

What High-Functioning Survivors Look Like at Work

A guide for HR professionals, people leads and organisations

One in four women has experienced domestic abuse. The majority are in employment. Many of your highest performers are carrying histories that your organisation has never been equipped to see, name, or respond to. This guide is for the people responsible for changing that.

What high-functioning survivors look like at work

She is your highest performer. She arrives early, stays late, never complains, never asks for help, and handles everything with a composure that others admire. She is also exhausted in a way that no amount of annual leave fixes. She is hypervigilant, people-pleasing, and running on a nervous system that has never been told the threat is gone. You are not seeing resilience. You are seeing survival.

Why trauma-informed workplaces are a retention strategy

Women who have experienced trauma are disproportionately represented in high-performing, high-stress roles. They are also disproportionately likely to leave without warning, burn out silently, or remain present in body while absent in everything that matters. The organisations that understand this and build cultures of genuine psychological safety do not just retain these women. They unlock them.

What disclosures actually need from you

When a woman discloses trauma, abuse, or a difficult history in a workplace context, she is not asking you to fix it. She is asking you to know. The most damaging responses are not cruel ones. They are well-meaning ones that minimise, redirect, or immediately reach for policy. What she needs first is to be believed. To be heard. And to know that telling you has not made things worse.

The cost of getting this wrong

A woman who discloses and is not believed, or is met with a process rather than a person, does not just disengage. She disappears into herself more deeply than before. She learns that the workplace is another place where her reality is not safe. The cost is her trust, her engagement, and eventually her presence. Attrition, long-term sickness absence, and grievance procedures are expensive. Trauma-informed leadership is less expensive than the alternative.

What trauma-informed leadership actually requires

It is not a training day. It is not a policy document. It is a fundamental shift in how leaders understand behaviour, performance, and need. It means knowing that withdrawal is not attitude. That people-pleasing is not enthusiasm. That an inability to receive feedback without shutting down is not unprofessionalism. It means creating cultures where women do not have to perform wellness to stay employed.

Book Victoria to speak or enquire about The Tunnel Workshop

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