

LEADING THROUGH CRISIS

A guide for FE leaders and managers

Written by Education Support

Content warning: This guide mentions trauma, suicide and bereavement.

Introduction

Transforming the lives of learners wouldn't be possible without the staff who work tirelessly within the further education (FE) sector. The reality is, our entire education system relies on you all being physically and mentally well enough to carry out your roles.

Despite this truth, we know you are navigating a complex set of shared challenges; some will be sector specific and others are influenced by external factors. These challenges have the potential to not only profoundly affect you as an individual, but the entire FE workforce collectively.

In this guide we shine a spotlight on these shared experiences, how they manifest through various channels and the impact on FE communities. We also consider types of trauma that may arise, such as collective trauma, and offer strategies to help you maintain workforce wellbeing.

We also suggest proactive steps you can take while leading through crisis, with real-life examples and look at the importance of creating trauma-informed FE settings.



Navigating FE pressures

As FE leaders and staff, we know your main focus is helping your learners to thrive. But often there are factors affecting the sector that can make you feel under pressure, or pull your focus in other directions. These pressures may also lead to heightened stress levels among FE staff.

Below we consider some of the common sector pressures you face then give examples of how other FE settings are approaching them.

FE sector influences

1.Redundancies

Risk of redundancy is not only a worry for FE staff against the backdrop of a cost of living crisis. Redundancies also mean that more work is done by fewer people and some are on insecure contracts.

2.Staff recruitment and retention

96 per cent of colleges have difficulty recruiting, with an average 25 posts per college remaining unfilled at the start of the academic year.¹ In the TWIX 2022 report, 61 per cent of staff had taken steps to leave their current job in FE.

¹ <https://feweek.co.uk/we-know-how-to-fix-fes-staffing-shortages-its-time-college-leaders-did-it/>

3. Workload

Education Support's report '[Supporting Staff Wellbeing in Higher Education](#)' found that 62 per cent of further education staff reported regularly working over 40 hours a week and 21 per cent working more than 50 hours per week.



4. Inspections or reviews

At some point in the next few working weeks, it's possible that you – and your effectiveness in your role – will be in the spotlight. It could be at your performance appraisal meeting or during an inspection. It can be difficult dealing with the stress in the lead up and aftermath of these events.

5. Funding rule compliance

All FE settings have to ensure that they are compliant with a range of funding streams in relation to the provision they deliver which can create additional pressure e.g. apprenticeships, learner support funding, adult education budgets, study programmes.

External influences

Below we have looked at some of the external factors affecting the wellbeing of FE staff. We have also suggested some strategies leaders might want to implement to support staff wellbeing:

1. Cost-of-living crisis

A survey carried out by Censuswide on behalf of Mind showed that the mental health of nearly 8 in 10 people in the UK has been affected by the cost-of-living crisis.² And we know that staff living in poverty or experiencing financial stress are more likely to develop mental health problems, affecting areas from their sleep, to feeling anxious, stressed or hopeless.³

2. Post-Covid landscape

Much has changed for FE staff since the height of the pandemic. Some of the changes to working practices have been beneficial for FE staff i.e. hybrid working offers more flexibility, but some staff experience loneliness due to home working, or relationships can be tricky to build with a mix of virtual and in-person meetings. Many learners have also struggled following the pandemic which has the potential to impact FE staff.

3. War and conflict

It is possible you will come into contact with colleagues and learners who have been impacted by war or conflict, or you may have been directly impacted yourself. Learners and staff affected by war and conflict may need extra support from their FE setting.⁴

4. Energy crisis

² https://www.mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/news/almost-20-million-adults-never-speak-about-mental-health-and-it-s-set-to-get-worse-due-to-the-cost-of-living-crisis/#_ftn1

³ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/policy-and-advocacy/mental-health-and-cost-of-living-crisis-report>

⁴ <https://www.eaie.org/blog/supporting-students-ukraine.html>

As we began to recover from the pandemic, demand for gas increased and couldn't be met because of a supply shortage. This caused gas prices to go up in 2021. Russia's invasion of Ukraine then threatened supplies, and this drove up the price of gas even more.⁵

5. Cyber attacks

According to the National Centre for Cyber Attacks⁶, UK education settings are at highest risk of cyber attacks. They warn of an increase in ransomware attacks at the start of term, with FE settings needing to put additional steps in place to keep criminals out of their networks.



Offering hope - what can leaders do?

You may want to consider these tips from our FE steering group and an Independent Training Provider:

- Find ways staff can work more flexibly
- Make sure staff are kept informed of changes to working practices in good time
- Discuss strategies to improve work-life balance
- Develop better opportunities for continuing professional development
- Offer support for health and wellbeing
- Facilitate peer support groups for staff
- Have an open-door policy
- Book regular check-ins with staff and connect on a personal level
- Lead by example by promoting self-care
- Reduce meeting durations with staff and opt for walking meetings if possible
- Have an environment that promotes healthy wellbeing, with plenty of light, windows and plants

Why should FE settings care about staff experiencing trauma?

It is important to remember that everyone is different, and staff will not be affected by shocking or severe events (such as those mentioned above) in the same way. However, many people will experience traumatic events throughout their lives. According to the Royal Society of Psychiatrists, about one third of adults in England report having experienced at least one traumatic event during their lifetimes.⁶

Stephanie Lemek, founder of The Wounded Workforce, shares a simple analogy explaining why you should take notice of staff experiencing trauma:

Each of us has a suitcase that we bring with us to work, and in that suitcase is all our knowledge, experience, education, skills, knowledge and expertise. It is exactly the reason we were hired to the team! That suitcase also includes all our lived experience – and for many of us – that includes experience of trauma.

⁵ <https://energysavingtrust.org.uk/your-questions-about-the-energy-crisis-answered-by-the-experts/>

⁶ <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/mental-illnesses-and-mental-health-problems/coping-after-a-traumatic-event>

Lemek argues, if you consider the range of people on your team and their life experiences, it is very likely many of them will be experiencing the affects of trauma in their life, which inevitably will be showing up at work whether they are aware of it, or not.

When you consider the pervasive issue of trauma, she concludes that it makes sense for organisations to take notice and adopt a trauma-informed approach (a concept we will explore later in this guide) to help maintain the wellbeing of the workforce⁷; which in the context of FE, has the potential to improve relationships with learners and ultimately how you teach them.



What do we mean by 'collective trauma'?

In basic terms, 'trauma' refers to the impact on an individual after a traumatic event, 'collective trauma' refers to the impact on a large group of people – usually entire communities or societies, following a traumatic event which takes place over a specific time period. Collective trauma can be caused by significant events such as war, terrorist attacks or natural disasters.

It is worth being aware of the language we use, especially when using the word 'trauma'. In day-to-day life, sometimes people may refer to an event as being 'traumatic' or feeling 'traumatised' by an experience; when in fact they mean it was difficult or inconvenient. For example, your train being delayed before a meeting might be annoying or stressful, but it is not a traumatic event which can lead you to experience trauma.

In your most recent memory, you may recognise or have experienced the collective trauma associated with the Covid-19 pandemic.⁸ During this time, many FE staff were working with colleagues and learners who may have lost loved ones or were facing difficult situations at home, or they may have been facing these struggles themselves.

Collective trauma has been described in academic terms as 'a cataclysmic event that shatters the basic fabric of society...collective trauma is also a crisis of meaning.'⁹ Sociologist¹⁰, Kai Erikson unpicks 'the crisis of meaning'. He describes the impact of collective trauma as: 'a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer

⁷ [Building trauma-informed workplaces with Stephanie Lemek, The Wounded Workplace podcast](#)

⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20210203-after-the-covid-19-pandemic-how-will-we-heal>

⁹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6095989/> Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning Hirschberger G. Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning. Front Psychol. 2018 Aug 10;9:1441. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01441. PMID: 30147669; PMCID: PMC6095989.

¹⁰ Erikson, K., 1976. Everything in its path. Simon and Schuster.

from it, so it is a gradual realisation that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared'.¹¹



Understanding secondary trauma

According to an Association of Colleges survey¹², colleges are aware of 1,357 suicide attempts by learners in the last year. 94 per cent of colleges reported that they'd had to deal with attempted suicides in the last twelve months, and they're dealing with a growing number of learners with both diagnosed and undiagnosed mental health conditions. Staff in further education are dealing with problems for which they may have little training, and which are outside their comfort zone. This can lead them to feeling helpless which can in turn increase their stress levels.

Equally, any type of bereavement in your FE community, including the loss of a colleague, can be extremely distressing and lead to you experience trauma. You may be particularly affected if you are in a leadership role and doing your best to support colleagues.

Likewise, FE staff are often the first line of support for learners dealing with a wide range of personal issues, from serious mental health struggles to financial hardships due to the cost of living crisis. As FE staff witness and empathise with these struggles faced by learners, they can experience secondary trauma, which can accumulate over time. This experience can be compounded when multiple staff members are suffering with the impact of secondary trauma.¹³

And secondary trauma can be an indirect experience of or exposure to a traumatic event. Many situations may trigger this type of trauma. It may be that you have heard an account of a traumatic event from a colleague which was emotionally challenging. This can have a knock-on effect on your mental health and mean that you also need support.

The mind-body connection

Our bodies are not designed to cope with a constant or long-term presence of stress hormones. They are messengers, intended to be present in the body for short periods. Their long-term or chronic presence in our bodies can actually have significant health consequences including heart problems,

¹¹ Erikson, 1976, pp. 153–154

¹² <https://feweek.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/AoC-Mental-Health-Survey-Report-2023.pdf>

¹³ https://www.et-foundation.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Looking-After-Yourself-and-Colleagues-while-Supporting-Learners_Secondary-Trauma.pdf

diabetes¹⁴, problems with our immune system¹⁵ and musculoskeletal conditions¹⁶.

But what about after a stressful or traumatic event? Stress doesn't leave your body because the stressor is gone. By this, we mean that even though a source of stress is no longer present (i.e. someone we are in conflict with leaves the room) we will still have stress hormones present in our body – we are still physically under stress. We need to find a way to tell our bodies that we are no longer under threat and it can stop producing stress hormones. This is called 'completing the stress cycle'.

Take a look at our guide '[Looking After Yourself and Supporting Colleagues while Supporting Learners – Secondary Trauma](#)' for seven evidence-based strategies to tell your body that it's safe again, and it can turn off the body's alarm system.

Supporting staff following a traumatic event

Sometimes traumatic events happen while people are at work (and as mentioned, working in FE can make it more likely you may be exposed to secondary trauma, especially in pastoral roles). Some people will experience traumatic events outside of work, but benefit from a supportive work environment while they recover.

If a person or several people who work for you have experienced a traumatic event then the Royal Society of Psychiatrists suggest a number of ways you can support them, including: ¹⁷

- **Checking in** – speak to the person or people in your FE setting about how they are. This can help you to find out if they have the support they need, and to notice any changes in them. Be wary of accepting 'I'm fine' as a response if you suspect that someone is not doing well.
- **Talking about what happened** – if the traumatic event happened at your FE setting, it can help to talk openly about the event. It can also help to tell colleagues where they can seek support if they are struggling. See the sign-posting at the end of this guide.
- **Creating a supportive atmosphere** – encouraging positive relationships in teams can support a positive atmosphere in the workplace. You can also encourage staff to attend any workshops or utilise any support systems available to them.
- **Making reasonable adjustments** – speak to your team members to find out what reasonable adjustments at work might make them more comfortable. This could include things like flexible hours or small changes to the working environment. Always ask what someone needs rather than assuming you know what will be helpful.

What else can FE leaders do?

1. AoC recommends the impact on staff mental health should be considered when making all policy decisions
2. Make sure staff know about wellbeing policies and what help is available to them. Just because there is a policy doesn't mean staff know about it!
3. Does your FE setting have links to healthcare organisations or access to confidential telephone counselling, such as those offered by an Employee Assistance Programme?
4. Make time for staff to speak to managers and check in with how they are feeling

¹⁴ Lloyd, C, Smith, J, & Weinger, K (2005). Stress and diabetes: a review of the links. *Diabetes spectrum*, 18(2), 121-127. sakkynidig.com/psykologi/artvit/lloyd2005.pdf

¹⁵ n, L, Krupka, D, Davidson, K W, and Edmondson, D (2012). Meta-analysis of perceived stress and its association with incident coronary heart disease. *The American journal of cardiology*, 110(12), 1711-1716. 21 Dhabhar, F S (2014). Ef

¹⁶ The New Reality Report: <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/media/cxkexon2/teaching-the-new-reality.pdf>

¹⁷ [How to cope after a traumatic event guide](#), Royal Society of Psychiatrists.

5. Allow dedicated periods for staff to spend time with each other (although, as mentioned below, this should not be a replacement for professional support).

When to seek professional help

All of these actions above can have a positive impact on FE staff wellbeing. But remember, they are not a replacement for professional support. Sources of further support for staff after a traumatic event to consider are:

- A GP referral
- Find an NHS psychological therapy service - The NHS Talking Therapies, for anxiety and depression programme (formerly known as Improving Access to Psychological Therapies, IAPT) - <https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-nhs-talking-therapies-service>
- Assist Trauma Care – Offers telephone counselling and support to individuals and families in the aftermath of trauma. Tel: 01788 551919. <http://assisttraumacare.org.uk/>
- You can call the Education Support Helpline 24/7 for free on: 08000 562 561 and speak to a trained counsellor.



Five strategies for leading through crisis

1. Build a trauma-informed FE setting

It is important to remember being trauma-informed does not mean diagnosing or treating staff experiencing trauma, which is the job of a trauma professional.¹⁸ Broadly speaking, becoming trauma-informed means recognising and raising awareness of the impact of trauma throughout your FE setting, reviewing all aspects of your setting through a trauma-informed lens. Then integrating and embedding knowledge about trauma into all areas of your FE setting including policies, procedures, language, culture and practices.¹⁹

We also suggest ensuring you have a psychologically safe working environment. To learn more about psychological safety read our guide '[Psychological Safety in Further Education Settings](#)'.

It is sensible to take the time to do your research on what becoming trauma-informed would look like for your FE setting, bringing in outside expertise where possible. It is important to remember being trauma-informed does not mean diagnosing or treating staff experiencing trauma, which is the job of a trauma professional.²⁰

¹⁸ [Building trauma-informed workplaces with Stephanie Lemek, The Wounded Workplace podcast](#)

¹⁹ <https://www.inspirenorth.co.uk/news/becoming-a-trauma-informed-organisation/>

²⁰ [Building trauma-informed workplaces with Stephanie Lemek, The Wounded Workplace podcast](#)

However, you can watch this quick [video](#) by Inspire North, about what becoming trauma-informed meant for them as an organisation and the benefits they noticed, to get you started.

What it looks like in real-life:

In Greater Manchester, colleges took steps to support staff and learners by becoming trauma informed as [seen in this video](#). As a result of their work, the colleges have changed many policies and procedures and see nurturing as one of their key goals. In practice, for them this means:

- Bringing in outside expertise to train and support colleges
- An enhanced pastoral and safeguarding team
- Training for curriculum staff to develop coping strategies
- Talking therapies and helping students and staff to communicate how they're feeling
- Helping students to manage their own mental well-being
- Encouraging everyone to be kind to people.

2. Consider the impact on *all* staff

During times of extreme adversity, not all staff are going to be impacted or react in the same way. Gender, culture, religion, economics and many other factors can compound their personal experiences. As an FE leader you can support staff in these situations by not making assumptions about an individual's experience, asking open ended questions and being sensitive to their unique perspective, which may be different from your own.

At an organisational level, Stephanie Lemek, a Human Resources (HR) and trauma informed workplace specialist, advises that you have a robust EDI strategy in place.

What it looks like in real-life:

The Man Cave West Lothian College was set up by Thomas Barlow, a full-time lecturer in Electrical Engineering and Matt Farnham who works in Student Support at West Lothian College. Thomas was affected by talking to a student who had attempted suicide: 'Hearing the student talk about what he was feeling, how isolated he felt, I realised I was in a position to help. I had thought before that my students would be open enough to talk about these things. What I realised at that moment was that men don't open up to each other and we need to change that.'

It offers weekly in-person and online sessions which give learners and staff a chance to have open conversations in a safe space as well as toolkits to help people spot the signs of someone struggling.

The Man Cave can be found [@themancave_WLC](#) (Twitter), [TheManCaveWLC](#) (Facebook) or [@the_man_cave_wlc](#) (Instagram).

3. Learn lessons from another sector

For example, while trauma might be a more recent concept for consideration in FE settings, much can be learned from staff who work in prisons or those staff working in the NHS. You could try looking to other sectors experiencing similar issues to draw on their learning and tailor it to your specific FE setting.

What it looks like in real-life:

In [Hidden Voices the experience of teachers working in prisons](#), a report by the University and College Union and the Prisoner Learning Alliance, respondents felt that receiving further emotional support was key. When starting work, they would like an extended period of shadowing a colleague: 'Too many just get thrown in at the deep end and can't cope'. Ongoing, they would like the support of an experienced colleague as a 'buddy', training in basic counselling skills; the opportunity for networking and sharing good practice plus regular support groups with a qualified therapist: 'much is internalised and [educators] should be able to offload when necessary.'

4. Look at what you are already doing

Can you list three wellbeing practices that are already being implemented in your FE setting? Are you communicating these effectively? For example, if you have an Employee Assistance Programme, do all staff have access to the relevant information to get in touch? Can you put up a poster in your staff room? Or share a regular newsletter reminder with all staff? Is there something you are doing for learners that could be extended to staff?

What it looks like in real-life:

Coventry College has rolled out the [Mental Health Playbook](#). Originally designed for students, this is now being accessed by staff too. The platform sends them weekly tips that they can incorporate into their daily life, emails and information about individual support offered by the college. Users also receive support materials including a gratitude journal, a health and wellness journal, and a self-care workbook. They also receive discounts and offers from leading local organisations including CV Life, and the opportunity to attend monthly webinars led by leading UK experts on mental health and motivation.

5. Make mental health a year-round priority

Staff wellbeing isn't just for Mental Health Awareness Day. For FE settings to be psychologically safe and for staff to be at their best, talking about mental health and making it a priority all-year round is essential. If staff feel they can ask for help when they need it, without fear of shame, judgement or putting their career and reputation in danger, then they will likely do this sooner. This is better for everyone, including learners, colleagues and the individual. A good place to start is to print the Education Support [helpline poster](#) and put it up in your staffroom or the staff toilets.

What it looks like in real-life:

Developing a staff mental health and wellbeing plan is also a great place to start when outlining your commitment to prioritising the wellbeing of FE staff all-year round. It's a place where you can set out clear areas of focus, agreed actions and measures of success while being clear about who is responsible for delivering on the actions included in the plan. A good plan isn't something that is developed and then sits on a shelf. It should be regularly reviewed, measured against, updated and communicated to staff. When it comes to staff mental health and wellbeing this is vital, because the needs of FE staff will consistently change.

Take a look at guidance on creating a mental health and wellbeing plan for education staff [here](#).

Finally, it is important to know this is not an exhaustive list, there are many strategies you can adopt in your FE setting to support the wellbeing of your workforce, even though times of crisis.

Remember, FE leaders, it is equally as important to take care of your own mental health and wellbeing as it is to support learners and colleagues.

Read our guide ['Starting with you - taking care of your wellbeing as a busy FE leader'](#) which covers role-

modelling wellbeing behaviour and how this can spread across your whole FE community.

If you or a colleague are struggling and need further support, you can call the Education Support Helpline 24/7 for free on: 08000 562 561 and speak to a trained counsellor.

Sources of support after a traumatic event to consider are:

- **A GP referral**
- **Find an NHS psychological therapy service - The NHS Talking Therapies, for anxiety and depression programme (formerly known as Improving Access to Psychological Therapies, IAPT) - <https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-nhs-talking-therapies-service>**
- **Assist Trauma Care – Offers telephone counselling and support to individuals and families in the aftermath of trauma. Tel: 01788 551919. <http://assisttraumacare.org.uk/>.**

Sources

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