The Compassionate Manager:

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

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Introduction

Since mid-March we've been dialoguing with clients and colleagues about their experiences coping through the Covid-19 pandemic. We have the privilege of working with a broad range of organizations, from corporate to non-profit, from out-of-school youth programs to business schools, and from U.S. based organizations to those working internationally.

As much as we facilitate, train, and consult at Edgework, we are also a knowledge hub. We've been consuming current news, opinion pieces, emerging research, and historical precedent, to help make sense of what is coming, first, in the shorter term return-to-work, and then, on the longer trajectory of rebuilding organizations, institutions, economies, and lives.

As much as we don't know what the future holds, and a week living through the pandemic feels like a month, there does seem to be a strong consensus among researchers and experts in stress and trauma, that a massive wave of Covid-19-related mental health challenges is fast approaching, if it hasn't already hit, many people, and organizations.

Right now, most of us, including our leaders, are consumed with reopening the economy. What we are already finding is that return-to work is going to be intensely messy, slow, and complex. Temperature checks, space requirements between workstations and customers, staggered shifts, and the looming threat of more shelter-in-place will be the norm. We are a long way from having the mechanisms and systems to halt the spread of Covid-19. In the meantime, history is telling us that even if we corral the virus this summer, it is likely to come back.

If you don't see signs of the mental health crisis confronting your people, you aren't looking closely enough. The energy we are all expending to do our version of the "Covid-19 juggle" is not sustainable. The pervasive threat of becoming sick, the isolation, the fatigue, fear, loss, and grieving, each take their toll. People's coping mechanisms have been stretched beyond their limits; the stress brought on by broken routines and the unpredictability of what lies ahead can be debilitating.

Don't doubt that for some people this pandemic experience is anything other than a trauma. There are too many complicated factors at play for it not to leave its mark.

Fortunately, for many, probably most, people's pandemic experience, though damaging, will not have long-term effects. This will not, however, be true for everyone. As we attempt our return-to-work and to create and understand the boundaries of our "new normal," we are going to see our people:
- Unable to sustain performance and struggle with productivity.
- Confront challenges with focus and motivation.
- Disengage from each other and experience more interpersonal conflict.

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- Continue the precarious managing of the myriad ongoing personal challenges with family and friends, struggles with school schedules syncing back up with work, financial insecurities, and more.

People are going to need networks and systems of support that extend into every aspect of our lives. The workplace is going to become an essential part of how we help our people, our families, and our communities to recover and heal. We will need employers to:
- Solve the immense logistical and safety challenges that will allow us to start working at our offices and in the field.
- Reconstitute our organizational cultures and create workspaces that are physically and also psychologically safe.
- Anticipate and address the current and late effects of stress and trauma that for some will be immediate, and for others, won't manifest for months.

It will be a huge mistake to think that this is simply an issue for HR to handle on a case-by-case basis or through corporate policy. This is a moment in history where we can, and should reimagine and rebuild our organizations as healing entities, equipped to help each employee recover. We must prepare everyone, especially managers, with the tools necessary to support one another in our era of Covid-19.

Anticipating the Mental Health Challenges that are Coming (and are Already Here)

"There's an invisible current of dread running through the world."
(David Brooks, writing in "Mental Health in the Age of the Coronavirus")

At this stage of our pandemic life, we know more about the personal lives of our colleagues than we did before the pandemic started. We've peeked into their homes on Zoom, seen what they wear when they don't have to come to the office, and perhaps met their children, roommates, and pets.

Our check-ins, similarly, have taken a more personal turn, as we inquire about how we are individually coping with the pandemic. We are reaching out to each other in new and intimate ways. We are trying to bridge the immense physical distance and keep our colleagues and friends at work engaged, productive, and focused.

A mid-April survey of our mental health status by Inpulse reported:
- 61% of employees feel anxious, distracted, or stressed because of the coronavirus.
- 43% have not been able to stop or control worrying.
- 53% have had little interest or pleasure in doing things.
- 40% recognize that their emotions are impacting their work performance.

The New York Times has been inviting readers to share their experiences with the psychological challenges of living through the pandemic (I Feel Like I'm Finally Cracking and I Don't Even Know Why + The Pandemic of Fear and Agony). Here is what they have to say:

"I've struggled with anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder for much of my life, only recently putting some kind of a saddle on it. Until the pandemic, I was in a stable and healthy place. After the world shut down, the anxiety started sneaking back in."

"I am normally a very positive person, outgoing, happy, energetic. Definitely a glass half-full. However, lately I cannot get through a day without tears, often sobs. I am terrified for myself and my family and everyone in the world. All the things I love to do, I'm now afraid to do."

"My life has suddenly started to feel like it is spiraling out of control. The fight or flight response has kicked in with a vengeance and full-fledged crisis mode is on. I used to rely on predictable outcomes and routine. The uncertainty of what's ahead has become the most frightening thing, triggering fear and anxiety. The world has been brought to its knees by a tiny microorganism. This pandemic has robbed me of my sense of control."

Guy Winch, writing in the Boston Globe summarizes our current reality and anticipated future:

"The coronavirus pandemic is affecting nearly every country across the globe, and while it's unknown how many will be impacted physically, practically everyone will be affected emotionally. There will be prolonged isolation for some, over-crowded homes for others, sustained levels of heightened stress and anxiety, as well as financial hardships, strained relationships, grief, and loss. It will heighten the mental health (diagnosable conditions such as anxiety and depression, and PTSD) and emotional health (the non-diagnosable conditions such as loneliness, grief, and loss) of billions of people around the world.

Massive uncertainty about the future (e.g., whether we will contract the virus and, if we do, how we'll manage financially, not knowing when life will return to a new normal and what that new normal will look like) is fueling anxiety, sleep disruptions, irritability, drops in mood, and even depression — all on a global scale. In addition, many health care professionals, emergency technicians, and other front-line workers might develop PTSD and require psychological intervention, which will be challenging to administer on such a large scale.

The legacy of social distancing and stay-at-home directives will be difficult to unwind. Anxiety does not disappear because shutdowns ease and people are allowed to return to school and work."

There is good news. Many people are feeling part of a supportive community or team. Many managers are leaning all the way into their role as compassionate leaders. And many organizations are bending policy and practice to accommodate and buffer employees during this unprecedented time.

These actions will help many, but not all. There is wide consensus among experts that this ***second pandemic*** of ***mental health challenges*** will be widespread and long-term.

Understanding Our Stress Response and What Happens When it is Overwhelmed

"When we think about traumatic events, it's not just what the event is, it's really your interpretation and what the event causes for you."
(Luana Marques, clinical psychologist and associate professor in the department of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and president of the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, quoted in "Could You Get PTSD from Your Pandemic Experience?")

To return to work and help our people and our organization recover necessitates an understanding of trauma. We need to do this not because everyone will be traumatized by the pandemic. We do this because, if our aim is to create a climate and culture that truly welcomes everyone back, then we need to make sure that everyone feels safe enough to fully participate and contribute. It means ***we rebuild with a commitment to be an organization that helps people heal.***

The consequences of not addressing the emotional, physical, and social well-being of our people are significant. We do have some [historical precedent](#) to study in order to better understand the impacts of this kind of crisis. *"Past research on the mental health consequences of disasters — including epidemics — suggests there may be a significant increase in depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), domestic violence, and substance use problems.,"* writes Alexandra Sifferlin for Medium.

Under normal circumstances, we are generally well equipped to handle a wide range of stressors. In fact, stress, in managed doses and durations, tends to have a growth effect on people. The pressure of a test or job interview, confronting a family or business challenge, can often cause us to "raise our game."

We are coping beings. It is one of our greatest attributes. We have, and can weather, tremendous disruptions to our livelihood and lives.

Coping is a combination of reaction, response, and recovery. We have powerful primitive wiring in our brain that interprets stressors as threats or challenges.

If our brain interprets the stressor as a challenge it keeps our executive functions online, amps up our energy, focus, and motivation, and we respond with full capability. Recovery, our return to calm, is relatively easy, because we've been engaged productively in the challenge; we are learning and even growing, and our body is not overwhelmed by the experience.

If the stressor is a threat, our brain is primed to protect us. These are the proverbial fight-flight-freeze responses. Our brain dials down and even shuts off executive function, and switches into survival mode. We act before thinking. This is a wired response and is highly functional in short duration, high threat situations, such as jumping out of the way of an oncoming bicyclist.

Our brain is incredibly skillful at returning our body to a relatively calm state. Our heartrate, blood pressure, and breathing slow down. The tension we feel in our muscles relaxes. Our executive functions come back online, and we can think more clearly. Even if the stressor is sudden and intense, we are generally not damaged by this reaction-response-recovery cycle.

With most of the world on some kind of lockdown, clearly, we are not battling a normal stressor.

The pandemic presents the worst kind of stressor:
- It is not acute, but chronic, and pervasive.
- We can't fully anticipate its moves.
- We don't know when it will end.
- It rips apart our normal support systems, including the one that is the most protective: social fabric.

The stressors that accompany Covid-19 are vicious enough to undermine even those with tremendous coping skills.

The inherent challenge with coping is that it is an adaptive response. It is not our natural state, so, it taxes our systems. We must apply discretionary effort and focus toward coping, which drains our overall capability in other aspects of our life. This is why we may be more distracted, have a harder time sleeping, disengage from some activities, are more short-tempered with colleagues or family members, and even push away our close friends.

On a physical level, it is also why we feel that pressure in our chest. It is our heartrate kicked up a few extra beats per minute. It is the elevated blood pressure we have coursing through our veins. It is the extra effort we are putting into trying to concentrate on work. These are some of the ways our bodies adapt to the extra energy burn required to operate in this heightened state.

Most of us have this kind of reserve tank to draw on. This surge capacity is one of the greatest assets we have in times like these. But, it's not sustainable. The vigilance required to cope eventually compromises our physiological and psychological systems.

When our normal coping mechanisms can no longer return us to a stable state, we begin to experience a rewiring, both in our brain and in our body. This accrued anxiety and stress starts to take a deeper toll.

It often starts with fatigue, the kind of fatigue you just can't shake, even with a good night's sleep. Jason Moser, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology and director of Michigan State University's Clinical Psychophysiology Lab shares, *"Stress activates a number of biological processes that disrupt our sleep wake cycle, and rev up our bodily response for action, among other things. That is exhausting. It's like doing a moderate workout all day, every day."* (How Coronavirus is Causing Fatigue and Shock)

Each of us may experience a different type of response. Some people will be just fine. Some will need a low dose of support. Others will find themselves confronting new and derailing mental health challenges they had never before experienced. Finally, there will be those who experience more suffering on top of the mental health challenges they were already facing, "*developing what clinicians call 'double depression' in which a persistent depressive disorder is overlaid with an episode of unbearable pain."*

Trauma is not the event itself. It is a certain way our body responds. Trauma is the mark that is left behind.

"When fear goes unseen and nurturance is withheld, fear wires to fear whether we are aware of it or not. If not interrupted through healing, the inflammation (and myriad other biologic impacts) in the body and brain ignite and accumulate over time, along with beliefs and reactions that keep the fear response alive and at-the-ready." (Healing in Place)

In a work setting, this results in a set of observable behaviors that, on the surface could have one type of explanation, but given our potentially compromised coping capabilities, could indicate something more.

Behaviors We May Encounter	What Could Really Be Going On
• Increased miscommunications and even confrontations with colleagues • Inability to focus • Decreased motivation or working all the time • Feeling a lack of purpose • Disengagement with work projects • Avoidance, detachment, or estrangement from colleagues • Absenteeism • Shutting down/decreased participation • Diminished problem-solving and creativity	• Grief and loss • Fear • Rumination • Loneliness • Emotional dysregulation • Hyper-vigilance • Burnout • Guilt • Disrupted world view • Physical health issues

The very good news is that, as coping beings, most of us will return to a relatively high functioning level of stasis. *"It's also important to remember that the vast majority of people, including all of us who are experiencing difficulties along the way, will ultimately do well."* (Joshua Morganstein, chair of the American Psychiatric Association's Committee on the Psychiatric Dimensions of Disaster)

Trauma is not destiny. We can rewire the brain and reset on our own coping and self-regulation capacity. It takes time and it's not necessarily a smooth path to healing, but it is absolutely possible.

While re-regulation is very possible, it is more challenging when a threat persists for a long period of time, which is what we are facing with Covid-19. We are facing months, and likely years of uncertainty about the virus's return and the threat it imposes to our workplaces, our schools, our public transport, our places of worship, our community events, and basically anywhere we used to convene.

We're also dealing with intense compounding stressors alongside the direct threat of contracting the virus, including: job insecurity and job loss, food uncertainty, death of family members or friends, providing care and support to loved ones, social isolation, and more. A further harsh reality is that the vast majority of people around the world do not, and will not, have access to definitive clinical care or interventions to help them cope.

All this means that our pathway to healing is going to have to happen in real time. For children, this must be designed into their new school experience, their sports and recreation programming, and their family life. The movement of [trauma-sensitive schools](#) and [sport for healing](#) is quite evolved and will help shine a light on the way forward for children.

We do not have the same body of work to draw from for work life, but the needs are the same, and the call is now.

This moment in our history requires us to build our organizations, and prepare our managers, to be trauma-sensitive.

The Trauma-Sensitive Organization

"When people know they can bring their pain to the office, they no longer have to expend energy trying to ignore or suppress it, and they can more easily and effectively get back to work."
(Jane E. Dutton, Peter J. Frost, Monica C. Worline, Jacoba M. Lilius, Jason M. Kanov, "Leading in Times of Trauma,")

As is the case with so many critical aspects of an organization's functioning, the responsibility for implementation of anything important for it's surviving and thriving, falls on the shoulders of its managers. They translate strategy into tactics, they lead change, they address personnel issues, they support career development, they drive motivation and morale, and they build and sustain culture.

__Make no mistake: whether you train and support your managers in their role as mitigators of trauma, they will be playing this role regardless.__ 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 as they return to work. It is unfair and unrealistic, however, to ask your managers to rise to this challenge without providing some key top-down support, training and structure.

Some Basic Recommendations for Organizations to Construct a Trauma-Informed Response
The recommendations below assume that an organization is implementing a well-researched and intentional return-to-work plan, which includes:
- Adherence to city, state, and national protocols and requirements for return-to-work
- Adoption of a vigorous occupational health and safety plan for the office
- Attention to the employee voice related to any concerns, specifically related to their sense of safety in the workplace
- Addressing ways to adapt policy and practice to support employees who need to take medical leave, are facing complicated household situations, etc.
- Close monitoring of the pandemic and creating plans for potential future scenarios

Recommendation	Description
Embrace a Trauma-Sensitive Approach from the Top-Down	- A fully trauma-sensitive organization has a leadership team that understands how trauma impacts people and is committed to an approach and set of practices that are aligned with how people heal. - A communication strategy and commitment to model behaviors and interactions that promote healing
Create a Climate of Safety	- Revisiting policies and practices to ensure that physical, emotional, and social safety is optimized - Creating many opportunities for the "employee voice" to be heard (More below) - Revising explicit and implicit norms in the organization to foster psychological safety, in both formal and informal interactions
Assume Unexpressed Needs for Support	- Acknowledging that some employees are likely confronting significant challenges that may not be apparent in how they show up for work, including: economic hardship, death of family members or friends, exposure to intimate partner

	violence, compromised physical or mental health, grief, loss, fatigue, burnout, etc. • Commitment to playing a meaningful role in helping employees get the support they need
Invest in a Long-Term Approach	• Realizing that return-to-work is not return to safety, productivity, performance, or health • Committing to keeping in place systems of care for the long-term • Committing to helping <u>everyone</u> make their best return, not just the majority of employees • Anticipating and adapting to the evolving situation
Develop a Robust Referral System	• Building a referral system for employees with a wide spectrum of psychological and emotional needs to access the support they need (Note: This does not mean that the organization needs to be an expert in trauma or have a large team of psychologists on payroll. It means that they can make efficient and relevant referrals.) • Eliminating the stigma sometimes associated with seeking professional help
Attend Closely to Employee Voices	• Listening closely to employees who have unresolved concerns about safety, inclusion, organizational culture, etc. • Facilitating the formation of formal and informal affinity and support groups • Commitment to helping everyone in the organization take collective steps forward in finding our new normal
Training and Ongoing Support for Managers	• Equipping managers with essential knowledge about the stress response, signs and symptoms of compromised coping, resilience, and trauma • Ensuring managers have intimate knowledge of the full range of referral and support services and how to best make referrals • Providing managers with tools and techniques to support healing, both for themselves, and for their teams • Educating managers in how to avoid re-traumatization • Providing buffering activities and ongoing oversight and support to managers for their own mental health
Develop a Training Plan for All	• A truly trauma-sensitive organization equips everyone with key knowledge and skills to be able to drive their own healing process and support their colleagues. This is a key lesson learned from the trauma-sensitive schools movement: The outcomes are often the highest when everyone, from the

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	principal, to the student, to the parents/caregivers is clued in about the effects of trauma and stress, and is working together to buffer against it. While managers are essential, we need everyone to be actively involved in helping the community to heal.
	• Enlisting employees as peer leaders in supporting each other

The Compassionate Manager: A Trauma-Sensitive Approach to Managing in the Era of Covid-19

"Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom."
(Viktor Frank, "Man's Search for Meaning")

Managers are the lifeblood of an organization. They sit at the hubs of communication. They are the implementers of strategy. They have a pulse on their people and how the work is really going. They shoulder tremendous responsibility for an organization's success when times are good. In times of crisis, their role becomes even more crucial.

Whether they know it or not, managers are potentially our organizations' most powerful agents for healing. They are interacting with small teams of employees day in and day out, leading 1-on-1's, facilitating team meetings, and coaching people through their current reality.

Our cohort of managers is already positioned across the organization with access to each employee at an individual level. 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, they do need to bring a new level of inquiry, empathy, and care to their work.

Compassionate managers believe:
• The effects of prolonged stress can manifest in different ways for each person.
• People are doing the best they can.
• Challenging or confusing behavior often tells a complex and nuanced story.
• Gentle 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 [and people in general] should be doing regardless of our current situation. A trauma-sensitive approach to managing embeds inside 1-on-1's, team meetings, casual check-ins, and

coaching conversations. And it cannot work without operating in close partnership with our HR function and other organization-wide approaches.

A Partial Taxonomy of Skills of the Compassionate Manager

Domain	Skills and Techniques
Knowledge	• Understanding stress and trauma, specifically: the stress response, coping, surge capacity, how stress can rewire the brain, signs and symptoms of trauma, triggers, etc. • How people heal and recover • Principles of do no harm and how to avoid retraumatizing actions • Risk and protective factors for resilience • The individual and cultural layers of how people respond to trauma
Observation and Awareness	• Enhancing identification of the signs and behavioral indicators that someone may be struggling • Creating clear lines of sight into the full lives of your people
Structure	• Creating predictable and consistent environments • Modulating our own interactions to foster safety and structure • Establishing and enforcing trauma-informed team norms • Providing regular organizational and team updates, particularly related to the pandemic • Holding the team accountable while managing by exception
Interaction Strategies	• Building trust-based relationships • Creating a calming, collaborative, and safe climate • Sustaining a supportive team culture • Conducting effective stress check-ins • Leading trauma-informed 1-on-1's • Providing reassurance and recognition • Teaching and coaching strategies • Providing constructive feedback • Engaging in deep/personal conversations • Crafting trauma-informed development plans • Making successful referrals
Partnering with HR	• Providing sensitive and timely updates • Activating the referral system • Creating integrated individual support plans
Peer Support and Collaboration	• Leveraging peers for counsel and input to addressing key individual employee situations • Tactics for engaging other managers to coordinate care, support, and intervention for individual employees • Activating support for our own healing and recovery process

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In our experience training people on trauma and designing trauma-sensitive interventions, once people begin to see the world through the lens of stress and trauma, they begin to shift how they work and lead in profound ways.

For managers, it comes down to four implementable strategies to help their people make meaningful progress on the pathway towards healing. The compassionate manager works with individuals and teams to help them:

- Build, mend and deepen *connections* that help to sustain organizational culture, and foster the sense of community and family that we have at work
- Reorganize and reconnect to their work in ways that give them more *control* and agency
- Develop key *competencies* that enhance their self-efficacy, productivity, and development
- *Contribute* to the greater good of the team and organization in ways that promote purpose and meaning

In Conclusion

When the world went on lockdown in response to Covid-19, our personal and professional lives collided. It is messy, sometimes terrible, and the sense of vulnerability we feel is raw and deep. With our routines upended, this sudden jarring reality has thrust us into each other's lives in unexpected ways. And through it, surprisingly or not, our gut response has been resolute: connection, and support is paramount.

We truly are in this together. People helping people is the way we see this through. ***From the trauma perspective, people heal people. It is our greatest intervention: the right person at the right time in the right way.*** From an organizational perspective, managers are the right people. It is our responsibility to equip them with the knowledge, skills, tool, and confidence to be present and to show up in the right ways.

Return to our places of work is not the goal. It is a means towards a more important end: one of personal, team and organizational healing and renewal.

Now is the time to invest in your managers so they are not just ready to respond to the tremendous mental health challenges that your people will and are facing, but to lead. ***This is their leadership moment.***

We are committed to helping organizations prepare their managers to lead their teams through the pandemic.
Please contact us to discuss Compassionate Manager training and consulting for your organization.
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