Beyond PTSD

# Operationalizing Worker Wellness

Worker wellness has largely been isolated as an individual responsibility summarized by practicing “self-care”. Study participants understood “self-care” to mean using personal time, outside of their work space, to address their mental or physical health needs. In our study, participants generally believed that their wellness was their own responsibility, with little support or concern from their employer.

*One thing that’s important for people who are doing this work, and I think what happens is that we become so invested in the lives of other people, that we don’t realize the harms that we’re bringing upon ourselves. Setting those boundaries and knowing what you’re capable of handling emotionally, whether it’s deciding to go to that funeral, or whether it’s deciding to go to that person’s home after they just got shot up. I think those little decisions, you have to ask*

*yourself, not just are you willing, not just are you physically capable but are you emotionally stable enough to deal with that right now? I never asked myself that question and I found myself oftentimes, not just in dangerous situations, but in things that really worked against my well-being.*

“Self-care” may be interpreted as ‘blaming the individual’ for their own struggles, even when those struggles are connected to their experiences in the workplace. Furthermore, many study participants described *working* as their self-care. If staff are told to practice ‘self-care’ outside of work, this may be confusing or an unhelpful recommendation for staff.

In contrast, some study participants described measures to incorporate wellness into their organizations’ practice. Several supervisors interviewed described personal efforts they made to demonstrate care and concern for the wellbeing of their staff, such as dropping off groceries following personal crises, going for a bike ride together outside of work hours, make an extra effort to check on them if they share that they are having a hard time. Supervisors also described carving out time to strengthen team cohesion through staff retreats and outdoor activities. Street intervention workers repeatedly referenced the importance of team support as a buffer against trauma exposure; thus, supervisor-led efforts to enhance team cohesion may also enhance worker wellness. This suggests that worker wellness is a collective responsibility that both the organization and individual staff contribute to.

*Uh, what came out of that is we hired someone, a clinician to support each staff once a month and providing the clinical support, we call it power hour because we didn’t wanna give it a clinical, uh-therapeutic, word to it because you already know, that the word therapy, not encouraged in our communities.*

The narrative from our study participants indicate there is tremendous opportunity to operationalize worker wellness beyond spontaneous forms of individual kindness and team building activities. Worker wellness can be integrated into all elements of organizational operations, ranging from worker onboarding and orientation, staff supervision, workload management, and ongoing training and professional development.

# Food for Thought

* + How does our organization define worker wellness?
  + What resources do we have available to support worker wellness? What other resources might we need to support worker wellness more effectively?
  + How does our organization present collective responsibility for worker wellness across all areas of work? What policies or practices are in place to contribute toward worker wellness? What kind of messages do we send our staff about “self-care”?