

Managing The First Few Weeks After A Traumatic Event & Meeting The Emotional Needs

Stress Reactions in the First Few Weeks

As employees return to their workplace following a traumatic event, the initial numbness, disbelief and bewilderment start to wear off and the reality of the losses experienced begins to set in. According to trauma experts, this is an important phase in the recovery process, as survivors:

- Begin working through their recent experience
- Try to understand its meaning
- Examine key learning points
- Make it part of their life experience

Following are some common reactions you and your employees may experience in response to traumatic events, the impacts of which can be decreased through effective emergency preparedness and planning.

Physical: fatigue, headaches, dizziness, stomach problems, increase or decrease in appetite, neck and backaches, or sleep difficulties.

In how you think: memory problems, have difficulty concentrating, find it hard to stop thinking about the event, find it hard to remember day-to-day things, feel disorganized at work and at home, or have flashbacks.

Emotional: fear that a similar event may recur, sadness for deaths and injuries, grief for colleagues, guilt for being alive, anger at the injustice and senselessness of the event, feeling vulnerable and fragile or anxious about the future.

In how you act: overly vigilant to environment, isolated, impatient, irritable, change in communication patterns (talk a lot more or less), or use more alcohol, drugs or tobacco.

Emotional Support Considerations

Following are key emotional support guidelines you need to keep in mind as employees settle back into the workplace and start integrating the traumatic event they experienced.

- **Various reactions are natural in situations of stress.** It is reassuring to know that most reactions to a very stressful event are common and that most people do not disintegrate in response to a traumatic event.
- **People are resilient and strong** and most will recover within a short period of time. Indeed, stressful events, even major crises, are part of life. In most cases, our life experience has given us the strengths and skills we need to gradually work through our feelings and reactions.
- **Contact with colleagues and others whom they feel close to is important** when adjusting to a traumatic event. It encourages co-workers to share stories, to put their experiences into words and slowly and naturally achieve some understanding and integration of their experience.

- **Reassuring employees about their safety at work** and explaining what measures are being taken to protect them **is an important step in helping them cope.**
- **Responding to employees' emotional needs in a timely and sensitive manner will** foster a sense of loyalty and trust, **facilitate employees' reintegration in the workplace and reduce absenteeism.**
- **Work has a healing value.** Getting up in the morning, returning to a safe environment, being surrounded by colleagues, and having meals at a regular time all contribute to increasing a person's sense of control, thereby reducing distress and restoring a sense of safety and security. It is important to remember that most people can work productively while still dealing with grief and trauma.

Administrative Considerations

You can assist employees by taking practical measures that can help in preventing or reducing work-related stress. For example:

- Recognize that the weeks following a traumatic event may be less productive-
- Request that pending deadlines be delayed or assigned to another group.
- Ask superiors to provide temporary help with administrative work. Use caution in getting additional help. If employees have been seriously injured or killed, co-workers may consider immediate replacements as disrespectful. It is good to discuss staffing needs with employees before making a decision.

How To Be Helpful

Here are some emotional support measures to help you support your staff as they adjust and start absorbing their experiences:

- **Being there with and for your employees** and listening to their stories and concerns in a caring way are the most helpful measures you can take in providing emotional support.
- **Meet with staff regularly.** Check with each one individually and privately and also meet with them as a group. Ask them how they are doing. Find out their concerns. Contacts should be supportive and caring. You represent the organization to your employees, and your caring presence and genuine interest can mean a great deal in helping them feel supported.
- **Build on the strengths of the group.** Encourage employees to take care of one another through such simple measures as listening to those in distress, offering practical help, visiting hospitalized co-workers, or going with an employee on a first visit to a feared site. Encourage them to check with each other at work.
- **Feel free to share your own natural reactions with your employees.** Knowing that you also experience anxiety, fear, anger or grief will help normalize and validate what they are experiencing. Showing you can function effectively in spite of your reactions may help them do likewise. Sharing your own reactions is not a sign of weakness; rather, it gives permission for employees to talk about their own pain. On the other hand, be careful not to turn conversations into forums for your own experience. Each person experiences events in a unique

way. Acknowledge their feelings. Avoid statements like "*I know exactly how you feel*" or "*You shouldn't take it so hard.*" Also, steer clear of pronouncements that minimize a person's pain (e.g. "*It could be worse*" and those that reject people's feelings, such as "*You have to pull yourself together*").

- **Facts help. Try to answer questions as best you can.** If you don't know the answers to their questions, it's okay to say that there are some things you don't know or understand.
- **Be accessible and supportive.** Listen attentively to what people are saying and respond in a caring and non-judgmental manner. Let people know it's okay to cry.
- **Alert them to expect to feel sad in the weeks after the event and to not rush recovery.** Normalize and validate these reactions
- **Talk about everyday issues and activities.** Refrain from letting the traumatic event take over every conversation.
- **Review your building emergency plan with all employees.** Ask staff to share lessons learned from the recently experienced traumatic event. Include these in your response plan.
- **Ask to attend a training session on stress management** so you can better understand employees' reactions and how to best help them manage their reactions.

If the traumatic incident was due to a workplace accident or criminal incident, employees, including managers, may:

- Be interviewed by the police, departmental security officials, the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development and/or an Occupational Health and Safety Committee
- Have to appear at a coroner's inquest or in court.

Any one of these events may trigger a wide range of stress reactions as employees are asked to recall what happened. Inquests or court appearances may last several weeks. Additional emotional support will probably be required at this time. Encourage employees to make use of help and services provided by your EAP.

Delayed Reactions

Some people react strongly as stressful events are happening; others react a few days, a few weeks or even a few months later. Delayed reactions can be confusing as people start experiencing reactions they had at the time or immediately after the traumatic event. Remember, not everyone reacts the same way and at the same time.

Employee Appearing Overwhelmed?

With the support of family and friends, most victims of a traumatic event see their stress reactions diminish over a period of time and they gradually recover from the emotional effects. For a small minority, however, the symptoms triggered by the traumatic event may not resolve themselves so quickly. This is particularly true for individuals:

- Whose lives were threatened
- Who experienced greater terror, horror or fear

- Who may have been more vulnerable because of concurrent stressful life events.

In some cases, a person's reactions to the event may become so intense that they:

- Have trouble functioning at home or at work
- Frequently cry unexpectedly long after the event
- Are depressed or anxious a lot of the time
- Withdraw from others
- Eat a lot more or less
- Appear tired and lethargic
- Complain of nightmares and insomnia
- Abuse drugs or alcohol.

If you suspect that an employee is experiencing distressing reactions, encourage the person to consult your EAP and ask for assistance. Supervisors are encouraged to consult with EAP about strategies to support staff.

The majority of information herein has been adapted from: [A Manager's Handbook to Traumatic Events, U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2007](#) .

Please do call me if you have any questions, suggestions, or if I may be helpful in supporting you as you support staff in the wake of this tragic incident.

*Sincerely,
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