Center on Trauma & Children
Evidence in action

Well@Work Podcast
Season 3, Episode 2:
Promoting Safety in the Workplace

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by a grant from SAMHSA through the Kentucky Department of Behavioral Health to the Center on Trauma and Children. On this episode, Emily Smith gives some tips for promoting safety in the workplace.

Hello, I'm Emily from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. Health care and social services professionals are almost five times as likely to be assaulted at work as workers in other fields. This isn't a new challenge for workers, first guidance to create a pathway to safer health care workplaces came from OSHA and the Department of Labor in 1996. Unfortunately, since the onset of the COVID pandemic, reports of violence have increased at a faster rate. In 2021, the CDC reported that 25% of health care workers reported being bullied, harassed, or threatened at work. By 2022 a U.S survey from National Nurses United found that 48% of nurses reported experiencing workplace violence, an increase of 119% from March of 2021. In a 2021 survey of public health workers, 26% reported harassment and threats of violence. The trend is similar for behavioral health workers who have experienced as much as a 60% increase in workplace violence. Those who have experienced workplace violence report that their lives are disrupted beyond the event itself, often experiencing decreased job satisfaction, higher risk of job burnout, and psychological impacts that reduce well-being and quality of life. In this podcast, I'll share some strategies that can help you to reduce your risk of experiencing workplace violence so that you can continue to provide care without fear of violence or injury.

Let's consider the example of Jennifer, who is a licensed clinical social worker at a behavioral health organization. During the COVID pandemic, Jennifer worked from home using a telehealth platform to meet clients. While she noticed it was easier to protect herself from high conflict situations, she also found it difficult to connect with many of her clients; some were distant in ways they weren't when she saw them in person and others had issues with technology. Jennifer returned to the office part-time last year, which was stressful for her. Next month she will return to the office full time and she is worried about her safety. Here are some tips to help Jennifer feel safer when she returns to her workplace.

Tip 1: do a safety assessment. Do you know what to do in case of a critical incident? Where the nearest exit is in case of an emergency? You may also consider doing a point of care risk assessment. Before you start a task, prepare yourself with needed equipment or tools, identify environmental risks, find an exit route, and note the emotional state of the person or people you'll be interacting with. It can help you to be present, focused, ready to help, and physically able to complete the task successfully.

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Tip 2: update your safety plan. After you assess your personal safety risks, think of ways to mitigate the hazards. Often organizations offer safety policies for critical incidents, you may want to make time to review these. You can also use organizational policies as a building block for your own plan, adding job-specific behaviors that can increase your safety at work. For example, Jennifer was meeting with a client who is frequently confrontational at the end of her workday, when others had already left the building. To increase her sense of safety, Jennifer arranged to meet her client during a time when others were likely to be in the shared office space. While in session, Jennifer knew she could call someone into her office by using the intercom feature of her desk phone. She also started alerting her colleague in the next office when this client was in the building.

Tip 3: make safety training part of your professional development. Take advantage of training offered by professional groups or your organization to learn ways to mitigate workplace hazards. COVID safety protocols led many trainings to become virtual, making them more convenient to access. Many are free, too! Look to trusted organizations like the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, OSHA, or the National Association of Social Workers for resources or trainings to learn de-escalation strategies and other ways to prevent workplace violence. If it is a concern, an armed shooter training can give you increased confidence and some ideas about how to address this type of situation if it arises.

Tip 4: become a safety champion. Model safe behavior, share what you learn in trainings, and talk about what steps you have taken to mitigate your own risks with co-workers. Many organizations have a safety team who work to reduce occupational hazards that result from direct patient or client care, they may have materials or trainings to share with you and your team.

If COVID has taught us anything, it is to be aware and prepared. Using these tips to increase your physical safety at work can help you and your colleagues to stay Well@Work.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast, follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website. And of course, stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you Well@Work.