

Common workplace interactions can trigger suicidal thoughts for employees with mood disorders

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Ignoring a colleague's greeting or making a sarcastic comment in the workplace may actually do more harm than intended, according to West

Virginia University research.

Perceived low-grade forms of [workplace](#) mistreatment, such as avoiding eye contact or excluding a coworker from conversation, can amplify [suicidal thoughts](#) in employees with [mood disorders](#), based on a study by Kayla Follmer, assistant professor of management, and Jake Follmer, assistant professor of educational psychology.

"We know from prior research that minor forms of workplace mistreatment reduce employee engagement," Kayla Follmer said. "But our paper provided an explanation for why this was occurring. Mistreatment increases [suicidal ideation](#) (thoughts) and because of that, work engagement is reduced."

The research team surveyed 279 American adults who are employed 20 or more hours a week and diagnosed with depression or bipolar disorder.

"What we wanted to do was hone in on employees most likely to experience these effects because that gives us greater opportunity for intervention," she said.

The researchers then asked participants to rate various experiences relating to workplace mistreatment, suicidal ideation, and job engagement over several months.

Kayla Follmer believes this is the first study that links these types of workplace mistreatments to potentially serious psychological outcomes. Their findings are published in [*Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*](#).

"These actions are not egregious or illegal," she said. "It's not even considered bullying or harassment. These are ways, on a day-to-day basis, that you might hurt somebody but in a low-grade way. It's how we

may behave and we don't think twice about it."

Another finding from the study suggests that these effects are stronger for those not receiving treatment for their depression or mood disorder. Kayla Follmer estimated that roughly 50 percent of participants fit into that category.

Mental health in the workplace is one of her areas of expertise. A trained industrial organizational psychologist, she considers the topic overlooked in management research and the business world, in general.

"We all focus on bottom lines and productivity but we fail to take into account [employee](#) experiences and the effect mental illness can have on those experiences," she said.

In turn, organizations can enhance the workplace environment by providing [mental health](#) resources to employees, which may increase production and job satisfaction.

While research for this study was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, Kayla Follmer wonders if the world of remote work intensifies the effects of mental health and workplace engagement.

She theorized that employees no longer working in a traditional office setting because of the pandemic may feel less engaged.

And virtual communication can be easily misconstrued, adding a layer of instability.

"In some ways, our results may be even more important now because we know that depression and anxiety are at the highest levels they've been," she said.

"Suicide and depression are very taboo, dark topics. It can be heavy at times to research, but that's the responsibility we bear to bring these experiences into awareness for organizations and to tell them we can do better. And it's our responsibility to do better for those individuals who need us."

More information: Kayla B. Follmer et al. Longitudinal relations between workplace mistreatment and engagement – The role of suicidal ideation among employees with mood disorders, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.obhdp.2020.12.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2020.12.002)

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