

# *Recovering from Workplace PTSD*

*A Recovery Guide for Mental Health  
Professionals and PTSD Survivors*

Workplace Mental Health Series Volume 1  
First Edition

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To my partner, Ryan, and my mother, Helga, for their kindness,  
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My favorite memory while writing this book was the trip Ryan and I took to visit Iceland. It was incredible to wake up each day in that beautiful natural environment, recharge my batteries, and be inspired its natural rugged beauty and serenity.

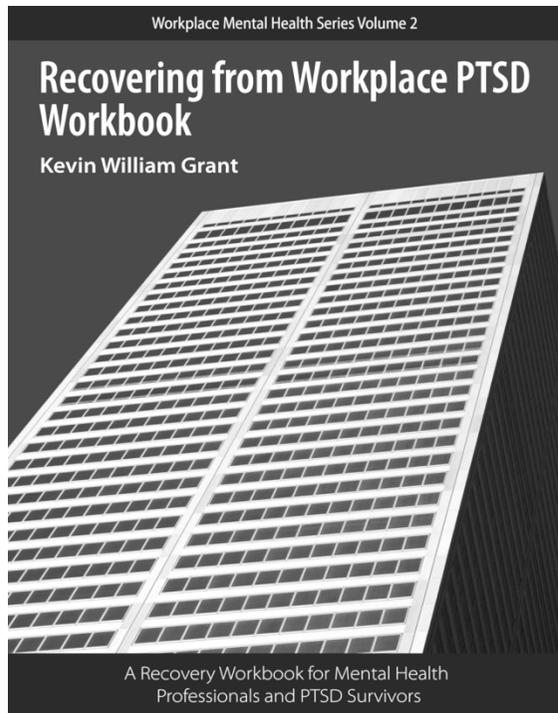
To my partner, Ryan, for your ever-present love, support, creative inspiration, and listening. I treasure your patience over the last 14 months.

Some of the people who helped bring this book to life include the following:

- **Editor:** Mary Ann Blair
- **Cover Photo:** Kevin William Grant
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## COMPANION WORKBOOK

This book has a companion workbook entitled “Recovering from Workplace PTSD Workbook”. The workbook offers powerful tools and techniques that will help you build your personalized PTSD recovery plan. If you are recovering from PTSD or are maintaining your mental health after receiving professional support, the workbook will give you the opportunity to put into practice what you’ve learned in this book and explore your recovery at your own pace.



The “*Recovering from Workplace PTSD Workbook*” is available in large format paperback on Amazon and in eBook format on Amazon, Kobo, and Apple Books.

## BOOK WEBSITE

Please send us your feedback and read supplemental material from the **RecoveringFromWorkplacePTSD.com** website.

## PREFACE

*Recovering from Workplace PTSD* is a recovery guide for mental health professionals and PTSD survivors. It offers no-nonsense, practical advice to help empower PTSD survivors to build and implement their personalized recovery plan.

I approach the complex topic of workplace PTSD from clinical psychology, life coaching, and corporate management perspectives. In the clinical psychology domain, I draw upon my experience as a Clinical Psychology Associate with a Master's in Clinical Psychology, a Bachelor of Science in Psychology, and a Ph.D. Candidate in the field of Social and Personality Psychology. My coaching perspective originates from collaborating with clients as a Certified Professional Coach, certified by the International Coach Federation. The corporate management perspective comes from my work as a product manager at Microsoft, Mozilla, TD Bank, The Globe and Mail, and Bell Canada.

I am a workplace PTSD survivor. Being a gay man who was out at work exposed me to harassment, bullying, and discrimination. This workplace trauma had a cumulative effect on me over two decades that ultimately transformed my recovery journey into a life mission of personally helping others recover from workplace PTSD. My clinical psychology skills and real-world corporate experience fit naturally with this mission, and I decided to research and put together this book.

When I began writing, I had lofty goals and was driven by a sincere passion for effecting positive change. My personal experience with workplace PTSD inspired me to find my inner voice of courage and strength, and I hope this book inspires you to

find yours. At its core, it will give you the tools and insights necessary for you to understand, confront, and heal from workplace PTSD.

I wrote this book for individuals recovering from workplace PTSD and to inspire mental health professionals with new and emerging treatment ideas. The goals of this workplace PTSD recovery plan are to learn more about PTSD—what it is, where it comes from, and why it develops. The book will help you come to terms with the realities of the modern workplace so you can examine your experiences with a fresh and honest perspective and find clarity so you can journey into a peaceful, happy, and rewarding future.

## INTRODUCTION

Stress, anxiety, depression, trauma, bullying, and burnout have all become “accepted realities” of the modern workplace. This book will unpack contemporary workplace realities, educate you about PTSD, and help you build your personalized recovery plan for transformation and recovery.

This recovery program has six core purposes:

1. **Validate your current situation.** This recovery program begins by validating your experiences and breaking through any denial you may be experiencing by examining all the ways you could be traumatized at work.
2. **Identify your realities.** Once you understand how you’ve been traumatized, you’ll learn about how PTSD develops and how to break through the defenses that protect you from the painful experiences you’re facing.
3. **Understand workplace PTSD.** Armed with a deeper understanding of what PTSD is, how it develops, and how you react to trauma, you will be able to identify the support you’ll need to heal and recover.
4. **Build your recovery team and develop your action plan.** Useful tools and techniques will help you connect with and build your team of support professionals and advocates. Once you begin working with your team, you’ll start the recovery process by acquiring a set of skills and techniques to help you weather the storm and begin healing.
5. **Grieve, mourn, and let go.** Recovery will take you on a journey of grieving, mourning, and letting go, which will

transport you to a new sense of calm and acceptance. I'll break down this journey into the stages you'll travel through to get to the other side.

6. **Maintain your recovery.** Finally, I'll share helpful ways to maintain your recovery, manage setbacks with compassion, and track your progress so you can proactively navigate the inevitably choppy waters as you continue your healthy and productive recovery.

*Recovering from Workplace PTSD* contains three central concepts: workplace, recovery, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

A **workplace** is a place where people are employed. Workplaces are incredibly diverse and span government offices, public transit, medical facilities, banks, for-profit corporations, and not-for-profit entities. They are typically organized into hierarchical power structures with employees neatly organized from lower- to higher-ranking individuals. **Recovery** refers to the process of healing from trauma by applying a variety of tools and techniques. **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)** is a mental illness with significant impacts on an individual's mental health. PTSD develops in some people who have experienced traumatic events, which include crimes, natural disasters, workplace abuse, bigotry, accidents, war or conflict, or other threats to life and self. PTSD can develop from a traumatic experience you experience or observe happening to others, such as witnessing a horrific accident. PTSD can also develop after a sudden and unexpected loss, such as the death of a loved one or the loss of a job.

An experience is traumatic when it is incredibly frightening, overwhelming, and causes high levels of distress. Trauma is unexpected, and many people say they felt powerless to stop or

change the event as it was happening. It is very common for someone with PTSD to reimagine the traumatic event after it's over. Many people experience flashbacks, nightmares, and spontaneous vivid memories of the events that feel as if they come from nowhere.

PTSD survivors often avoid things that remind them of the event—for example, an airplane crash survivor may avoid flying at all costs. PTSD can make people feel very nervous or on edge all the time. Many are easily startled, have a hard time concentrating, feel irritable, or have problems sleeping. They may also manifest feelings of dread, as if something terrible is about to happen to them, even when they know, rationally, that they're safe. Others react by feeling numb and detached; they perceive things around them as not feeling real, as if they're disconnected from their body or thoughts, or have a hard time feeling emotions. Another typical reaction is to self-medicate using alcohol or drugs.

Scary and emotionally traumatic situations occur for everyone at some point in their lives. Individual reactions vary from person to person. Some people might feel nervous, others may have difficulty sleeping, and many ruminate on the details of the situation. These thoughts or actions are a healthy response. Typically, these reactions subside over time, and people eventually go back to their daily lives and move forward. PTSD, on the other hand, lasts much longer and can severely disrupt a person's life.

Symptoms usually begin within three months of the traumatic incident, but they can take years to appear. They must last more than a month and be severe enough to interfere with a person's life to be considered PTSD. Some people recover within six months, while others' symptoms last much longer or become chronic. But

not all traumatic experiences lead to PTSD. We aren't sure why only some people are affected, but it's likely linked to specific factors including the length of time the trauma lasted, the number of other traumatic experiences in a person's life, their reaction to the event, and the kind of support they received after the event.

Trauma doesn't always refer to a single event in the past. Repeated or prolonged acts, such as sexual abuse, sexual violence, abduction, or harrowing experiences during wartime, can impact a person's life far beyond the symptoms of PTSD. The term **complex PTSD** is used to describe these experiences.

*Recovering from Workplace PTSD* is divided into four sections from self-discovery to recovery. Some of the sections may be more relevant to you and your situation than others. You can dip in wherever you like because each section stands alone. If you would like more information about a particular topic, the Index and Contents are great places to start.

**Section 1: Understanding and accepting workplace realities.**

Recovery always starts with an intuitive sense that something isn't quite right. For some people, their lives can feel broken, and daily living becomes an uphill battle. This section inventories the most common realities of corporate life that contribute to or trigger extreme stress and trauma. My experience working in corporate environments and interviewing workplace PTSD survivors inspired this list. The purpose of this section is to validate your experiences and let you know you're not alone.

**Section 2: Identifying your realities.** This section will identify and define what you're experiencing. Since recognizing you're experiencing PTSD is the first step toward healing and recovery, here I'll introduce the process of self-reflection and understanding.

The impacts of workplace PTSD are real and can be debilitating. Understanding the underlying causes of PTSD will help you come to terms with your reality. Acknowledging and accepting your current situation will unlock and begin the healing process. I review the core symptoms of PTSD, such as nightmares, flashbacks, hypervigilance, numbing, avoidance, and triggers. Then I cover the close connection between PTSD and other mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive thoughts. The section ends with a review of the brain changes and health impacts associated with PTSD.

**Section 3: Building your action plan.** Researching and selecting your support team is the foundation of an effective recovery plan. I begin by reviewing the different types of recovery professionals capable of treating PTSD. Next, I cover strategies for effectively researching and contacting local professional support options, and I review effective PTSD treatments in more detail. At the end of this section, I teach you how to become a self-advocate, so you can clearly communicate your needs and wants and talk openly to your recovery team about your thoughts and feelings.

**Section 4: Grieving, mourning, letting go, and moving forward.** Grief and trauma go hand in hand, and this section begins by exploring that connection. As you'll learn, the PTSD recovery process is broken down into six stages of mourning. The grieving and mourning process helps us make sense of what happened to us and ultimately find a path forward. We form a new self-identity when we let go of our past self and reach a place of calm and acceptance. At this point, we're ready to let go and move forward with our lives. The "Final Thoughts" section covers this topic in more detail.

**Workbook Exercises.** Workbook exercises are available in a companion volume entitled “*Recovering from Workplace PTSD Workbook*”. Exercises will help you digest the content, reflect on your situation, learn from that reflection, and incrementally create a personalized recovery plan. Each exercise in the workbook walks you through a process of self-reflection and self-discovery to help you understand and make sense of your situation.

Recovering from PTSD is a step-by-step process. Whether you want to make a change in the next couple of months or the next few years, this book is designed to help you achieve the following:

- Open your mind to creatively explore your PTSD recovery options
- Identify and understand the triggered emotions that surface with your PTSD symptoms
- Deepen your approach to life and your lifestyle needs
- Define what you need in your work environment to feel healthy and happy
- Outline your recovery action plan and personal recovery steps
- Transform your passions and interests into a viable recovery plan

Creating a personalized recovery plan is an empowering way to actively participate in your recovery. PTSD is a severe mental health issue, and it is critical to find qualified support professionals. The workbook exercises in the companion volume are designed to be paired with the assistance of a qualified mental health professional with PTSD recovery experience. Later in the book, I systematically walk you through how to research and contact local support professionals. I recommend skipping forward

to this section now if you feel you urgently need professional assistance. Support systems in your local community are ready to help you at any time.

When we're trapped in a negative situation at work, it's easy to lose perspective because we're surrounded by toxicity daily. What initially seemed bizarre or crazy can evolve into resigned acceptance, denial, and a feeling of futility. We often feel a profound sense of relief when we realize we're not the only person going through something. Whether it's life stress, a significant life change, a physical or mental health diagnosis, or anything in between, we often suffer in silence, fearful that we will be misunderstood or considered different. A powerful technique applied throughout this book is **normalizing your experience**, which is the process of recognizing that an experience isn't strange, unusual, unique, or shameful. Throughout your recovery journey, you'll have an opportunity to understand and explore your experience from different angles.

Part of being human is the desire to feel like you belong. By normalizing your experiences, I hope you grow to understand yourself better and learn to manage your physical and mental health needs. Your recovery process is about realizing that others have shared similar experiences and that your reactions or symptoms are normal and real. I hope this recovery journey breaks down barriers and fosters within you a sense of openness and honesty.

## **SECTION 1: UNDERSTANDING WORKPLACE REALITIES**

### **Introduction**

Your career impacts your mental health in many important ways. A career that allows you to apply your unique talents and skills in a satisfying and personally fulfilling way spills over into other areas of your life in a positive way. A rewarding career enables you to express who you are and live the life you want. Sometimes, though, a job may look great in theory, but it clashes with who you are and how you want to live your life, and you cannot find a way to include your needs and desires at work.

Our work environments are distinctly different from the contexts we live in with our friends and families. Switching between work and non-work time requires us to take on vastly different cultural and behavioral norms. The divergence between those two worlds often leads to cognitive and emotional conflicts within us.

The first step in your recovery process is acknowledging the workplace realities contributing to your PTSD symptoms. The main goal of this section is to help you identify those realities that are also seeping into your leisure time. I'll discuss some workplace realities that are proven to contribute to the development of PTSD symptoms and identify their impacts. If you're being abused or have experienced a traumatic event at work, you're not alone, and many treatments and support resources are available to support you through your recovery. If you're experiencing extreme symptoms that are making your life difficult to manage, I encourage you to skip ahead to Section 3, which covers how to

find the support you need.

I hope that this section brings you comfort, hope, and optimism by learning to more clearly understand your realities at work. My objective is to give you clarity on how your situation at work could be contributing to the development of PTSD symptoms and impacting your mental health. Your workplace PTSD recovery journey begins by seeing your situation more clearly and opening yourself up to finding the support you need to recover.

## **Abusive Workplaces**

Workplaces are tightly organized groups of individuals working together to form a culture, objectives, goals, missions, processes, and profits. Every work environment has a distinct and evolving culture of beliefs and behaviors that determine how employees and management interact with colleagues and customers. Often, workplace culture is implied, not expressly defined, and develops organically over time through the cumulative traits of all the people within the organization.

The culture at work is often reflected in the dress code, business hours, office configuration, employee benefits, turnover, hiring decisions, treatment and satisfaction of customers, and operations. Culture is a huge part of what it is like to work for an organization and directly influences what's considered acceptable or unacceptable behavior.

Workplaces become abusive when employees are denied basic human needs, dignity, and respect—when they don't receive the validation, information, encouragement, and communication they need from management or coworkers. Employees become resigned to being mistreated because they're surrounded by abusive behavior daily and have no way to change the situation. Most

employees fail to recognize and acknowledge workplace abuse simply because it becomes the norm.

Individuals who become targets of workplace abuse exhibit personal behaviors that are vastly different from the organizations' norms. For example, a woman entering a predominantly male profession, such as policing, might have to tolerate sexist male behavior to stay in that profession. Pushing back might lead to being marginalized, scapegoated, and finally pushed out.

Workplace abuse is so prevalent that victims often do not realize they are a target. Denial prevents many workers from acknowledging workplace abuse until they eventually experience a severely traumatic episode. Then the abuse and trauma become so unbearable that their resources become strained and PTSD symptoms begin.

Workers stay in abusive situations through the process of adapting to workplace norms, which has four stages:

1. A new employee observes and assesses the behavior of others in the organization.
2. Although it's challenging, they must change their behavior to adapt and match other employees.
3. The employee then starts enforcing the learned behavior and norms on other employees.
4. The adaptation process ends when they accept their new reality.

Authoritarian organizations develop cultures that tend to blame problems on individuals, and task accomplishment becomes a secondary priority. Exercising power and control within the organization means productivity and profits generally suffer. Because there are currently so few collaborative organizations,

abused workers must generally try to cope within authoritarian workplace systems. Recognizing work abuse when it happens is crucial.

Authoritarian organizations have the following characteristics:

- This type of organization is the most widespread.
- It has an enforced power structure that is rigid and hierarchical.
- An autocratic approach to leadership creates the following situations:
  - Leaders make all decisions on processes, tasks, and goals based on their ideas and judgments and rarely accept advice or feedback from subordinates.
  - The leadership style is to get the job done at any cost.
  - Individuals and teams are not empowered.
- Morale suffers, and employee happiness declines in the long term.

Collaborative organization are characterized by the following:

- This type of organization is less common.
- It has a flat organizational structure.
- Individuals in positions of authority have empathy and align their needs with those of their workers; leaders listen to their employees.
- Leaders promote high levels of cross-team collaboration.
- Everyone works together to make decisions; task accomplishment is the prime objective.
- Communication is honest and open.
- Its flexibility means it can adapt and evolve as things change.

Collaborative organizations allow employees to feel more

connected to their jobs and coworkers, reduces workplace stress, makes their jobs easier, allows for more work freedom, and in general makes them happier people. Collaboration not only positively impacts the lives of employees at work but also at home. Workplace abuse, bullying, harassment, and discrimination are less likely in collaborative organizations, since peer pressure suppresses these negative forces. Experiencing a collaborative workplace leaves a lasting positive impact and makes it difficult to return to an authoritarian system.

## Dangerous Working Conditions

Some careers include a higher likelihood of experiencing traumatic events that can lead to the development of PTSD.

### High Risk Professions

- Military and combat personnel
- Law enforcement officers
- EMTs and paramedics
- Firefighters
- Healthcare workers
- First responders during disasters
- Journalists
- Transit and train operators
- Prison employees
- Security guards/workers during armed robberies
- Workers during industrial site disasters

**The Military:** Serving in the *military* is a high-risk factor for the development of PTSD, although combat veterans appear to develop PTSD at different rates depending on the severity and length of exposure to traumatic experiences. There are also high

incidences of reported sexual harassment and sexual abuse in the military. The rates of PTSD are relatively high when compared to the overall prevalence in the general population.

**Law Enforcement:** Not only can *law enforcement officers* experience direct threats and stressful conditions, they regularly witness the devastating effects of assaults, robberies, kidnappings, and violent events. However, individuals in this profession have surprisingly lower-than-expected rates of PTSD. An estimated 20 percent overall may result from having access to counseling and rigorous pre-employment screenings.

**EMTs and paramedics** are routinely exposed to life-threatening incidents and have more health problems than individuals in other occupations. PTSD rates in this group are as high as 20 percent. PTSD prevalence in this profession is comparable to law enforcement.

**Firefighters** conduct paramedic activities and are the first responders for natural disasters. Firefighting is a dangerous profession that exposes workers to stressful conditions and traumatic events, ranging from threats to their safety and experiencing the devastating effects of catastrophes. The prevalence of PTSD in this group can be as high as 20 percent. Volunteer firefighters may have even higher rates because they don't have access to the same level of support as career firefighters.

**Healthcare workers**, especially those working in emergency rooms and intensive care units, are also at higher risk. Nurses working in critical care units are more likely to develop PTSD than nurses in other groups. While senior-level nurses report fewer PTSD symptoms than junior ones, they report higher rates of burnout. Healthcare workers exposed to patients that have experience violence, such as an assault victim, are more likely to develop

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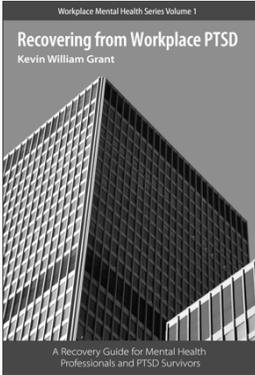
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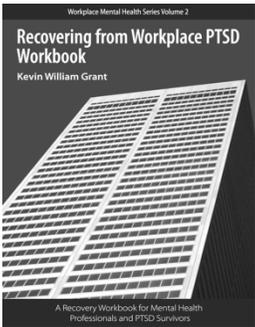
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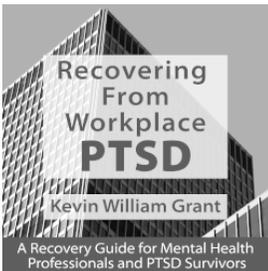
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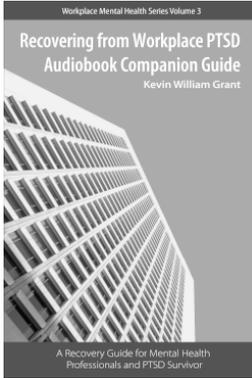
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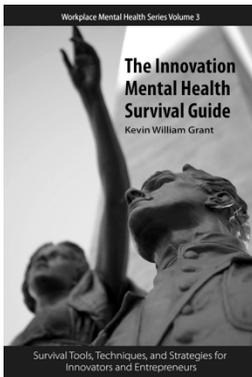
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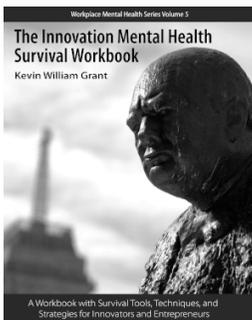
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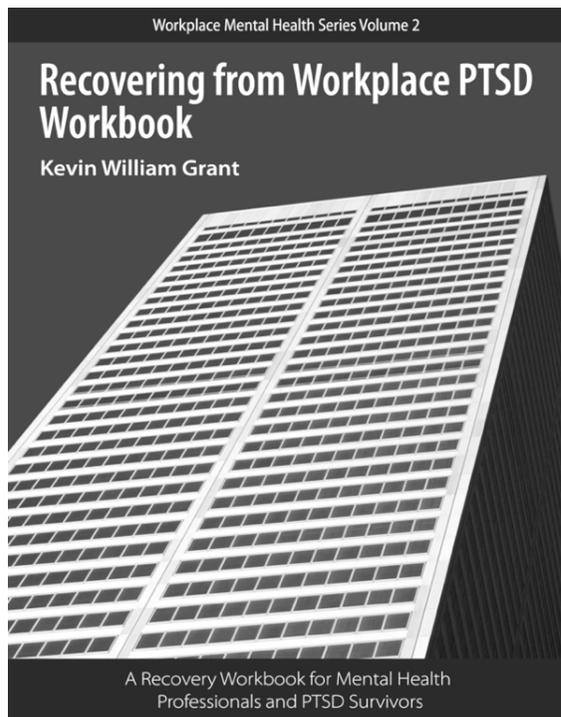
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