: the problem is the person
- Empathy: the problem is the problem
- Don't view the person as broken

IF SOMEONE CONFIDES IN YOU:

- How you respond can really affect a person
 - It can potentially encourage or discourage them from reaching out again
1. Thank them for sharing
 2. Really listen to what they are saying
 3. Ask what you can do to help
 4. Don't make promises you can't keep

SETTING BOUNDARIES

- Being supportive does not mean that your mental health should be ignored
- It is well within your rights to set boundaries
- Be gentle but firm
 - Don't blame or guilt
 - Reaffirm the boundaries as needed
- **Bad:** "All you ever talk about is how sad you are. I don't put my friends on a pedestal and I can't spend so much time supporting you."
- **Good:** "You've been mentioning a lot about how sad you are recently and I am worried that I am not able to give you the support you deserve. I think that this would be something your therapist would be better equipped to help you with."

RESOURCES

AT WORK

- Your supervisor
- Human Resources
- Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND HOTLINES

- National Alliance on Mental Illness
 - <https://nami.org>
 - Text NAMI to 741741
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
 - <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>
 - 1-800-273-8255
- Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN)
 - <https://www.rainn.org>
 - 800-656-4673
- National Eating Disorders Association
 - <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/>
 - 800-931-2237
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Helpline
 - <https://www.samhsa.gov/>
 - 1-800-662-4357
- National Domestic Violence Hotline
 - <https://www.thehotline.org/>
 - 1-800-799-7233

QUESTIONS?