

# HR Insights



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## Managing Employees With “Survivor’s Guilt” in the Workplace

“Survivor’s guilt” is often associated with car crashes or natural disasters, but it can occur after any traumatic event. The emotion typically comes when individuals feel remorseful for making it through a tragedy when others did not. In a professional setting, employees may experience survivor’s guilt—and the anxiety that comes with it—after organizational layoffs, furloughs or other shake-ups.

Employers should do everything they can to address these complex emotions among employees following major workplace changes. Failing to do so can result in serious long-term consequences for employees and the organization as a whole.

This article provides a brief overview of how survivor’s guilt can affect a workforce and outlines mitigation steps for employers to take.

### Why Do Employees Feel Survivor’s Guilt?

Employees may experience survivor’s guilt for any number of reasons, both related and unrelated to the workplace. For instance, an employee could’ve recently survived a car crash and must now deal with those emotions on top of job responsibilities.

However, organizational shake-ups—not outside sources—tend to be the greatest source of survivor’s guilt in professional settings. These include layoffs, furloughs, job reassignments and any other scenario where some employees are “spared” from actions taken against others. This can lead to survivor’s guilt among the remaining employees and impact their performance.

### What Does Survivor’s Guilt Look Like?

Survivor’s guilt commonly manifests in the form of anxiety or depression. This mental health deterioration can have an immediate impact on performance, with overwhelmed employees burning out and letting tasks slide.

However, as with grief, the emotions associated with survivor’s guilt can vary widely. In fact, some individuals may not appear to be suffering at all in the workplace and may continue to perform as usual. That attitude can be misleading and may actually hide deeper emotions, simply delaying performance issues.

That’s why it’s critical for employers to address survivor’s guilt with the entire workforce. Employees should be given an avenue for help even if they don’t appear to need it at first glance. Otherwise, some employees may continue pretending to feel fine, while actually compromising their work.

### Why Does Survivor’s Guilt Matter?

Employee well-being should always be a top concern for employers—employees struggling with mental health issues should be given resources for improving. But survivor’s guilt can affect more than the suffering individual.

More to the point, a workforce wracked with survivor’s guilt is not a productive one. Studies have shown that nearly 75% of employees who were

spared from layoffs experienced a decline in productivity, according to the Harvard Business Review. Additionally, of those employees, 69% said their organization's product or service quality declined following the layoff.

## How Can Employers Help?

Just like there's no one reason for workplace survivor's guilt, there's no single solution for resolving it. However, there are some effective practices employers can use to improve their initiatives.

And even minor efforts can lead to big gains. In fact, employees who said that their supervisors were "approachable" and "open" following a layoff were 70% less likely to experience declines in productivity and 65% less likely to report drops in product or service quality, according to the Harvard Business Review. This illustrates how important quality leadership can be during times of heightened workplace stress.

Below are some other ways employers can help their workforce cope with challenging periods.

### *Be Transparent*

Managers are often looked to as sources of information and stability in the workplace. If a furlough or layoff occurs, employees will naturally seek their manager for details. Managers should welcome these conversations and be ready to talk candidly about the organizational changes. They should be able to explain the organization's position and rationale for the decision, while honoring the service of the employees who were laid off. Avoiding questions or dismissing laid-off employees will only create more uncertainty and distractions among workers.

### *Keep Communication Consistent and Ongoing*

Ignoring the elephant in the room won't do anyone any favors—doing so can actually chip away at trust and provoke resentment. That's why managers at every level should be actively talking with their direct reports, using consistent language. This communication should be frequent and ongoing, and discussed during one-on-one meetings and in larger settings, as appropriate. The goal should be to address the situation with every employee so they know where to find helpful resources. Critically, employers should allocate

time for training managers on talking points and dealing with employees suffering from survivor's guilt.

### *Consider Outside Assistance*

At the end of the day, managers are not mental health experts. If a workplace situation is disruptive enough, employers should consider seeking outside assistance for dealing with subsequent employee mental health issues. This may involve inviting counselors into the workplace or referring specific employees to seek assistance.

## Conclusion

Employers must do what they can to address survivor's guilt and its underlying emotions among employees following organizational changes. If left unchecked, these emotions can reduce productivity and infect the workplace culture.

Speak with JP Griffin Group to learn more about promoting mental health among your workforce.