

When work affects your health: Toxic workplaces take toll on workers' well-being

A new year brings about many possible changes – promises to eat better, exercise more, stop smoking, save money, and so on. Another priority for some is to improve their work situation.

If that's you, there may be no better time than the present, especially after U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy released a report that links a toxic workplace culture to health issues such as heart disease, depression and anxiety.

"A toxic workplace is basically any work setting where you're dealing with any sort of psychological stress, where you're feeling nervous, you have some fear, anxiety, sadness, depression – things like that," says Victor Mendoza, a behavioral health provider with OSF HealthCare. "If you start noticing those things in your own workplace, that can be something we would call a toxic environment."

According to the U.S. Surgeon General, the five components of a healthy workplace include protection from harm, connection and community, work-life harmony, mattering at work and opportunity for growth.

Mendoza says now is the time for organizations to assess their relationship with employees – to create a sense of connection among workers, show them they are essential and support their professional needs.

"First of all, if they haven't added these five components, they should probably try to because I think that's a good founda-



tion to what a healthy work environment should be like," says Mendoza. "You want to have a workplace where you feel comfortable, you feel heard, you feel like there is upward mobility, and that people care for you. That you're not just a number to them but that you actually are a human, and they understand and are willing to be empathic to your situation. And if there is a concern, they're open to listen to you."

There are many ways feeling stressed or miserable can manifest in an unhealthy work environment such as increasing the risk for cardiovascular disease, increasing the chance of high blood pressure, weakening immune

systems, causing headaches and increasing anxiety and stress. Mendoza says physical symptoms can include stomach aches, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and racing heartbeat.

The report comes during an uncertain time in workplace culture due to the COVID pandemic, when employees are seeking more flexible opportunities including working remotely or a hybrid schedule. Mendoza adds that the pandemic also affected our routines, and when routines are changed it can impact our mental health.

"It's been really tough for a lot of people," says Mendoza. "When all this started with the pandemic, a lot of people

were having anxiety about what was going to happen. People feared losing their jobs, and a lot of people did lose their jobs, sadly, and that was very hard for them. They had to switch careers. A lot of them were lucky they were able to keep their jobs, but they had to work from home and that created some stress as well even though we do have good technology."

There are things, however, you can do to cope with your workplace stress. Mendoza suggests keeping track of the stressors in your job, developing healthy responses such as exercise, getting enough sleep and learning how to relax and take time to recharge by unplugging from work, and making sure to use your vacation days.

Mendoza says it's easy for some people to feel guilty about work-related issues. The most important take-home message is to first take care of yourself, and not let a stressful environment affect your health.

"Sometimes you can only do so much and you have to advocate for yourself, and you have to be aware when this happens," he adds. "So set up good boundaries with your workplace, make sure that you're taking some time off work for self-care, whatever that looks like for you, and do something you enjoy. Make sure you do some basic things like exercise, you're eating well and you're sleeping well. That's a really good foundation to deal with a toxic work environment."

In the workplace: 'Older and wiser' not always seen as 'better'

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Regardless of gender, race, religion, sexual preference, or other types of potential discriminatory markers, one truth stands alone. We all must consider what happens as we age, and we are likely to feel its impact in the workplace head-on.

Published by Lioncrest Publishing in October 2022, *I'm Still Not Done: It's Time to Talk About Ageism in The Workplace* (2nd edition) takes an in-depth look at this one form of discrimination that most all face someday, in some way:

Ageism.

Book author Patti Temple Rocks shares one definition of ageism from topical expert Ashton Applewhite:

"Ageism occurs when the dominant group uses its power to oppress or exploit – or simply ignore – people who are much younger, or significantly older. We experience ageism anytime someone assumes we're 'too old' for something – a task, a relationship, a haircut – instead of finding out who we are and what we are capable of."

As referenced, this type of discrimination is felt at both ends of the age lines. Employees can feel its sting by being marked as "too young and immature, lacking experience or expertise."

Perhaps more overlooked is the sting of age discrimination as employees reach their "golden years." They start to be seen as irrelevant, out of touch, or even as a "relic," a leftover from a bygone era.

"We're currently experiencing an unprecedented longevity boom; baby boomers now represent 50 percent of the population and are living longer and staying healthier than any previous generation," Rocks notes.

"As a result, the workers that are being pushed out of their careers early represent the single largest demographic currently living in the United States. That's a lot of institutional knowledge, a vast amount of professional experience and skill, that will be lost."

"Ageism doesn't just hurt people; it hurts businesses, too. It's the last socially sanctioned prejudice," Rocks adds. "For reasons that don't make sense, ageism is the last socially acceptable 'ism' in our society. Yet no one is organizing

anti-ageism marches. Cable news generally doesn't report about highly-qualified professionals in their 50s who get marginalized and forced out of their jobs."

Stereotypes run rampant about workers over 50, sustaining this form of workplace discrimination. There's an erroneous belief that they aren't capable of mastering new skills (you can't teach an old dog new tricks).

Other erroneous, yet widely shared beliefs: Workers over 50 years old don't understand technology. They have less energy, are set in their ways, or are not open to new ideas. Erroneous beliefs, all unfounded.

In the modern workplace, it does come as a bit of a surprise that age discrimination even remains an issue. After all, the law prohibiting this, known as The Age Discrimination in Employment Act, was enacted over 55 years ago back in 1967.

The Act forbids age discrimination in any aspect of employment against people who are age 40 and older. This includes hiring, firing, pay, job assignments, promotions, layoffs, training, benefits, and any other term or condition of employment.

So, why is this still being discussed?

The simple answer: Because it is still an issue. As are all forms of discrimination that fall under any company's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility initiatives and policies.

Age discrimination in the workplace is also vastly underreported.

According to an AARP study before the COVID-19 pandemic, 61 percent of people ages 40 to 65 had either seen or experienced age discrimination. In May 2021 that number rose to 78 percent.

But only 3 percent had made a formal complaint. Why?

AARP Senior Attorney Laurie McCann offers Rocks this explanation: "Age discrimination is viewed by the courts and society more as an economic issue and we defer to the employer's prerogative. Even employees will say, 'Well, it's their business, and I understand why they want to save some money.' But you wouldn't say that if the employer said, 'We want to save money, so we'll get rid of all of the women,' yet we tolerate it when it's age."

Employees who are victims of age discrimination sometimes fear losing their job entirely by filing a formal complaint. And if

they stay, they worry that there will be more subtle forms of retaliation. They may be shunned, viewed as a troublemaker, or burn carefully constructed professional bridges.

In a recent article published by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics numbers indicate that the U.S. labor force would grow to about 164 million people by 2024. Workers ages 65 and up would be at about 13 million.

Approximately 25 percent of the workforce will be 55 or over in 2024, up from 11 percent in 2000.

So, what can an employer do to keep its workforce age-diversified?

Assess the organization's culture, practices, and policies to determine if there are any outdated assumptions in place about older workers, recommends SHRM.

When it comes to company culture, be sure it is conducive to a multigenerational environment. One where everyone can feel comfortable and safe. Accepting of race, disability, nationality, religion, sexual preference and age within its culture.

Include age as a part of the company's DEI & A programs and efforts. Offer learning and development to all employees, as well as career counseling and mentoring for all career stages.

Examine recruitment practices, campaigns, and activities in detail. A company should be clear with its recruiters and interviewers on how to address candidates without bias. It also needs to clearly communicate a multigenerational welcome.

A website, recruitment posters, ads, and social media posts -- all with age-diverse photos -- can further help diversify a company's talent pool.

Review job applications (paper or electronic) for potential age discrimination questions -- such as date of birth or year of graduation -- and revamp as needed.

Benefits that are age-diverse will attract candidates from all generations as well. Offer jobs as project-specific roles, part-time and flex-time options, or critical-task-oriented consulting opportunities. Also, compensation based on talent rather than years. All are options that can solidify an anti-ageism approach in any workplace.

The book written by Patti Temple Rocks can be a great resource to help take a deep dive into your own workplace. Many business leaders might even experience an "a-ha!" moment when they realize older workers can also help fill the labor shortage gap prompted by the Great Resignation, as noted by AARP CEO JoAnn Jenkins.

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