

Manager's Response to Traumatic Events

Developing and following an emergency response plan for certain traumatic events has become a standard management practice in many organisations. If your employer established such a plan, take the time to review it on a regular basis. The hope is that you will never have cause to activate those procedures, but preparing for the possibility now would be a prudent step to take.

Given in that spirit of preparedness, the following information can be applied to events occurring within or outside the workplace that cause moderate to severe stress reactions to employees. Natural or man-made disasters, serious accidents, acts of violence and suicide at the workplace are classified as traumatic events.

First Steps

- Focus on feeling and communicating a calm and controlled attitude. Although difficult, reacting calmly as a leader is critical at this point. Recognise your own anger, anxiety or frustration, but resist acting out of these emotions. Take a few deep breaths on a regular basis to reduce the effect of stress on your body and mind. Speak in a slow, measured way. Consider your course of action rather than making snap decisions that may have to be changed.
- If your organisation has one, follow the emergency response plan and assume that everyone else is doing the same. Depending on the situation, contact 999, senior management or other internal responders. You may also need to secure the area, shelter yourself and employees in place, or act in other ways to provide for everyone's safety.
- Keep information and communication lines open. As people will quickly begin to respond emotionally to the event, sharing accurate information with them will reduce speculation and anxiety. Don't be afraid to say, 'I don't know'. Don't pass on information without confirming the source. Follow up with employees as soon as you obtain new information or answers to their questions.
- Unless security would be compromised, encourage employees to contact their loved ones.

Your Response to Employees

- Don't view the behaviour of people reacting to an abnormal event as psychologically abnormal. People will be affected and will react differently to the event, so be sensitive to those differences. Over time, they will feel better and show signs of recovery. If you become concerned about an employee because of continued physical, emotional or work-performance problems, consult with your manager, employee assistance programme (EAP) or other professional resource.
- Interacting with your employees in a compassionate and understanding way will reduce their stress response and prevent increased anxiety and conflict.
- Before employees leave work after the incident, gather facts and solicit their input. Show your compassion and understanding for what they've just gone through. Touch base with each one to assess how they're doing and if they can get support from family or friends that night. Don't be afraid to set a positive example by sharing your own reactions. Advise them to care for themselves in a mindful way: Drink water; limit consumption of alcohol, nicotine, caffeine and junk food; limit unnecessary driving; take a walk or get some other form of exercise; and get some sleep and rest.

Helping Staff and the Organisation Recover

- Walk through the workplace, and talk with all employees in a caring way. One of the biggest factors in

helping the workplace heal is for management to show understanding about how the incident impacted the employees. Inform them that the EAP is an excellent resource for situations like this one.

- If death resulted from the event, give employees the information about the funeral or memorial service, and encourage them to attend. If possible, attend yourself, and invite senior management to accompany you. Ask employees if they would like to plan a way to honour the deceased. Allow them time to meet and work out the details.
- Provide regular updates with new information when available. Make sure all employees are informed, even those who did not attend your update meetings. Accurate information is part of the process of recovery and de-escalation from the event.
- Accept that normal work productivity will be reduced for a time. Workloads may need to be temporarily redistributed and deadlines changed. Discuss the changes with employees before making them. Ultimately, a return to normal work schedules and routines will help to establish a sense of normalcy again. Good communication and developing a shared story – 'We're all in this together' – will also help restabilise the workplace.
- Consult with your manager and the EAP about the possibility of inviting a counsellor from the EAP to meet with your staff. An EAP consultant can also give you guidance about how to manage any employees who are exhibiting behaviours that concern you.
- Based on the circumstances of the traumatic event, you may want to discuss with your manager the need to review security or safety procedures, and develop or revise the emergency response plan.
- Lastly, follow the advice you gave employees. Choose healthy and positive ways to manage your own stress response. Monitor your reactions regularly. If you notice that your choices aren't working, consider reaching out to your EAP or another reliable resource to find alternative ways to take care of yourself. Remind yourself that this experience will end, the workplace will stabilise and return to normal, and you will be able to move forward.

Sources

Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress. (n.d.). *Psychological first aid: How you can support well-being in disaster victims*. Retrieved 1 September 2021 from <https://www.cstsonline.org>

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Disclaimer: This document is intended for general information only. It does not provide the reader with specific direction, advice, or recommendations. You may wish to contact an appropriate professional for questions concerning your particular situation.

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