



Tips for Supervisors: **Traumatic Events Impacting the Workplace**

Workplaces are quasi-communities impacted by change and trauma. Employers and supervisors can impact healthy post-trauma transition by keeping an open mind and offering support to employees as needed. Call **C-SEAP at 1-800-821-8154** if you have questions or need support.

Types of Trauma impacting the Workplace

- **Death of a co-worker or client.** Employees may struggle with grief following the death of a colleague, co-worker, client, or agency leader.
- **Human-caused violence.** Trauma and/or stress response is common following violent incidents in the workplace. Supervisors should be prepared to address acute and longer-term impact of violence impacting the workplace.
- **Natural disaster.** Environmental devastation can leave employees displaced from home and work setting thus impacting livelihood, physical and emotional health, and safety.
- **Down-sizing.** Announced or unannounced lay-offs due to mergers, office closures, or buy-outs can trigger stress responses for those released from employment as well as remaining staff.
- **Office construction or re-location.** Structural changes to office spaces, re-locations, adding offices or closing offices creates stress as employees manage new space, new co-workers, and changes to their own setting or schedules.

Understand Stress Responses

- Physical signs of acute stress can include chest pain, difficulty breathing, dizziness, shock.
- Cognitive signs of traumatic stress include inability to concentrate or accomplish tasks, memory problems, difficulty with problem-solving.
- Emotional impact of traumatic events can include anxiety, guilt, irritability, feeling overwhelmed, blaming self or others.
- As employees, we often spend the greater part of our day in the workplace. Be prepared to see your employees display some of the physical, cognitive, and emotional signs of stress for days, weeks, and even months following a workplace critical incident.

Action Steps for Supervisors and Leaders

- Link employees with EAP in order to access counseling, referrals, assistance with basic needs.
- Remind employees, even weeks or months after the incident, how to contact EAP for assistance.
- Repeat necessary information frequently as stress can impact ability to process and retain information.
- As a leader, be available and visible as a model of resiliency and compassion.
- Provide honest and factual information to employees about organizational, location, or other related changes that may occur as a result of the traumatic event or incident. Keep employees regularly informed of changes so they have a sense of understanding and control.
- As a leader, seek emotional support for yourself as you work to maintain safety and structure in the work setting.
- In acute situations, work with HR to assist with contacting family or emergency contacts.
- While not critical for healing, some employees may request a post-incident debriefing. Never require employee participation in a debriefing group but do make it available for those who express interest. **Contact C-SEAP for facilitation.**
- Remind yourself and your employees that we all respond differently to traumatic events – be patient with yourself and others as you all cope in the aftermath of the event or situation.
- Consider some type of response to the disaster or trauma that could unite your employees (*e.g.*, memorial, *etc.*).
- Returning to normal work routines is generally preferred and helpful to employees. Notice, and help seek assistance, when an employee is struggling to return to the normal rhythm of their job following a traumatic incident.

What to Avoid Following a Traumatic Event

- Do not require employees to share their stories or participate in debriefing activities.
- Avoid simple reassurances such as “everything will be all right.” Instead, ask how you can help or access help.
- Do not require employees to participate in remembrance or related post-incident events – this may cause stress or re-trigger difficult emotional response.
- Some professionals must be evaluated on their ability to respond to acute disasters, crises, and crime. If there is not a mandated response duty assigned to your employee(s), do not evaluate their responses to the event or incident – process these observations with your supervisor or a counselor. All humans respond differently in crisis, regardless of training.

Sources:

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