A young police cadet attended a fatal car crash, where there was significant loss of life. Thirty years later, he still remembers how the senior police officer at the scene was clearly affected emotionally, yet able to regain composure in order to help others in a compassionate and focused way. The cadet, who went on to have a successful career in the police force, learned that day that it was normal to feel emotion in these situations. He also learned the importance of having coping strategies to anticipate, manage and respond to the emotions that were inevitable in this job. These were strategies he used throughout his career and an example of building resilience to cope with workplace stressors.

If we don’t know how to anticipate, manage or respond to emotions on the job, there can be potential for psychological injury. Psychological injury occurs when exposure to a stressor overwhelms a person’s ability to cope with everyday life. Resilience on the other hand preserves or restores one’s coping strategies. Psychological injury can impact all aspects of a person’s ability to function at work, including how they think, manage change or conflict, and relate to their co-workers.

In most workplaces, employees are not exposed to the kind of traumatic incidents that first responders like police officers are faced with. But distress related to common workplace pressures may significantly reduce employee focus, concentration, productivity or sense of well-being.

One example of a potentially distressing work situation could be dealing with irate or verbally abusive
customers — either face-to-face or on the phone. The potential to overwhelm a worker’s coping strategies is more likely when the verbal abuse is ongoing or the worker feels powerless to manage the situation effectively.

Psychological injury can also contribute to both physical and mental health problems, including depression, anxiety and substance abuse. The cost to individual workers and organizations can be immense.

The benefits of building resilience among employees in the workplace can be significant including allowing employees to adapt to different stressors and cope better with work and life and making it easier for employees to recover from challenges and setbacks.

**What can your workplace do to help build resilience?**

1. **Create awareness of emotional responses to potential stressors**

   Stressors in the workplace could include the unexpected loss of a co-worker, layoffs or terminations, conflict, humiliation, bullying and harassment or even violence. Engage employees in identification of these and other potential stressors. Once they’ve been identified, ask the employees to discuss the range of potential emotional responses to these types of incidents. Once the full range of emotional responses have been listed, consider effective coping strategies to manage these emotional responses. These conversations allow employees to anticipate and normalize emotional responses as well as consider which coping strategies may be most effective for them.

2. **Prepare employees for potential disappointment**

   The concept here is to specifically prepare employees for potential disappointments or changes that are unanticipated or outside of their control. One example is an employee who becomes over-whelmed or demotivated when denied an anticipated promotion. This can be especially challenging if the employee feels humiliated or that the process was unfair. One approach to building resilience could be discussing the...
possibility of not getting the promotion at the time of interview with each candidate. This could include asking each candidate what next steps should be taken should he or she not be successful, and sharing the fact that while each candidate has unique strengths, there is only one position available. This can help prepare the individual for what could happen, lessening the chance that they are over-whelmed or demotivated by disappointment. This approach can also be adapted for critical performance review conversations, restructuring, redeployment or other changes that may be unexpected by employees.

3. **Develop emotional intelligence and objectivity**

   Emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize and manage our own emotions, as well as identify and respond appropriately to the emotions of others. Higher emotional intelligence builds resilience by facilitating more effective responses to stressors. While improving emotional intelligence can benefit all employees, higher levels of emotional intelligence should be key criteria for the recruitment or promotion of those who manage, support or lead employees. This ability allows leaders to be more objective about the behaviours and emotions of others and therefore better able to respond in ways that are more effective.

   Emotional intelligence is a skill that can be learned. Developing emotional intelligence skills should include a focus on the core aspects which include understanding your own emotional reactions, dealing with the emotional reactions of others, communicating effectively during times of emotional upset and managing your own emotional reactions.

4. **Support good mental health for all employees, including those with mental illness**

   Provide information on mental illness, help reduce stigma and make the point that mental illness is a condition to be managed similar to other chronic illnesses. Help employees understand mental illnesses like depression, anxiety disorder and addiction and how to respond to co-workers who may be experiencing these conditions. Mental health is something that every employee needs to manage just as they would their physical health.”
physical health. Provide information on how resilience can help protect and promote good mental health for all employees, including those with mental illness.

5. Foster a supportive organizational culture

Social support is a protective factor that can help build resilience. This is where individuals feel that they belong and that others are there to support them. It is not uncommon for someone who has experienced either acute or long-term stress to engage in behaviours such as distancing, negativity, or feelings of helplessness. By creating a culture where social support is the norm, co-workers are able to identify those who withdraw and reach out before a crisis occurs.

Having strategies in place to support employees to become more resilient in anticipating, managing and responding to emotions in distressful situations can help protect the psychological health and safety of all employees, including those who may be more vulnerable due to mental health issues.

Building resilience seen as a key prevention strategy

Increasingly, employers recognize the importance of building resilience to help employees respond more effectively to stressors in both work and life and prevent stress-related illnesses.

Experts in the fields of resilience and emotional intelligence support these efforts and are working together to develop activities that workplace teams can use to build resilience and to reduce the risk of psychological injury. These low to no cost approaches will be available to employers in the near future.

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