



When
partners
pick up

PTSD

Research shows that when a person experiences trauma at work, similar symptoms can also manifest in their spouse or partner. 3

IT'S widely acknowledged that stress has a ripple effect and affects everyone around us.

People may experience stress and traumatic experiences in many areas of their lives, including the workplace.

Workplace trauma – yes, there is such a thing – is an emotional response after witnessing or experiencing a negative event at work.

Also called career trauma or workplace post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), it is a mental health condition that can develop and affect people of all ages and occupations.

It is not unusual for employees to experience PTSD due to dealing with terrible bosses, toxic work environments, large-scale health crises, or witnessing a colleague go through domestic or sexual violence and harassment.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that approximately 3.6% of the global population has experienced PTSD in the past year.

Females are twice as likely as men to develop it.

The impact of workplace trauma can vary from person to person, depending on the nature of the trauma, the individual's coping mechanisms and their support system.

For example, the Covid-19 pandemic was particularly traumatising for many employees, especially frontliners, who were forced to put themselves at increased risk of Covid-19 just to go to work daily.

The effects of trauma can cause the employee's mental health to deteriorate.

Often, employees experiencing trauma at work don't feel safe in the work environment; they find it stressful going to work.

Unaddressed, it can ultimately lead them to resign, and the organisation to lose talent.

Stress spillover

On average, we spend a third of our lives working, and at the end of a workday, we all want to return to the safe haven called home.

Asia School of Business assistant professor of organisational behaviour Dr Wang Yi-Ren observes: "We carry back with us everything left unfinished and unaddressed at work, whether it's incomplete tasks or unresolved emotions.

"The experiences at work – be it achievements, frustrations, happiness, panic, sadness or suffering – all find a place to reside and linger at home.

"There may be others at home – spouses, parents, children or other significant individuals – with whom we share our most intimate spaces.

"To varying extents, they are influenced by what we bring back home, including an altered version of ourselves after a long workday."

This spillover, i.e. the transfer of stress, can occur within the individual (from work life to home life), as well as cross over to another person(s).

In 2019, as part of her doctorate research, Asst Prof Wang, along with her collaborators, decided to explore the impact of workplace trauma on those who directly experience it through spillover, and on their partners, even in the absence of direct exposure, through crossover.

The study called *A Meta-Analysis on the Crossover of Workplace Traumatic Stress Symptoms Between Partners* was published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* last year.

A meta-analysis is a research method that involves aggregating existing studies on a given topic, in order to determine average effects and trends.

In this study, the researchers reviewed over 50,000 articles and closely examined 276 of them.

Asst Prof Wang also interviewed three couples based in the ASEAN region.



Dealing with terrible bosses, bullying and a toxic work environment are some of the causes of workplace PTSD. — Freepik

Bringing stress home

"The samples in these studies ranged from workers in high-risk occupations (such as military personnel, police officers, firefighters, first responders and emergency medical personnel) to those in low-risk occupations who had experienced traumatic incidents like harassment, bullying or assault," she says.

Workplace trauma indeed significantly impacted workers directly exposed to it, but what surprised the researchers was that the impact of the same traumatic stressors also affected the partners of the trauma-exposed employees.

Asst Prof Wang, whose interest revolves around psychology in the workplace, says: "We found that the partner's susceptibility to secondary traumatic symptoms can be similar in magnitude to the worker's vulnerability to PTSD."

According to the fifth edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), individuals with PTSD typically report an ongoing experience of the following symptoms: > Persistent re-experiencing of the traumatic event, which may manifest as intrusive upsetting memories, nightmares, flashbacks, emotional distress and physical reactivity.

> Avoidance of trauma-related stimuli, including avoiding thoughts, feelings or reminders related to the trauma. > Negative thoughts or feelings that emerged or worsened after the trauma, such as difficulty recalling key details of the event, excessively negative self-perceptions or perceptions of the world, reduced interest in activities, and feelings of isolation.

> Trauma-related arousal and reactivity that begins or intensifies after the trauma, potentially leading to increased irritability or aggression, risky or destructive behaviour, hypervigilance, and difficulties with sleep and concentration.

Asst Prof Wang adds: "There are more extreme PTSD symptoms outlined in the DSM-5, but one does not necessarily have to meet all of these criteria to feel traumatised, terrified or significantly impacted."

"Symptoms, even if relatively less severe than those described above, can still disrupt daily life, both at work and at home."

Women more vulnerable

She shares a story of a couple she had spoken to.

Emma and David (not their real names) had been in a long-distance relationship for two years.

As an anaesthesiology registrar at a hospital, David had witnessed a number of Covid-19 patients dying during the pandemic.

Despite his typically reserved and logical demeanour, Emma noticed subtle changes in his personality after the pandemic began.

He began displaying even fewer emotions, becoming more closed off and isolated.

Presumably due to the traumatic experiences he endured at work, he developed a heightened sense of protectiveness and risk aversion.

He also quit smoking abruptly.

Asst Prof Wang recalls: "During his off-duty hours, he would shut off his emotions, seeking rest and relaxation.

"It appeared that he didn't allow himself to process his emotions, and this deeply troubled Emma, who, though physically distant, was emotionally attached to David.

"This serves as an example of how, even if someone hasn't met the threshold for a clinical diagnosis of PTSD, traumatic experiences can still exert a powerful impact on distressed workers."

Research has indicated that women might exhibit a greater vulnerability to secondary PTSD, compared to men.

"As women often play a more prominent caregiving role within families and are often perceived as more emotionally attuned, they might experience heightened distress due to increased empathetic engagement and the potentially-impaired quality of couple interaction."

"Many high-risk occupations continue to be predominantly male-dominated, resulting in predominantly female partners."

"Consequently, most research on secondary trauma among partners has relied on samples comprising male workers and female partners."

"So, the observed gender difference might not provide a wholly accurate representation of the reality," she points out. "It's not always easy to maintain a boundary between work and personal life."

She continues: "Many people encounter workplace stress on a daily basis; however, as long as it remains manageable within our coping capabilities and effective boundaries are established between work and personal life, it can be controlled without significantly intruding into one's home life."

"When compared to ordinary work-related stress, trauma is arguably one of the most acute, distressing and painful experiences."

"It often surpasses an individual's capacity to manage before leaving the workplace, leading to a more pronounced carry-over of stress from work to home life."

Coping strategies

As has been emphasised frequently, taking care of oneself is just as important as caring for your significant other.

Asst Prof Wang suggests: "Ensuring your own well-being and receiving support is essential before you can provide strong and resilient care for your traumatised partner."

"Prioritise your own needs and implement strategies to relax and detach, even if it occasionally means appearing less empathetic or engaged."

"During moments when you feel helpless, it's crucial to believe that your care does indeed have a positive impact on your loved one, though it may not be immediately apparent to you."

She also encourages couples where one person is undergoing PTSD, to maintain a spirit of reciprocity, even if at times it might feel unbalanced or take time to regain equilibrium.

"As shared by one of my interviewees: 'Please know that your partner is still the same person you loved from Day One. Reciprocity is key.'

"While I'm eager to suggest coping strategies for individuals dealing with distress and secondary PTSD, our research intention was to provide recommendations to organisations operating in hazardous workplaces or roles that frequently expose individuals to trauma," she says.

A crucial step is for employers to thoroughly evaluate their existing preventive and treatment measures, such as counselling services and cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) for trauma victims.

Shockingly, not all, if any, law enforcement institutions in Malaysia have established such measures.

"A wife of a Malaysian police officer once shared with me her concerns about the absence of mental health services for her husband and his colleagues after a traumatic incident at work."

"Despite her efforts to find professional help provided by the institution, she couldn't locate much information."

"This is deeply troubling and highlights the need for greater awareness."

"If the mental health of those serving the country's security, like police officers, isn't adequately protected and cared for, citizens of the nation could be negatively affected," says Asst Prof Wang.