Professionals in the fields of human resources, health, wellness, and management came together from across Canada to discuss prevention and intervention approaches related to trauma.

Key themes included understanding the impacts of trauma on individuals and the workplace, preparing for potential trauma, and steps to protect ourselves and others. Specific action items developed through the conversations of this group are provided at the end of the article.

**Understand the impacts of trauma**

Julia Kaisla, Director, Community Engagement, Canadian Mental Health Association, BC, said that it helps to be aware that in most instances, trauma isn’t caused by one specific thing. She said, “I really came away with better insight into the different elements of trauma. My job involves working with people with lived experiences and having them tell their stories. I now see the importance of asking more specific questions so we’re not coming up with simplified answers about these individuals’ experiences of trauma.”

Miri Freimanis, Healthy Workplace Specialist, City of Hamilton, also came away with a new appreciation for the value of deeper conversations and the need for seeing the whole person throughout the process of support at work. “When we’re dealing with trauma issues, it’s not about one or two or even just three meetings. We need to look at every person and understand where they are coming from in their journey. When someone has a heart attack, it’s not just about his or her heart. The whole person has been impacted by this trauma. “Jean”
didn't stop being traumatized just because I spoke to her and “Joe” isn't finished grieving just because it's been a year since his loss. It’s a continuous process with many check-ins,” Freimanis said.

Erika Caspersen, Program Development Specialist – Health, Safety and Wellness, Hamilton Health Sciences, also saw the importance of understanding the continuum of a person’s experience or recovery from trauma. “It's about honouring people where they are at, deeply listening to their story, and offering support that empowers them to generate options and take action that supports their recovery, well-being and contribution in the workplace.”

Tom Regehr of Cast Canada said that managers can benefit from focusing on what they're actually seeing. “This is the importance of responding to what you're seeing in the employee's behaviour and managing expectations based on that,” he said.

“All trauma involves expectations that were shattered in some way. That's why it's so important to manage expectations clearly across the board for these employees. This can help reduce both workplace stress and trauma.”

**Prepare employees for potential trauma**

Irene McClymont, Corporate Manager, Human Resources, County of Lambton, was eager to get to work implementing new approaches to help employees be more prepared for what to expect should a potential trauma occur. While policies for violence prevention are in place throughout the County’s work sites, both she and her Health & Safety Coordinator, Joe Solinas, saw opportunities to expand trauma prevention services.

Solinas said, “We currently target first responders but I can see how helping all staff understand what they might feel when they are exposed to trauma can make a difference.” McClymont added, “This could include a checklist that states, ‘here’s some of the things you might go through, here’s how to take care of yourself, here’s how you might relate this to your own personal life, etc.’” She also sees the value of including information for new employees about what they may experience so they are better prepared. “Having conversations with employees that teases out what they might experience could again be really helpful.”

**Consider organizational policies and management practices**

The National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace (The Standard) is a framework to help employers prevent psychological harm and promote psychological safety. The participants discussed various ways that this approach could be used to support employees who may have been exposed to trauma. The Standard defines factors that impact psychological health and safety, including psychological support, management competency, psychological competencies and civility and respect.

Carol Lamoureaux, Executive Director, Sudbury Counselling Centre, said that the information that was shared about trauma during the discussions has motivated her to talk to counsellors in her organization about potential risks. “Many of them are very
resilient and good at their jobs but take so much on their shoulders,” she said. “Now I can see the importance of having conversations so that these individuals know that someone is looking out for them.” This concept of knowing someone at work is looking out for you is part of psychological support.

Competency of management was discussed as a factor impacting psychological health and safety of employees. Mary Ann Baynton of Mindful Employer Canada said, “Front line managers need to be able to build trust, follow through on their commitments and exhibit behaviours that are consistent with a positive organizational culture.” This gets into the need for clear leadership and expectations which participants felt reduced the risk of workplace stress that could increase the risk of trauma.

Participants felt that hiring the right people for the right jobs, with the right skills and psychological competencies, was another important factor for working toward psychologically safer workplaces. Those who are put in positions that they aren’t prepared for or given responsibilities they may not be equipped to handle, may be at higher risk of being traumatized. Yvonne Defreitas, Director of HR and Organizational Effectiveness, Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety said, “If it isn’t the right fit, we’ll eventually be going down the performance management path to address concerns. Recruitment should include hiring managers with psychological competency and emotional intelligence. These are people who in addition to their technical competency have insight to manage and respond to people effectively.”

Participants agreed that a clear expectation for civility and respect should be embedded in organizational policies, and that this must be part of the way that employees regularly interact and be included in the orientation of new employees. This is especially significant following a traumatic event but must be in existence before the event occurs.

Recognize and respond to other forms of trauma

The conversations helped both Susan
Fuciarelli, Director – Health, Safety and Wellness, Hamilton Health Sciences, and Defreitas see opportunities to expand their programs to protect workers from the impact of other forms of trauma such as ambiguous loss and vicarious trauma.

Ambiguous loss is experienced when an individual suffers a loss without closure or certainty. Defreitas said, “The discussions really helped me put some language around behaviour related to ambiguous loss. I now see that many of the healthcare workers as well as others in my workplace could be dealing with trauma related to these feelings that they may not be able to put a name to,” she said. “Now that I’m aware of it, I can start thinking about the best way to provide support.”

Vicarious trauma is an emotional reaction to the pain, fear or trauma of others. An example is what occurred after 9/11 when some flight attendants were afraid to fly even though they themselves may not have been involved in a crash.

Fuciarelli said she sees how prevention of vicarious trauma can dovetail into a more thorough workplace violence prevention strategy. In Fuciarelli’s workplace the vicarious aspect occurs when the healthcare workers experience violence from patients and other workers then become fearful that it will happen to them. “This places importance on having the necessary programs and workshops to prevent violence or trauma from happening in the first place,” she said. “Assessing psychological hazards should be as important as the assessment we currently do for physical risk.”
Action plans for protecting psychological health and safety

At the end of the two days of working together, participants shared their preliminary lists of what they would be taking back to their workplaces to help achieve the goals of protecting the psychological health and safety of everyone in the workplace.

- Focus on prevention of stress and burnout, which can make employees more susceptible to the long-term negative effects of trauma
- Develop orientation programs for new hires that will include preparation for the potential psychological hazards associated with the job
- Protect the mental health of employees and help individuals learn to protect their own mental health
- Set aside time for education and awareness to address issues related to potential trauma
- Go to superiors with the message that it’s time to address risks to psychological well-being
- Provide training to increase emotional intelligence and objectivity of managers
- Ensure hiring policies address competencies related to psychological health and safety.
- Have an action plan for implementing the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace and draw on champions to help
- Look for ways to build mental health safeguards into existing processes

This group of professionals are taking action and believes that having strategies for both prevention of trauma and support for employees who have been exposed to trauma can be an essential component for a psychologically safer work environment.

Leanne Fournier is a freelance writer who specializes in writing about mental health and workplace issues. She attended the Preventing Psychological Injury session, on behalf of the Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace, held in Toronto this past September.