



| By Jeff Gorter MSW, LCSW
& Taylor Devota, MPH

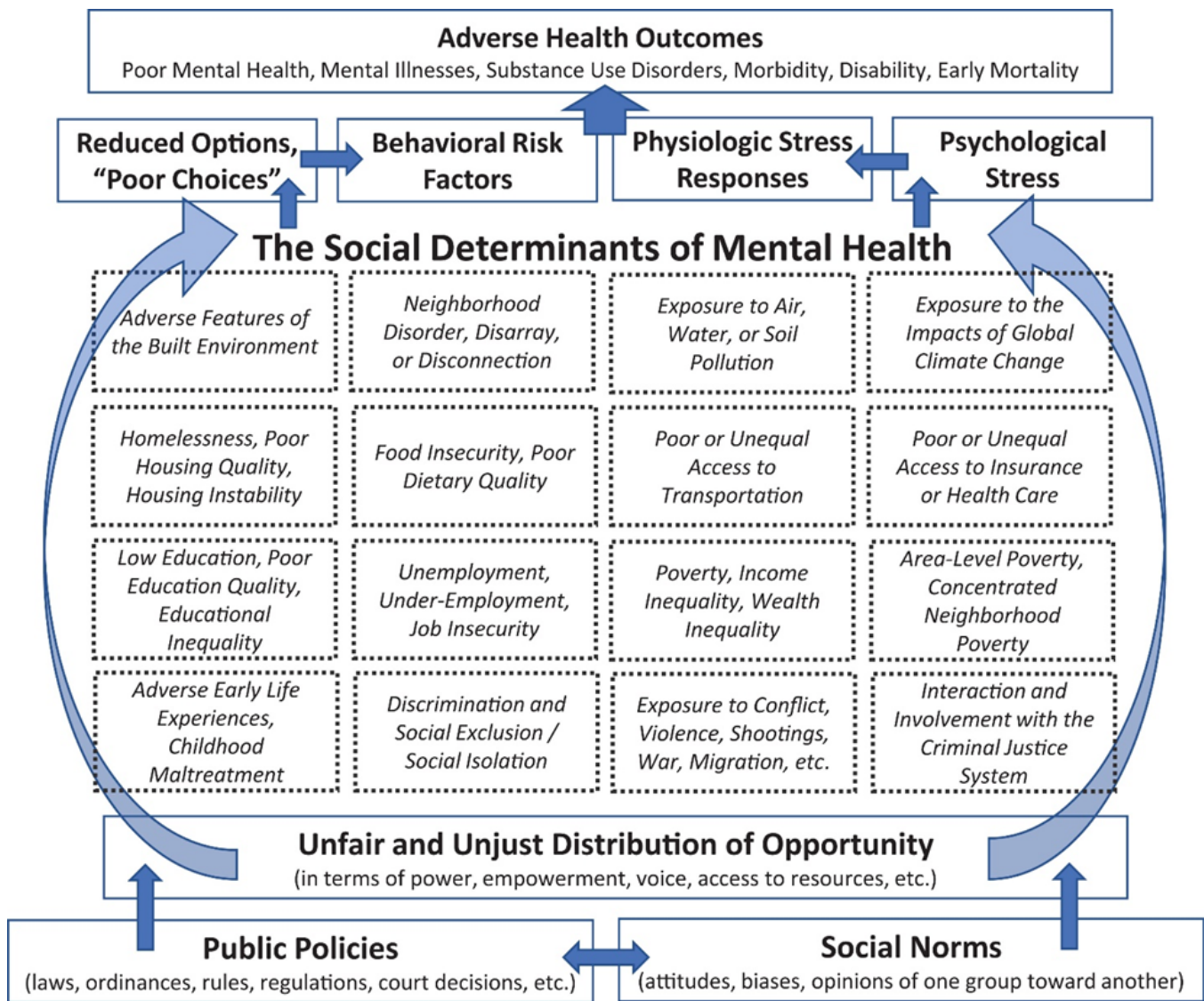
Crisis, Context, and Compassion in Employee Assistance



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We bring ourselves to work, every day. This includes our skills, talents, and aspirations *at* work, as well as our challenges, triumphs and lived experiences *outside* of work. The notion that employees can “check their home life at the door” when they arrive at the workplace has long been debunked and fostering the wellbeing of the whole person – both in and out of work – is a central tenant of any successful Employee Assistance Program.

Recent crises, however, have brought this concept into sharp focus and challenge some long-held assumptions about promoting employee wellbeing. The Global Pandemic upended the traditional notion of work-life balance as “home” and “work” fused into one for many, sharply illuminating how conditions in one sphere may impact the other. These *social determinants* – the context surrounding each employee at home and at work – play a critical role in the wellbeing and mental health of the workforce. Savvy business leaders are leveraging these aspects to improve engagement, productivity, and retention.



Source: SAMHSA, US DHHS

Social Determinants of Mental Health in the Workplace

To understand how social determinants of health are present and impact the workplace, it is best to understand this concept as an integral part of a whole-person approach to health and well-being. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines social determinants of health (SDOH) as *non-medical factors* that influence health outcomes. These factors include conditions in the environment where people are born, live, learn, work and age, which affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality of life outcomes and risks (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022).

For decades now, public health experts have used social determinants of health to better understand physical health outcomes to target interventions, policies and programs. In recent years, the concept of social determinants of *mental* health (SDOMH) has become more widely adopted (see chart). As one of the leading drivers of disability and lost productivity in the workplace, the financial impact of poor or undertreated mental health is significant with an estimated total annual cost to US employers of \$467 billion. (Compton & Shim, 2020). A few examples of the impacts of SDOMH in the workplace include:

- Increased absenteeism among employees who do not have reliable transportation or realistic access to public transportation;
- Decreased productivity among groups without safe, stable, affordable housing;
- Poor or unequal access to health care resources; and
- Isolation among and lack of collaboration between cultural minorities present in the workforce.

EA professionals have long been involved in addressing these issues in the workplace. Because of their unique role, EAPs are often privy to information which identifies prevalent SDOMH factors and can provide valued insights to client organizations. With this information, organizations and leaders are equipped to better discern the social determinants negatively impacting their employee’s mental health and in turn, offer accessible resources and preventative programming.

When Past and Present Collide

Research is clear that that SDOMH can form a constant backdrop – a kind of low-level continuous crisis - in the lived experiences of many employees, but what happens when an acute crisis strikes a workplace or community? Or when several occur in close proximity? How does an immediate crisis impact those whose coping and resilience resources may have already been stretched to maximum capacity *before* the current crisis?

These are not hypothetical questions, but a reflection of the reality many workers have experienced over the last decade. The tragic frequency of workplace and school shootings, the rapid increase in climate-driven events (floods, fires, hurricanes, etc.), outbreaks of civil unrest following instances of racial or political outrage, and the lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, are just a few examples of severely impactful events, all occurring within the context of “regular life” shaped by the social determinants surrounding individuals, both good and bad.

At R3 Continuum, we respond on average to over 2,000 critical incidents each month on behalf of and representing a wide range of EA customers. In that partnership role, we have tracked the rise of these ***cascading collective crises*** in managing disruption, and we are not alone in perceiving this shift. In 2022, Collins Dictionary named *permacrisis* the word of the year, and in 2023 the World Economic Forum Meeting in Davos, Switzerland focused extensively on the management of *polycrisis* in the global workforce. If it feels like we’ve been stumbling from one tragedy to the next, it’s because we have!

Researchers have defined cascading collective crises as “a series of compounding catastrophes that may be both *historic* and *concurrent* in nature and yield stronger emotional response with each new exposure” (Silver, et.al. 2022). The description of *historic* refers to the observation that these events have outsized power and meaning, as they become part of our personal narratives; while the *concurrent* reference reflects that the events occur in close proximity of time and/or space. Combine the acute immediate impact of cascading collective crises with the systemic historic influence of SDOMH and this results in a volatile mix resulting in a weary and wounded workforce. As one reporter noted, “If individual trauma says, ‘I’m not safe,’ then collective trauma says, No one is.” (Walecki, 2022)

EAPs are exceptionally well suited to respond to this need. Through the skillful knowledge and strategic application of interventions at both the organizational and individual levels, EAPs bring trauma-informed consultation essential to enabling business leaders to *lead* during these tumultuous times, while simultaneously offering critical resources to facilitate the resilience and recovery of individual workers. Employers can both influence and have a vested interest in addressing the social determinants in the communities where their employees live, learn, work and play. EAPs have the added advantage of being able to advise, consult and train their corporate clients in trauma-informed leadership.



Caring and Competent

Most business leaders have reached their executive positions because of skill, training, drive and initiative – all admirable characteristics that mark a successful leader. But few have been trained on how to respond to an employee who is wrestling with an emotional challenge, and perhaps even fewer have an understanding of how trauma-informed principles can either negatively impact or benefit their business.

A trauma-informed leader understands that all workers, including themselves, may struggle at any given time with past or current traumatic experiences – and it doesn’t surprise them! Accepting this reality, and embracing their role in addressing it, empowers them to acknowledge and honor those emotions while also communicating a calming expectation of resilience, even growth. This may sound aspirational rather than practical, but savvy leaders recognize that a compassionate and competent response is not only the right thing to do, it is the smart thing to do for their business - it pays dividends in productivity, engagement and employee retention. As Brené Brown, a researcher who’s spent two decades studying courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy says, “Leaders must either invest a reasonable amount of time attending to fears and feelings or squander an unreasonable amount of time trying to manage ineffective and unproductive behavior” (2018).

The US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration provides a powerful model and recommends these four core principles for trauma-informed leaders (2023):

- **Realize** the widespread impact of trauma and the potential for healing/growth;
- **Recognize** the signs and symptoms of trauma in staff, clients, or others in their system;



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- **Respond** by integrating knowledge about trauma in policies, practices and procedures; and
- **Resist** re-traumatizing by committing to the safety, authenticity, and well-being of all staff.

Again, these are certainly worthy goals but how do these principles offer value to a leader during the real-world running of a business? Here's a practical example:

John, an employee at a tool and die manufacturer, is a military veteran and brings a decade of experience in a highly skilled area, having had a great record of productivity and performance with his employer. Lately, however, his output numbers have been falling, attendance is becoming an issue as he has called in sick repeatedly, and he seems distracted, irritable or preoccupied while at work. John's supervisor must address these performance issues and has two choices: 1) initiate written disciplinary action and advise him that he may face sanctions if he does not promptly improve his job performance, or 2) schedule a meeting with John and approach it with concern, a desire to know more, and offer resources, such as EAP support.

The supervisor chooses the latter and begins the meeting by acknowledging John's skills and the positive contributions he has made to the company. He reminds John of past challenges he has successfully faced during his employment and asks if John can help him understand what's getting in the way of his continued success. Because he was approached with respect and compassion, John reveals that his neighborhood has had an increase in violence due to gang activity, reminding him of his past deployment; and he worries about his children's safety. Further, his mother has had to move in with him due to a chronic condition and her access to health care is limited, requiring more time and attention on his part. While none of these issues - his past combat experience, the social determinants of neighborhood turmoil and the poor access to health care for his mother - are the responsibility of the employer, his supervisor recognizes the understandable impact such factors have on John's performance. Confident that with the right resources John can manage these issues, they connect with their EAP to devise a coordinated strategy that addresses the multiple housing, safety, elder care, and behavioral health needs, supporting John to return to a positive trajectory.

This vignette is understandably simplistic and many EA professionals long for this kind of positive outcome! But the critical element to emphasize is the leader's *choice* – the moment of inflexion – when the leader must decide to be punitive or compassionate.

Effective EAPs can train and coach leaders to make that choice intentionally. Through EA education, support and consultation, trauma-informed leaders recognize that past or present crises are inevitable in every workforce, but so is post-traumatic growth, that innate resilient capacity to rise to the occasion, perhaps even rise above. These leaders understand that employees don't represent problems to be solved but rather potentials to be unleashed. In short, they can either say "what's *wrong* with you?" or "what's *strong* with you?". As EA professionals, it behooves us to help them make the right choice. Or as Helen Keller, the noted disability rights activist, once said "Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it."

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Taylor Devota, MPH has over 5 years of experience at R3 Continuum, in various roles encompassing operations, training, and customer partnerships - all with a commitment to delivering outstanding customer service.

Throughout her career, she has demonstrated a strong dedication to making a positive impact on community mental health outcomes, focusing on equity, accessibility and education.

Jeff Gorter, MSW, LCSW is Vice President of Clinical Crisis Response at R3 Continuum. He has responded on behalf of EAPs to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Hurricane Katrina, the earthquake/tsunami in Japan, the Newtown Tragedy, the Las Vegas Shooting, the breaching of the US Capitol, and the 2023 Maui Wildfires, among others.
