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WEBINAR TRANSCRIPT

# **GRIEF, TRAUMA & DEPRESSION IN A CRISIS:**

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How it Shows Up and How to Manage It

Nonprofit**HR**

# GRIEF, TRAUMA & DEPRESSION IN A CRISIS: HOW IT SHOWS UP AND HOW TO MANAGE IT

**Date of Recording: April 27, 2020**

[Webinar Recording](#)

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically changed our reality. Some among your workforce may be finding healthy ways to cope with concerns about their health, safety and jobs, while others may be experiencing grief, either due to the loss of a friend, loved one, co-worker, or death toll stories they are reading about. As employee grief continues to manifest itself in the workplace, leaders and HR professionals are faced with how to manage this among their staff.

Listen to this panel discussion to better understand signs of grief, trauma and depression among your workforce during a crisis and how they can impact the achievement of your nonprofit's mission. Gain insight into how you as an HR or organizational leader can help your employees cope during this difficult time. Learn how to better manage related performance issues, recommend helpful resources, and help build resiliency in your staff.

Increasing understanding of these issues and developing a strategy to address them as we prepare for our "new normal" are an important part of your talent management strategy in these unprecedented times.

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## SPEAKERS:



**Lisa Brown Alexander**  
President & CEO  
Nonprofit HR



**Lisa Dinhofer**  
"The Crisis Tamer"  
Koden Consulting  
Services, LLC.



**Dr. Christine Allen**  
Workplace  
Psychologist and  
Executive Coach  
Insight Business  
Works

## MODERATOR



**Alicia Schoshinski**  
Managing Director,  
Talent &  
Development



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**Alicia Schoshinski:** Hello everyone and welcome. Thank you for joining us today for Nonprofit HR's Virtual Town Hall on Grief, Trauma & Depression in a Crisis: How it Shows Up and How to Manage It. My name is Alicia Schoshinski and I'm the Co-Leader of Nonprofit HR's Knowledge practice and a Senior HR Business Partner. I will be your moderator for today, so let's get started. But before we do, I want to go over a few items so that you know how to best participate in today's event.

You've joined the presentation listening using your computer speaker system by default. If you prefer to join over telephone just select telephone in the audio pane and the dial-in information will be displayed. You'll have the opportunity to submit text questions to today's presenters by typing your questions into the questions pane of the control panel. You may send in your questions at any time during the presentation. We will collect these in address them during the Q&A session at the end of today's presentation.

Today's webinar is being recorded and you will receive a follow-up email within the next few days with a link to review the recording as well as any resources related to it.

Today's session is going to be moderated by Lisa Brown Alexander, President and CEO of Nonprofit HR. She will be joined by panelists Dr. Christine Allen, President, Workplace Psychologist and Executive Coach of Insight Business Works and Lisa Dinhofer, President of Kodan Consulting Services and "The Crisis Tamer."

Under Lisa Alexander's direction, Nonprofit HR has served some of the most prominent nonprofits and associations in the country with more than 25 years of human resource management experience working with nonprofit and for-profit organizations, Lisa and Nonprofit HR have helped hundreds of social sector organizations realize improved impact through talent. Lisa provides strategic level guidance to Nonprofit HR's clients and works closely with C-suite leaders and nonprofit boards of directors on client engagements.

Dr. Christine Allen has been providing executive coaching, team building, talent selection and assessment and other training to senior leaders since 2009. With 20 years of previous experience as a clinical psychologist, Dr. Allen is an excellent listener who quickly grasps the underlying issues with which individuals and teams struggle. She helps leaders and teams identify needs, discover and use strengths and accept and utilize feedback. She excels at improving communication within teams and she specializes in helping leaders develop executive presence, emotional intelligence and resilience. As a licensed psychologist, she is particularly skilled in using assessments for hiring selection and development. Her home base is in Syracuse, New York.

Lisa Dinhofer works with subject matter and circumstances that most people turn away from. She mentors past traumatic and destabilizing events, workplace abuse and disastrous communications so companies can regain stability, establish a new normal and build resilience at companies. Lisa was an employee at the World Trade Center during the 1993 bombing and was still working in New York City during 9/11. She draws from those firsthand experiences of workplace trauma and lessons learned from other workplace tragedies. Her work addresses issues that EAP's risk management and business continuity services do not, following disruptive events that impact retention of key talent and

organizational longevity. She's a certified thanatologist and with a subspecialty in trauma, a trained counselor, a trained mediator and a crisis communication specialist with more than 18 years of professional experience in training, consulting, coaching, debriefing and public speaking.

Now, I will turn it over to Lisa Alexander.

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** Good afternoon everyone and thank you so much for joining us today. I am thrilled to welcome to this very important discussion two distinguished women, Dr. Christine Allen and Lisa Dinhofer. I invite them to join us on camera as we get into this very important discussion.

As many of you know, Nonprofit HR has spent the last six weeks delving into the varying aspects of this COVID-19 crisis as it impacts social sector organizations. This conversation is particularly important because it deals with the emotional health of our workforces, so what I'd like to do is just dive right in and I want to ask both Dr. Christine Allen and Lisa Dinhofer a little bit about their backgrounds as it relates to mental health in the workplace. If you two would take a quick moment to just tell us your experience in this space to set the stage for today's conversation.

**Dr. Christine Allen:** Thanks, Lisa. My background is as a clinical psychologist working in hospitals and in private practice, I did some teaching and research for about 20 years. In that area, I specialized particularly in helping people with trauma-related issues, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, but I also treated people with anxiety, depression and other mental health issues. I began to see that I could have greater value in the workplace because really only about 4% of people ever seek out counseling when all of us need some help now and then. As an executive coach, I go into workplaces and work with the leaders and their teams. When you impact the leader and you impact the team, you help the families at home and ultimately, you help everybody.

That's really what I've been doing for the last 10 to 15 years of my career. I think at times like these, though this is an unprecedented time, it's particularly valuable to have somebody who has expertise both in leadership development, teamwork and mental health, in the workplace.

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** Excellent. Thank you so much. Lisa?

**Lisa Dinhofer:** Good morning. Thank you for having me. I'm very excited to be here today. My background involves a lot of trauma, not me experiencing the trauma necessarily, but being in very traumatic environments. As you read, I was working in the World Trade Center on the 79th floor when it was bombed in 1993, and that was my first exposure to trauma in the workplace. It served, unfortunately but also fortunately, as a tutorial of what not to do in terms of leadership. I am convinced today that because of the way my organization's leadership handled it at that time, it was what led to their eventual demise and the company no longer exists. What I saw, how employees were handled and how they were spoken to, really stayed with me. Also, I was still working in New York City during 9/11 and again, that's a pretty stark tutorial on what to do and what not to do. I've spent two decades working in a very specialized area of healthcare that has a high mortality rate. I'm used to working in environments that are non-stop crisis and working in a lot of industries that involve first response and exposure to a lot of trauma and death in their work as professionals. Like Christine, I figured out a long

time ago that if I could help teach people in leadership positions, as well as on the ground how to manage of the exposure to trauma and chronic stress in the course of their job, they would be a lot more productive, retain their key talent a lot longer and we would all be a lot more healthy. That's my background in a nutshell.

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** I appreciate it and I thank both of you for being here today. Let's talk a little bit about how as HR leaders and as organizational leaders, we are not only dealing with our external stakeholders, but also internal stakeholders, our staff and sometimes our boards. What are some of the signs that reveal that an employee is coping with some challenges or not necessarily coping well with challenges? What are some of the signs that one might see as a leader, as an HR professional, that might be a red flag? Christine, do you want to tackle that one?

**Dr. Christine Allen:** Yeah. To begin, I want to mention and normalize that this is part of the challenge. Everyone, including managers, leaders, their employees and their families, is going through something. We might not be going through identical things, but we're all going through something and to feel anxious, stressed or sad is one hundred percent normal. So how do you then figure out which of your employees might be more vulnerable and might need something more or different? Everybody needs something and everyone needs to rethink and retool what our coping strategies are. Evolution has prepared us to be anxious and stressed in these situations, so we remember to wash our hands or we're willing to physically distance. I don't like the "social distancing" term, I like the "physical distancing" term.

The question becomes how do we meet the needs of ourselves and our self-care? How do we meet the needs of our employees that are feeling stressed and anxious? Then, how do we, like Lisa A. said, figure out who the vulnerable people are that might need something more? I would just say it's particularly challenging to do that virtually when we're not in the same place. How do we, as managers and leaders, dial-in and connect with employees and notice who might be feeling the sadness? I know Lisa D. has a lot of expertise in this, in the difference between normal grief and depression, but how do we figure out when a person is feeling hopeless and like there's no point to getting out of bed? Those are some of my spots.

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** What should we look for? What are some physical triggers? Lisa, you can answer this too. What are triggers that might tell us that someone is in distress or maybe not coping with this new normal level of stress in a way that is okay or that might be concerning? What should HR leaders and organizational leaders look for or be aware of that when they see a sign that somebody needs some additional support?

**Lisa Dinhofer:** I would say the first thing to notice is a real change in someone's behavior. These people that you've been exposed to, even if you don't know them on an intimate level or for very long, you know what they're like in an everyday way. If you're noticing significant changes in their behavior or their appearance, which can mean anything from being super hyper to very withdrawn. If they're not making eye contact or if the tenor of their voice has changed, those are subtle but important cues that something's going on there and at this time, I think everybody is confused about what they should or should not do.



I think people in leadership need to understand that when something like this has happened, like after an active shooter for example, what's the normal response to the experience you're having? There's not an easy answer to that and people are going to respond differently. However, understand that you should not wait for people to come to you and say they need help. Go to them and say, "Hey, I'm noticing this about you, what's happening?" If we only offer assistance that people have to access themselves, a lot of times they won't.

**Dr. Christine Allen:** What I would add to that is asking. Similar to what Lisa's saying, a manager or a leader can reach out not only in formal ways through our regular meetings or check-ins, but also asking employees directly how they're doing. If you have concerns about somebody, there's a lot of data and evidence saying that asking people if they're thinking about harming themselves or hurting themselves does not put ideas in people's heads. It does not increase the risk of suicide or harm or violence. I think a lot of leaders and managers feel uncomfortable asking those questions, but as Lisa said, if there are some of those signs you see that really worry you about someone, it's okay to ask, "Are you safe? Are you thinking of hurting yourself?"

**Lisa Dinhofer:** I would like to bring up that I really agree with what Christine said and one of the resources that I provided, which is going to be on the website, is the Columbia-Suicide Severity Rating Scale. The version that I've offered is for family and friends for the late public. It's six questions that you don't need to be a professional to ask, you can ask somebody and it gives you a scoring guide at the bottom to know if somebody is really thinking about harming themselves and in danger. I really advise HR people and people in leadership positions to keep that severity rating scale tucked in their drawer. It's just six questions and it's extremely effective.

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** Yeah, one of the things that sometimes gets missed in this conversation is that we assume that the people asking the questions are comfortable and sometimes as HR leaders, in particular, we know the emotional intelligence quotient of our leadership team. It can be that you know that this is not an area where either someone feels comfortable or where they can be effective and I think it's okay for us as HR folks to say, "Let me have this conversation on your behalf, but if you see something that's concerning, let me know." You can do this if you as a leader, supervisor or manager is maybe not adept to having emotionally sensitive conversations. I want to point that out because sometimes we expect leaders to naturally be able to have those dial-in conversations and they're sometimes not comfortable doing that.

**Dr. Christine Allen:** Can I make a comment about that, Lisa? I just want to say that it's the job of the upper-level managers to coach those frontline managers. The frontline managers are the most important and the most connected, so it's important for the employee to feel like you care about them as a person, as all the Gallup data suggests. I think that's a great role for those more senior leaders to try to coach and support those frontline managers. When you're in the office you can do what's called "a warm handoff" to make sure someone follows up with someone else, whereas it's not just giving someone a number to call. I think you made a really good point, Lisa, when you are talking about how to do that.

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** Great. Alright, let's talk a little bit about helping employees face a loss of a loved one.

The longer this crisis goes on, the more likely it is that death or loss will come closer to our staff. For organizations who may have employees who face or experience the loss of a loved one or who might lose an employee to COVID-19, what do you recommend to help organizations and employees deal with those kinds of losses? What should leaders say? What should HR folks say? What's the approach an organization should take if there's been a physical loss, either of a staff person or a family member of a staff person?

**Lisa Dinhofer:** Well, we know from a recent study done by Cigna Health that fear is a major issue for people in the workforce. This includes fear of a family member becoming ill, fear of themselves becoming ill, fear of dying and fear of family dying from this. Those fears are very realistic. In terms of when there's been an actual physical death of an employee, it's critical that you create community around that immediately. There needs to be real connection and community building around that and I would say do the same kinds of things you would do if everyone was on-site and that's to have a debriefing. Debrief and come in and help people with that, if it's the death of a family member or of an employee. Now more than ever, it is a time for companies to really look seriously at their bereavement policies. It's been my experience for many years that most bereavement policies serve the company, not the employee, and they cause more harm than good. I would have somebody really look at those bereavement policies and ask if they really want to be in the business of dictating to an employee how much time they should have for dealing with the grief and loss of a loved one. Mostly because the typical three days for certain types of relationships and one day for others is wholly inadequate and does far more harm than good. In terms of actual death in the workplace, I would conduct a debriefing, I would speak openly about this and I would make those debriefings mandatory. I get sent out to do debriefings all the time and one of the reasons why they're not helpful for companies is because leadership doesn't make attendance to the debriefing mandatory and it should be. The senior leadership should also be participating and they need to talk about how this has impacted them so they make it okay for other people to be impacted and to talk about it. It's all about community.

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** I would say for smaller organizations of 50 or even 25 people, that's really feasible. What do you say to the organization of 500 or 5,000 or a nationally dispersed organization that has experienced either a loss of a staff member or the family member of a staff member passes away, what would you recommend in that case? We've got a really broad diversity of organizations on this call and some are very small so facilitating that debriefing conversation is much easier. In other cases, these organizations have multiple locations or multiple states and in this virtual environment, they may not necessarily get to convene a large national call. What advice would you give them in that situation?

**Lisa Dinhoferr:** I would look at delivering these types of resources in cohorts. The first cohort are the people who were closest to that employee who died and then you start having more and more sessions wider out to cohorts that are impacted. Just because you don't necessarily know the person who died very well, that doesn't mean you're not impacted. We know it's not just a one-size-fits-all. You have to look at your organization, look at who's being impacted and start with the closest cohort of people.

Then, begin having other debriefings or services for other people impacted as you move out. The company should know that somebody in their family died, whether it's a 25-person family or a 5,000-person family. People should be made aware of that so that now, they are empowered to reach out to the family or other people and talk about that. It's how you create community.

**Dr. Christine Allen:** There are two things about what Lisa said that I want to underscore. I really think those two pieces she said about community are spot on. What we know about trauma and about coping with trauma is that it is made bearable or easier through support, through social support. Though, social support is complicated at this time. People can't be with people even when they're in the hospital, sick or dying. If you had a concrete slab and we were all trying to hold it up together, we could hold up a lot more weight than I, as an individual, could hold alone. So, one of the things we find that mitigates the impact of trauma is that community and support that Lisa was talking about. The second thing is that aspect of modeling from leadership. If leadership doesn't attend these events, if they don't show up for these community moments, services or debriefs, that speaks volumes to the people of the company and I think it does harm.

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** Absolutely. All right, let's move to the next question. We've talked about death in this case, but what about the trauma and the loss that people might feel as a result of having really high levels of uncertainty?

How do you recommend that we help our staff navigate through the anxiety and the fear, to use your word Lisa, that comes from not knowing the future of the organization, its stability or the communities that it might be serving? Or, a significant loss of some sort that is not death related, but a loss that creates uncertainty nonetheless? Is there any advice from either of you on that front?

**Dr. Christine Allen:** I think that's a great question. I think it's that loss of normalcy that we're all going through in one way or another. What I've noticed, and other people have talked about this too, is this notion of comparing suffering to others. I've heard my coaching clients and people that I know personally say variations of, "Oh, I should just be grateful because I have a job and I'm not financially strapped." I think one of the things we have to do with uncertainty is make room for all of our feelings and understand that our feelings are going to shift and change. It's not like you have to get rid of anxiety or fear or sadness in order to experience gratitude or to experience love from your family or from the person with whom you might be able to go for a walk. It's not a polarity, an either/or, and I often say, and others have said, that compassion for ourselves is not a finite resource. It's not as though if we have self-compassion, we don't have enough compassion for others. It's not like pie where there's a certain number of slices. The research actually shows that when we're more self-compassionate, we have a bigger heart, bigger love and more compassion for others.

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** Thank you, Christine. Lisa, anything you wanted to add to that?

**Lisa Dinhofer:** Yeah. This is where the role of educating about grief and loss comes into play as well as providing education. When leadership provides education to its workforce, not just psychological support in terms of an EAP or counseling, but actual education, it helps people understand what they're experiencing and helps normalize it. What we're all going through now is collective grief and we're



going through a very particular type of loss known as a non-finite or a non-death loss. People are often surprised that we grieve losses that don't involve physical death, but we are smack dab in the middle of a nonfinite loss that's characterized by how the loss is continuous. It starts with an event, but it is continuous with seemingly no end in sight. This creates a lot of uncertainty, powerlessness and helplessness. There's a disconnection from the mainstream and even though we're connected virtually, we still feel disconnected. There are multiple losses involved within a nonfinite loss. It requires constant adjustment and the biggest thing about a nonfinite loss is that it creates both a coping and a support fatigue the longer it goes on. Because we are all in this right now, we are suffering with this collectively. We're all suffering with the support fatigue and the coping fatigue that goes with this, so it's not imagined. It's very real. There is a constellation of grief responses to this nonfinite loss and it's going to be here for a while. The more senior leadership can understand this and help educate its workforce and provide education around how to manage this, the better the psychological well-being leadership will have in their company.

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** That's a really good way for us to segway into the leadership response. For those of us who are on the call today, help us understand what you think employees are looking for from their leaders during this time? How can leaders support the emotional well-being of staff?

We talk a lot about those who are on the receiving end of grief and loss, but what should leadership be doing right now to demonstrate that they care? And what do you think that staff are looking for, employees are looking for, from their leaders during this time of uncertainty?

**Dr. Christine Allen:** Well, they're looking for a lot of things. However, I would say authenticity and honesty. That means being willing to say how they're impacted in a general way. It doesn't mean that leaders or managers should be leaning on their employees to help take care of or support them, but should be honest about this scary or stressful time. It's about being real and being human. I would also say staff want leadership to tell the truth and be realistic about what the future looks like even in terms of the work. Certainly, there are employees I've worked with where they know they're going to get paid for another month, but they don't know if they'll have money after that. As a leader, be honest and tell the truth.

I think having empathy and compassion means leaning in a little bit more and acknowledging that you know people are suffering. An effective leader can do that, they can carry an emotion that shows heart and understanding for what people are going through. I think if employees have to take pay cuts, then leadership should have to take pay cuts in some kind of commensurate way, so they demonstrate that they're part of the whole and everyone's being impacted. Those are just a couple of thoughts.

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** Thanks, Christine. Lisa?

**Lisa Dinhofer:** Yeah, I think right now what is key for leadership to understand in preserving the psychological well-being of their workforce is all through their communication style. For a real master class on that, look at Jacinda Ardern, the Prime Minister of New Zealand. She has epitomized the three principles of really effective leadership: communication (meaning clear communication and clear direction giving), meaning-making and empathy in how she communicates. This is why she had such a

high level of compliance and why her country is doing so well. I think it's mission-critical for leaders to be willing to be vulnerable and demonstrate humility in front of their staff in terms of saying, "This has impacted me too." As an example, the leaders that I've worked with who've gone through an active shooting are often ill-advised. The advice they have received is that they shouldn't show they've been impacted or they shouldn't tell people they're getting help, that it will weaken them as a leader. I've told them that's the worst advice they could hear and to get rid of that.

Tell people you've been impacted. Be humble and vulnerable. As a leader, tell them how it's impacting you and that you're getting help because when you do that, you model for your people the same kind of behavior of firstly, being willing to talk about it, which lowers the stigma, and secondly, getting help. This is because if they see their senior leader is doing that, then they feel they can do that too without any worry of stigma.

I think it's all about communication and how you present yourself. You don't need to know all the answers. I don't think your workforce expects you to know all the answers, but what they do expect is to hear you in a very authentic, honest way continually telling people this is what we don't know, this is where we are and whether or not you're going to lay people off. Be really open and honest because it lowers the fear factor for people when they can depend on hearing from you regularly and they are getting updates. Even if there's nothing new to report, that's information.

**Dr. Christine Allen:** I'm up here in New York and Governor Cuomo has been, like the Prime Minister of New Zealand, impacted. He has family members who have been sick. He tells it like it is, even when it's hard news, but he shows he cares and that's on a huge level. These people like the New Zealand Prime Minister and the Governor of New York can communicate this and that's why I think individual leaders can too.

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** It's interesting that you mentioned Governor Cuomo because he has become my new leadership crush, if there's such a thing. As I watched him lead those daily briefings, I think he's been masterful at balancing the need for facts and information, which can be a stabilizing force for people, and showing care and concern in saying when he doesn't know that he doesn't know. Yet, he always follows it up by saying that they're going to figure it out. I think that's really reassuring for people and I just appreciate your responses with respect to leaders.

Let's talk a little bit about what HR can do. How can HR create space for employees to process grief and loss and uncertainty on their own timelines without necessarily crippling the organization's productivity? Do you have any advice for HR leaders and how they can demonstrate emotional intelligence, to not be the policy police right now, but to show their own emotional intelligence? What should HR folks do to influence leadership and to create space for employees to process loss on their own timeline?

**Dr. Christine Allen:** Well, I think that's a great question. I think we're innovating also because everybody, or most everybody, is working remotely. We have to figure out new ways to check in that don't feel like too much for people and how to communicate or overcommunicate but not be intrusive. One of the things I hear is that most employees are working more than they would at work and they're

having to set boundaries with themselves because now they're working from their kitchen table or dining room and their kids are there. I think there's a concept in psychology and evolutionary biology about social loafing and cheating. However, the reality is that most people are not the social loafers or the people who are letting others carry the load. I don't know what the exact data is, if it's 10% or 5%, but the reality is most of your employees are working really hard for the team, the business, the mission and the purpose. We need to trust that they can, in terms of emotional intelligence, get their work done, even if they have to attend online school, make dinner and then go back and finish a little work after dinner. Having that kind of trust in and flexibility for your people is important and I'm hoping that will be one of the things we carry forward. I know you might get to that later so I should hold off, but it's about really carrying forward that people could be working remotely very, very well. That kind of trust is one thing and I'll give Lisa a chance to add to that.

**Lisa Dinhofer:** I think a really important question that leadership in HR, and particularly those midline managers, need to ask themselves and be very honest about is, "Are we an additional stressor on our workforce? Are we creating additional unnecessary stress in our workforce?" I'm seeing memos and hearing about email communication where there's this very punitive approach to their workforce. Leadership say that this is not a time for goofing off or, as Christine said, loafing. If they say they're watching you or watching your keystrokes, then that is somebody in the leadership position who is feeling out of control and very frightened. That is conducting a very obedience-driven style of leadership which fails miserably in the middle of a crisis and also doesn't do really well when not in a crisis. However, to the larger question you asked about helping people process the loss and grief that they're going through, this is why I believe, again, that education about death and loss and grief in the workplace is mission critical. When we present it as education and not as group counseling or a support group, people will take in this information and what resonates with them. They'll have a think about it on their own time and maybe talk with their families about it. But it's about going through all of the myths about grief and loss. We don't use the five stages of grief any longer from Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, we left that behind a long time ago. She was very helpful in the 1960s and by the way, that was not about bereavement, that was about working with terminally ill patients. Her work was really misappropriated, and she wasn't really thrilled about that.

However, you should talk about the myths about grief, grieving and the suffering contests that Christine talked about before to provide basic information about what grief looks like, what trauma looks like, how it affects us and how it affects our brain. I think that portal of information and education is how you're going to be most helpful to employees on this issue.

**Dr. Christine Allen:** I would just say that on one of the handouts that I provided, there's so many research-based strategies for building our resilience, it is looked at as a set of tools and we all have our own favorite tools. Psychologist Abraham Maslow said that if the only tool you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. So, you need to have a lot of tools in your toolbox for coping and we all cope differently. Some of us have our favorite go-to tool, but it wouldn't hurt to expand our arsenal of having more tools in the toolbox to increase our resilience muscles. Like Lisa said, that's one of the reasons I switched; while I have the greatest respect for mental health treatment and I did it for many years, I think the coaching model is an educational model. I often will talk about how or use words like cognitive behavior training. We all have some post-traumatic stress symptoms, but that doesn't mean

we are going to all have a disorder so normalizing that and educating people about that is important. One of the handouts I gave has a few of those strategies that with some resources, people could look up to get deeper in terms of building that. It takes practice, I'm a big fan of practice. It's similar to kids on the soccer field or the basketball court playing when they're little, they get better with practice. I'd be curious about Lisa's thoughts on this, but I don't think we really teach people a lot in schools and in our society about how to cope with normal, but very difficult, things like grief and loss.

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** Yeah, I would agree. I think one of the things that you mentioned, Lisa, was that there are organizations that are watching your keystrokes. What advice do you have for talent management professionals and HR leaders in organizations where that's kind of the MO of the leadership team, where they don't work from a place of trust? How do you navigate through the issues of grief and loss and workplace depression while coping with leaders who are not trust-based and who are kind of looming over or watching their staff? What advice would you have for those folks?

**Lisa Dinhofer:** When I work with leaders after a traumatic event that has really disrupted the workplace, I see them go into that fear-based mode and they're imposing that on everyone else. I remind them that everything is of importance in regard to what they do and say whilst a crisis is going on. By the way, we're still in crisis mode and this is not a discrete crisis like an active shooting, where when it's over you go into recovery. This crisis is still unfolding. We're not in recovery mode yet, so everything you do and say during the crisis is already creating an impacting your aftermath. Simultaneously, people don't forget about being on the receiving end of you, particularly in a crisis situation. What kind of workforce do you want to have? Do you even want to have a workforce when it's time to pick your company up off its knees? Unless you feel that you can do all the work by yourself, you're going to need these people. Are they going to want to work for you and with you? Everyone is having to think about that right now, they're watching you, they're listening to you and they're asking themselves, do I want to keep working for this person and in this environment when this is over? If you are relying on the notion that people are going to just be grateful to have their jobs and no one's going to leave, I really suggest you rethink that because people are going through a real perspective shift. If you think that this is the way to get short-term results from your people, you need to think about how you're going to work with the long-term consequences of that because the crisis is temporary, but the aftermath is permanent.

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** I couldn't have said that better. I think as an added step, be concerned about the people who actually don't leave your organization, but who stay and disconnect. Or worse so, the people who stay and become a negative social ambassador for your organization, who get on social media and go public with their statements about how poorly they were treated during this time of crisis. No one wants to be navigating a PR nightmare during this time of crisis. Look what's happened with Shake Shack and some of the other brands that caught with their hands in the PPP cookie jar.

Do you want to be the employer who, the word on the street about you is that you were mistreating or insensitive to the needs of your staff during this pandemic? That is probably the last thing that you want as an organization. As a CEO, my advice to other CEOs is to think about this not only from a humanity perspective, which is critically important, but also from a business and reputational management perspective. What are you going to do? If your name shows up in the paper or shows up

on social media as the employer who mistreated their staff at this particular time, that's not what most folks want.

**Dr. Christine Allen:** I want to say something real quick on that point. One of the other areas I do some work in is talking about ethical leadership and looking at ethical organizations. I would say this is a component: Showing that you care and trusting your people is a part of ethical organizations and ethical leadership. All the research suggests that you're exactly right, you're at much less risk for having some kind of reputational damage and that highly ethical organizations are more profitable and more successful. All the research supports that.

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** Exactly. We want to get to some questions because this is a very unique kind of conversation we're having today and we want to afford a lot of time for questions. As you're listening to us, if you have some questions and have not used the chat feature to advance those questions, please take the time to do that now. Our closing question is for both of you to answer. What do you see workforces moving toward as we come out of this crisis? We know that Georgia opened back up for business on Friday, albeit controversially. As the numbers and the curve starts to flatten and the death rate starts to level off, more and more states are going to consider reopening. What do you see the workplace moving toward as we come out of this crisis and how will expectations of both employers and employees change with respect to the management of grief, trauma and emotional health in the workplace? Christine, let's start with you.

**Dr. Christine Allen:** Well, I would just say that this crisis is ongoing, like Lisa was saying. It's not a discrete thing like an active shooting or even a natural disaster like Hurricane Sandy, which created tremendous disruption in New York City. I'm in upstate New York, but was very connected to that.

I think the mental health, grief and trauma part of this crisis is only just in its beginning. If there is a time when we have a vaccine, the numbers go way down and there's much less physical risk, I'm very concerned about another wave, if you will, of mental health distress and vulnerability. We could think about vulnerability in the same way that you think about vulnerability to the virus. We talked about some people being more vulnerable based on underlying conditions, their age or other various things. Some people are more vulnerable and this kind of overwhelming stress that we're under right now can have an even greater impact. I think when we go back, people will have to be looking for, and maybe then we will have more, opportunities to make those warm handoffs for people that really need counseling. I'll just make a quick plug. I'm not doing telemental health or telecounseling now, but the insurance companies, to their credit, have greatly relaxed HIPAA restrictions and they're paying providers. It used to be providers would have to fight tooth and nail if they weren't in a rural area. They couldn't see their patient who might be homebound or not be able to leave the house. They could not get authorization to see people, but now telemental health, I think, is going to be here to stay. There should be much greater access to mental health services in addition to the educational things that employers can provide.

I want to say one more thing about what's going to come in terms of this trust issue with working remotely. There's a lot of companies and organizations who can't recruit because someone doesn't live close to them. I work with some smaller credit unions, who do wonderful work, but they have trouble



recruiting and retaining talent. If there was more trust that people could work remotely for at least part of their job, it would also serve organizations, so that may be one positive that comes out.

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** Let me just add something, because we do have a number of direct care organizations on today's call. These are organizations that are based in the community or are community-facing for whom teleworking or virtual work does not fit the business model. They're delivering services in and for the community. Lisa, what advice do you have for those organizations as they emerge from this crisis? They've been in the trenches all along. Is there anything they should be doing differently? Their staff didn't get to be home and think through this, they have continued to deliver services in their organizations to the community throughout the crisis. What advice do you have for them?

**Lisa Dinhofer:** I would say to leadership that they need to be extremely cognizant of the fact that these people have been operating on your behalf under a chronic diet of fear. They've been out there exposed and I think the issue of fear is going to be a major challenge for every leader in this country regardless of what kind of company you have. This is because we do not have adequate testing and contact tracing.

There is really nothing that leaders have that can guarantee and assure complete safety from being infected when you come back. Taking people's temperature is, I liken it to what we see when we go to the airport in terms of security, a lot of theater. I think the CDC just came out saying that they're augmenting their infection rate to 25% more, which is a gobsmacking number for all of the asymptomatic cases and because you can shed the virus when you're asymptomatic. People are taking a risk coming back to work unless you have that testing and contact tracing. Leaders are going to be faced with some difficult situations, such as if their employees say that they cannot come back into the work environment because they are caring for elderly parents who are at risk or they have an immunosuppressed child that they are the primary caretaker of. Leaders are going to have to think about how to work with that fear and how to accommodate their employees because we don't have this testing tool. Also, they are going to have to think very carefully before disengaging someone from the company because they don't feel safe coming back to work. That's going to be a hard one. This is a time where we're going to need to be creative. We're going to need to be patient because again, this is all short term. We will at some point get beyond this but what you do in the short-term will impact you in the long-term. I think every company is going to have to figure out how to accommodate that very real fear and very real risk, because everyone's on a different risk spectrum for their employees, and to rise above the goal of revenue-making. What is your companies' purpose, making money?

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** Well Lisa, we know that nonprofits are not so much focused on the revenue goal, it's not about shareholder value as much as it is about social investment.

**Lisa Dinhofer:** What I'm saying to leaders now is, what is your legacy through this going to be? How are you flexing to meet this? What is this situation asking of me right now? Leaders have to become comfortable working with uncertainty, being very present in the moment, making decisions for right now because that's all we know and constantly asking themselves, what is this person or this situation asking of me? How do I need to show up for that?

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** Great. I've got a lot of questions. I'd like to just get to them before we run out of time. We want to thank Christine and Lisa for their expertise, their time and their knowledge. The participant interaction is really important for us at Nonprofit HR, so I do want to be sure that participants get from this experience what they came for. Let's open it up to any questions that we have so we can hear from Christine and Lisa some more. Alicia, are there any questions?

**Alicia Schoshinski:** Yes, thank you. There are definitely a lot of great questions and I'm trying to put them together here so they make sense. Because you spoke early on about recognizing how your employees are failing, some people are asking how you do that in a remote environment without offending somebody, invading their privacy or making them feel overwhelmed? How does a manager, HR person or leader do that?

**Dr. Christine Allen:** I'll say something first about how, again, the issue of role modeling is really important. For example, if you're having a virtual team meeting, for the leader there's a distinction between leaning on other people (your team) for help versus being willing to be authentic and open and vulnerable, so as a leader, go first. If you expect or want to know how your team members are doing, then share how you're doing and some real-life examples of how you're being impacted so that you normalize that fear and you role model that it's okay to talk about it. I do think that one size does not fit all and some of us even in normal times are extroverts and introverts. Some people feel there's a whole performative part of being on Zoom or in a virtual meeting where you see yourself in some way, even if you minimize it. Some people are not going to be as comfortable in that format, but I think it's okay for the team leader to share a bit and then invite others to share. People benefit from other people sharing even if they're not willing to share themselves. Then, of course, in an individual context, some people are more comfortable with email, which gets vilified all the time. Some people are more comfortable in writing. As Lisa was saying, you know your people, you know if you have an introverted person. I know some people that I work with who much prefer writing something to me in an email. If you simply ask how someone is doing, you encourage people to be open, but you don't pry or push. You're not intrusive, you're respectful. However, there's nothing wrong with asking and then again, like Lisa said, having some resources if you get people. You might be deer in the headlights if you feel as though you found out more than you thought you would and are unsure of what to do. Some of these resources that we've been talking about for managers are places you can help people turn to, either for education and/or for treatment because there is a lot of virtual treatment available now.

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** Great. Let's go to the next question. Lisa, we'll have you tackle that one. Alicia?

**Alicia Schoshinski:** There are a couple people who asked about cultural differences in an organization. As you're trying to deal with all these situations with your employees, if you have an organization made up of people from various cultures, or even if you have a more global organization, how do you deal with things such as bereavement issues or offering condolences or just tackling all of these when everybody comes from a different background?

**Lisa Dinhofer:** Yeah, that's a really good question and something that I've dealt with for two decades in terms of the healthcare sector that I worked in, it was a high mortality sector. Working with people

from all over the world with life and death issues, you have to become conversant pretty darn quick in the culture that they're from because the key here is that you don't make people step into your cultural experience. You have to step into where they are. This is working with people in crisis 101, start with where your client is and move forward when they will allow you. That means you have to go into their cultural background and work from within that context because that's where they are.

Find out from a very reliable resource how cultures within your company deal with death, deal with sickness, deal with bad news, deal with talking about death and also ask those people to educate you. You can even make this an educational kind of activity in celebrating the fact that you're a very diverse company and it would be helpful to you as a leader, and maybe to your colleagues, to understand from your culture what people do in these certain circumstances.

Also starting a conversation with, "I've noticed such and such with you lately and I'm concerned, what can you tell me about that?" Start really simple and right now the thing that I'm saying to leadership a lot is keep it simple, show up and serve. If there was ever a time for you to embrace the principles of servant leadership, it's now. You are there to serve your people in guiding them through a terrible storm that everyone is afraid of, including yourself. They don't expect you to have all the answers, but they expect that you have the leadership skills to move forward and guide them through uncertainty by being real. Getting real, fast, I think is the way to stay connected with your people and they will follow you voluntarily.

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** It's also important to underscore the fact that having a diverse work environment is not just about celebrating racial or gender differences. At a time like this, it underscores the importance of diversity, equity and inclusion in the workplace. If this is your on-ramp, so be it. If you're on-ramp was through a lawsuit, so be it. Use this opportunity to study, as Lisa said, from reliable sources and get up to speed. Yet, also consider giving the people in your organization who have diverse backgrounds a voice around this to help you through it. That requires a measure of vulnerability as a leader to say, "I really don't know how to deal with this particular community as it grieves or as it experiences trauma. Can you help to inform me? Can you share some perspectives with me?" I think sometimes we are afraid to show our vulnerability as leaders and to demonstrate that we don't know. I just wanted to add that.

Alicia, we will take a couple more questions. For those of you who are on the phone, we actually have until 1:15 p.m. EST so we want to continue to take more questions with the time we have remaining. Alicia, what do you have?

**Alicia Schoshinski:** A couple of people asked about what is needed to help employees who are afraid to return to work. For instance, if a governor permits people to reopen workplaces, what would you need to do to help address staff fears in that situation?

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** I'll answer this from the HR perspective. Obviously, there are safety and security concerns, separate from the emotional piece, which I'll have Christine and Lisa Dinhofer respond to. There are guidelines being prepared, even now, on how you will return to work and ensure that your workplace is safe, including things like physical distancing and reconsidering that physical

workspace. You'll also want to look at your policies and maybe now is the time to relax some of those policies around sick leave, annual leave or bereavement leave. Be sure that you educate your staff around employee assistance. Those are some of the logistical and easier to tackle resources that you'll want to consider as you move forward. I'll turn to Christine to answer the emotional component and how to ready staff for that.

**Dr. Christine Allen:** Well I'll just respond to what Lisa A. said. There are some leaders I work with, even at a large university, that did exactly what you're saying. They relaxed their sick vacation policy. If people need to be out because they have to self-quarantine or because they are homeschooling, they don't have to use vacation or sick time for that. It's tremendously reassuring for their staff and that's a very practical way, like Lisa and I have been talking about, that employers can show that they care about you and care about your safety rather than just the mission or bottom line. I think that is helpful in terms of feeling reassured.

Also, different people are different in terms of anxiety and what they need to feel safe. So I think, again, to Lisa D.'s point around flexibility and that one size doesn't fit all, how would you be able to have a policy but still make some individual differences if some people feel more anxious than others?

I'll just tell a little quick story. My daughter is teaching English abroad in Japan. She's 23 and, to her amazing credit, she negotiated with the British company that hired her as an Assistant Language Teacher working from home, to go in to work on the train half an hour later and leave half an hour later on the one day she has to hand-deliver materials because they don't have the technology to email it. My 23-year old negotiated being able to go in at a different time so that she doesn't have to travel on the busy train and her employer, to their credit, let her do that. That is just a simple example reassuring people.

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** Thanks, Christine. Lisa, anything you want to add to that?

**Lisa Dinhofer:** I think Christine's story illustrates the value of being creative and at the core, this is a time when leadership needs to ask themselves, "What are my values?" Then, they need to be leading from those values rather than leading from policies. You created policies and you can uncreate policies. What are your values? What are the company values? Is it valuable to us to maintain our connection and our relationship with this employee? Does their talent matter to us? If the answer is yes, that their talent matters and maintaining relationships with your employees matter, then through that lens you'll find a way. Whether it's allowing people to go on a train on off-peak hours or remaining at home and contributing. It's not about getting hung up on feeling as though you have to treat everybody the same to be fair because that's a false concept to begin with; rather, it's about recognizing what you need to do to keep your key talent wanting to work for you and contributing to your mission so your organization can survive.

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** Great, thank you. Alicia?

**Alicia Schoshinski:** Yes. There are also a couple of questions. Earlier, you mentioned adjusting your bereavement policies and there are a couple questions about just clarifying what you might do differently in those policies.

**Lisa Dinhofer:** The first place I would start is asking people how it's been working with it so far because there's a wealth of information there from people who have used that bereavement policy. They can tell you whether it's really working or not. They can tell you what was done to help them reintegrate when they came back, if anything. That's something that I work with companies about, they forget about how best to reintegrate an employee coming back to the workplace from a bereavement leave. Ask people, "Was this helpful to you or did it make this harder for you when you came back? Were you really productive?" We know that grief in the workplace is a \$75 billion dollar problem a year for companies and I'm going to repeat that number, \$75 billion dollars a year. Most often it's because people are coming back and they're being expected to jump right into things. They're not ready. Their concentration suffers, their ability to take in new information suffers and their ability to make decisions that involve money suffers. It becomes an expensive problem rather than having a policy that really works for what this person endured, what they need at that time and what they need coming back. It really is about turning your bereavement policy, the way it was written in standard, upside down and starting from scratch, but this time with the notion that it is there to serve the employee. In the UK, bereavement leave is called compassion leave and I love that because it really reminds everybody what it's about. Words matter.

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** Excellent, thank you. I like that a simple name change could just set such a different tone. About two or three weeks ago, we hosted a webinar on keeping your people together. A lot of the focus of that session was around values and using your values at a time like this to really anchor your staff and to convey to them a strong message of care. Thank you for reinforcing that without even knowing, we appreciate that. Alicia, what's the next question?

**Alicia Schoshinski:** There were a few questions about you dealing with people as a group and how they responded. How do they structure those types of group sessions and what are some resources for doing those types of things? This is for Lisa D. or Christine, what are some of those things you recommended if you were to get your employees together during a period such as this or after any kind of grief issue? How would you go about structuring such a session and where might they get the resources to do that?

**Lisa Dinhofer:** It depends on what the gathering is. If it's to do a weekly check-in on how we are doing, that's going to be structured differently than a gathering to create community around the death of a co-worker. First, you have to be very clear on why you are getting together. I'm a big fan of the weekly check-in meetings where you're meeting with each other to talk about things other than work just to create social capital. The more social capital that exists in your company, the better you're going to come out of this and the better community you can create.

If it's a debriefing, I would start with a cohort that is immediate to the employee that died, maybe the unit or the department that they were in, and then I would go outwards into a larger cohort. Then, have somebody facilitate a conversation or sponsor a conversation that they're not necessarily able to have



themselves that also involves education about grief and loss and responses to that. Allow it to be an organic discussion and just keep going out further from that employee into other groups that are impacted. They're not all going to be necessarily sponsored the same way, or be the same conversation, because they're impacted differently.

**Dr. Christine Allen:** It also might be better when we go back to work, when people in that immediate cohort are co-located and you can do it in person at some point rather than virtually. I was in a virtual town hall yesterday for the New York State Psychological Association and I'm on an organizational consulting and work division board. Out of our nine members, we have lost one, one is on a ventilator and another young woman has been home recovering for six weeks and her husband is doing everything. We did a moment of silence as a whole organization for them, so think about how you can create space for that acknowledgement of loss in your community. That's just an example.

**Lisa Brown Alexander:** Christine and Lisa, thank you for your invaluable contributions in today's conversation. We hope that this was helpful for those of you who are participating. Thank you so much and we'll turn it over to Alicia to wrap up this afternoon.

**Alicia Schoshinski:** Yes, thank you Lisa D. and Christina for the great information you shared with everyone today.

I want to let people know that our Virtual Town Hall for next Monday will be around that issue of the things you need to consider in returning your staff to the workplace and how you go about that.

As soon as this closes, you'll receive a feedback survey that will pop up. Please take a few minutes to answer some questions there, it should only take a couple of minutes. If you would like more information about available services or support from Nonprofit HR, you can email us at [info@nonprofithr.com](mailto:info@nonprofithr.com) or visit us on the web at [www.nonprofithr.com](http://www.nonprofithr.com).

You can access any of our COVID-19 resources including all of the ones that Christine Allen and Lisa Dinhofer mentioned today at [www.nonprofithr.com/covid19](http://www.nonprofithr.com/covid19). Those will all be shared there and a recording of this presentation will also be emailed to you within the next day or so.

We thank everyone for attending today. We hope you have a wonderful day and best of luck as you tackle all of these issues. Thank you everyone.