

Pandemic Leaves Some Struggling with Survivor Guilt at Work

Create space for employees to vent about their stress, worries and frustrations

By Kathy Gurchiek

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C OVID-19 has been a source of anxiety and depression for workers who may be worried about job security, reduced hours or wages, dealing with forced isolation, or juggling work and caregiving responsibilities.

Some also are wracked with remorse as they continue working while colleagues are laid off or furloughed.

Survivor guilt can occur when a person survives a traumatic event, such as a car accident, while others do not. It's also seen in the workplace, according to John Hackston, head of thought leadership at the Myers-Briggs Co., which is known for its personality, career and organizational development assessments.

The global pandemic, Hackston said, has forced many organizations to reduce their staffs. That can cause workers who remain to feel guilty; they may also feel stressed or anxious as they are asked to take on more work in their colleagues' absence.

People found by Myers-Briggs testomg to have a "feeling" personality preference are more likely to experience survivor guilt than those with a "thinking" personality preference. Those with a feeling personality tend to make decisions based on emotion and weigh how their decisions affect others; those with a thinking personality tend to make decisions based on objective logic.

Managers and executives are more likely to have a thinking personality preference, Hackston said, and thus are less prone to survivor guilt. It may be less obvious to them "that survivor guilt is even a thing," he said, which is one reason it's important for them to develop more self-awareness and an understanding of others. Communicating about why downsizing was necessary for the organization's success, for example, can help employees better process what happened.

"Staffers with a feeling preference are likely to appreciate knowing that those who have been laid off or furloughed have been treated well," Hackston said. "They will also want to be reassured that even if they had been prepared to make sacrifices themselves, this would not have changed the outcome" for the furloughed or laid-off employees. "They are unlikely," he cautioned, "to respond well to being congratulated" on their good luck in keeping their jobs.

SHRM RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

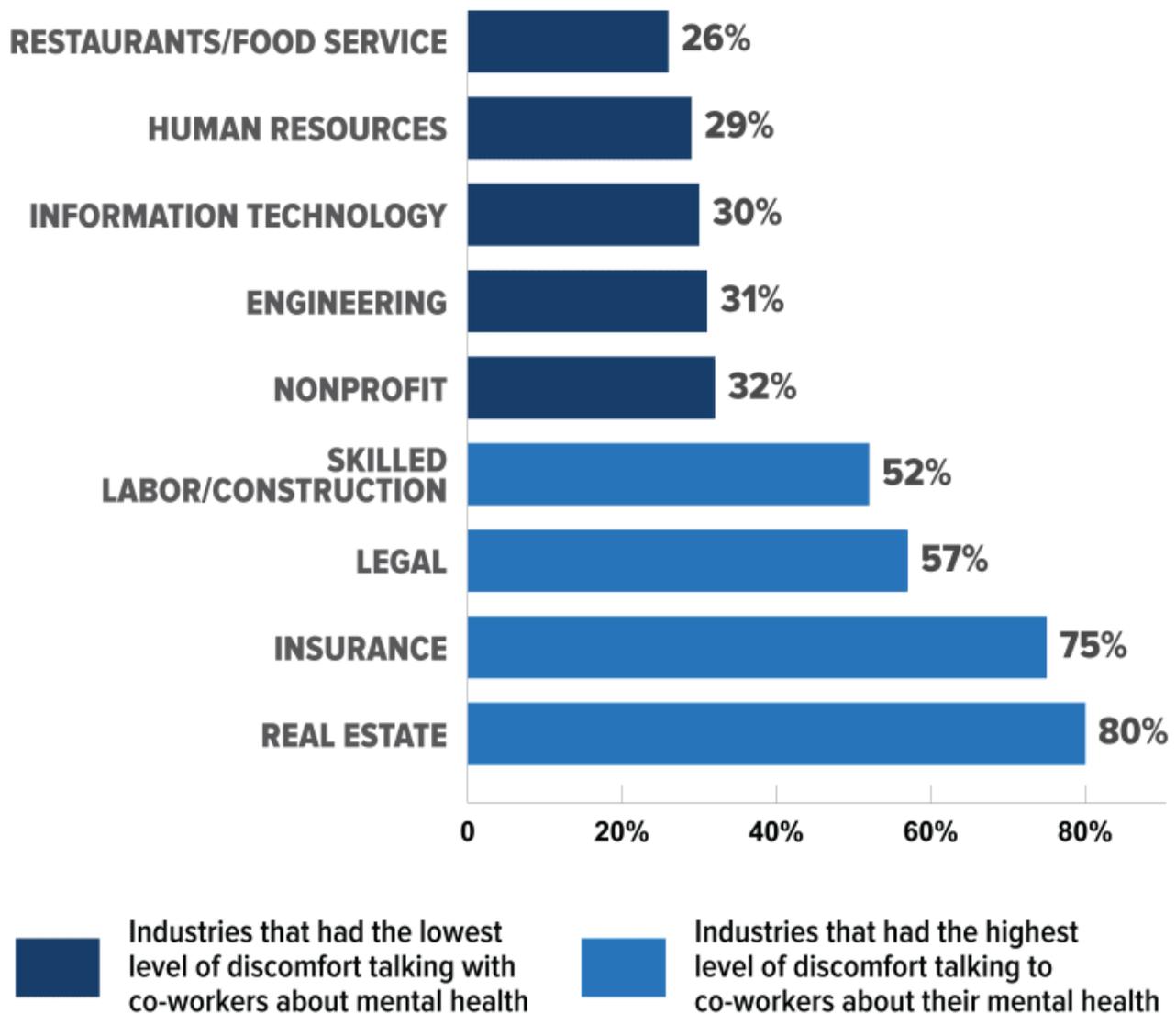
Mental Health (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/mental-health.aspx)

Melissa L. Whitson, an associate professor of psychology at the University of New Haven in Connecticut and a licensed psychologist, said employees dealing with survivor guilt can gain a sense of control by advocating for policy changes or assistance services that would help their laid-off or furloughed colleagues.

People Are Struggling

Research by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) released in early June found that about one in five employees struggled often with depression (www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research-and-surveys/documents/shrm%20cv19%20mental%20health%20update%20v1.pdf?_ga=2.63530982.870424597.1594643089-2001400392.1582295686), and those who lived with members of a vulnerable population struggled more.

DISCOMFORT WITH TALKING ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH VARIES BY INDUSTRY



Source: Maestro Health Mental Health Survey 2020, <https://www.maestrohealth.com/mental-health-survey-whitepaper>

"The unstable state of our workforce and economy is undoubtedly compounding the mental health issues of America's workers," said Dan Jolivet, workplace possibilities practice consultant at The Standard, a financial products and services company based in White Plains, N.Y.

The company released a behavioral health study (<https://standard.com/employer/behavioral-health-resource-center>) earlier this year examining the impact of COVID-19 on employees' mental health. A large majority of those surveyed—91 percent—thought companies should help employees with mental health or substance abuse issues, but 73 percent said mental health is not talked about as a priority at their company.

Jolivet said it's important that "employers act as a bridge to behavioral health support for their employees" and prioritize mental health alongside physical health.

"Fostering an environment of trust, modeling an attainable work/life balance, providing viable support options and educating workers on their employee benefits are valuable steps employers must take," he said. Building a workplace culture that bolsters behavioral health is crucial, especially during this time of uncertainty and added stress we're all experiencing."

Supervisors can destigmatize mental health issues—and the need to seek help—by referring people to free hotlines, counselors and support groups, Whitson said. It's important, too, that leaders acknowledge and display how actions their organization has taken, such as imposing layoffs, is affecting the workforce.

Feelings of guilt among employees may not be limited to when layoffs and furloughs occur, Whitson pointed out. Fear and uncertainty around the pandemic affects everyone "and is going to leak into our work lives and our ability to perform our work." Employees may feel guilty, for example, if they fall short in balancing work and caregiving during the pandemic, said Whitson, the mother of a 1-year-old and a 6-year-old.

"It's OK to be grieving the loss of your workplace and the stress of trying to have and balance it all. Understand it's OK to feel that way. It's normal to feel that way."

Talking as a Safety Valve

The best way to handle mental health issues caused or exacerbated by the pandemic is to talk, whether with a professional, in support groups or at other venues, Whitson noted. Creating space for employees to vent about their stress, worries and frustrations is one way to do this, and it can help to have someone external to the organization guide group discussions.

The good news: Workers who have experienced mental illness are often comfortable talking about it to their co-workers (<https://www.maestrohealth.com/mental-health-survey-whitepaper>), according to a survey for Maestro Health conducted with 2,009 U.S. workers March 20-22:

- 61 percent of employees polled said they are comfortable talking to co-workers about mental health conditions.
- 69 percent said a co-worker has talked to them about his or her struggles with mental health.

The comfort level dips, however, when a manager is involved. Slightly less than half (49 percent) of those surveyed said they are comfortable talking to their manager about a mental health condition. Those with managers who are in their 20s and 30s were more comfortable talking about mental health issues than employees who had managers ages 50 and older.

Industry also can be a factor:

- People working in HR, restaurants, engineering, information technology and nonprofits reported the least stigma discussing mental health issues at work.
- People working in real estate, insurance, law and skilled-labor industries ranked highest among those who do not feel comfortable talking to their manager or co-workers about their mental health.

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) created a one-day virtual panel session for its employees during Mental Health Awareness Month in May "to help destigmatize conversations" about mental health, said Mike Jackson, manager of employee experience at the Society. A panel of SHRM employees talked about mental health issues they have dealt with and coping practices they have found

helpful.

"Hearing about self-care practices—whether it was therapy or meditation or adult coloring—ended up being far more impactful coming from their colleagues than it would have been coming from HR alone," Jackson said.

Other resources from *SHRM Online*:

Promote Mental Health by Communicating Benefits, Leading by Example (www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/Pages/Promote-Mental-Health-by-Communicating-Benefits--and-Leading.aspx)

SHRM Research: COVID-19 Takes a Toll on Employees' Mental Well-Being (www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/Pages/SHRM-Research-COVID-19-Takes-a-Toll-on-Employees-Mental-Well-Being.aspx)

Coronavirus: Overcoming the Loneliness of Social Distancing (www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/Pages/Coronavirus-Overcoming-the-Loneliness-of-Social-Distancing-.aspx)

Starbucks Unveils Mental Health Initiatives for Employees (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/benefits/Pages/Starbucks-Unveils-Mental-Health-Initiatives-for-Employees.aspx)

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