Helping Employees after a Stressful Event: A Guide for Managers

One of the services your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provides is a consistent, comprehensive method for coping with the impact of traumatic events affecting the workplace. Involving your EAP as soon as possible will minimize the negative impact of the event and promote healing in those who have been affected. This guide is provided to managers as a way to help you address the immediate consequences of a stressful event and to understand the potential short- and long-term effects on you and the people you supervise.

Stressful Events

Stressful or traumatic events (also referred to as critical incidents) that have a serious impact on the workplace may include the following:

- Natural disasters
- Death (natural or accidental)
- Homicide
- Serious injury
- Violence or the threat of violence
- Terrorist attack
- Suicide
- Robbery (with or without violence)

Typical Response to a Stressful Event

When a stressful event occurs, the normal tendency is to try and stop the flood of feelings that ensues. People affected typically try to “build a wall” around the incident in an attempt to keep it removed from the rest of life. It is as if the person is saying: “If I can keep this event out of my awareness, then it will not affect my work, my home life, my relationships, or my peace of mind.”

Organizations may react in much the same way. In order to contain the incident, a decision may be made to downplay the event or deny that it is or will be a major problem (depending, of course, upon the severity of the event and how widespread the potential damage). The false hope is that the consequences of the event won’t affect the functioning of the organization or work group. Withholding and minimizing bad news is a normal human reaction used by both individuals and groups to protect themselves and those around them.

In reality, attempts to use denial as a strategy do not have the desired effect. The facts of a traumatic event are painful and disturbing, but will do far less damage if they are dealt with directly and openly, giving all those affected an opportunity to acknowledge and come to terms with the facts in a healthy way.

Effective Management Response Is Crucial

Emotional turmoil resulting from a highly stressful event can leave lasting scars on individuals and organizations. However, effective leadership from management and utilization of the EAP can help ensure a positive outcome.

The turmoil and loss that people experience will surface sooner or later. If normal feelings of grief, loss, fear and even guilt and anger are expressed at the time of the incident, disruption of normal operation can be short-lived.

However, if these feelings are not allowed expression, they will be manifested later in more serious and damaging forms such as increased illness; absenteeism and turnover; decreased productivity and morale; and disruption in communication among employees and between employees and managers.
What to Expect after a Stressful Event

Depending upon the event itself and the characteristics of the individuals affected, consequences can be extreme and disruptive. Employees may find even the act of reporting for work very stressful. They may have difficulty sleeping or eating. Common reactions are listed below. However, it is important to recognize that different people respond differently and recover at different rates. For most people, the effects of the event will subside within a few weeks of the event. For others, the symptoms may become worse. If the latter is the case, the employee will probably require some individual counseling assistance.

Common Physical Reactions

- Headaches
- Dizziness
- Back pain
- Digestive disturbances
- Muscle tremors or tension
- Palpitations
- Chest pain
- Difficult sleeping/nightmares
- Startle reactions

Common Behavioral Reactions

- Withdrawal
- Angry outbursts
- Crying
- Irritability
- Decreased energy/ambition
- Marital/relationship conflict
- Increased alcohol/drug use
- Eating too little or too much
- Decreased productivity

Common Emotional Responses

- Shock or numbness
- Anger toward others involved
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Guilt/frustration
- Sadness
- Feeling unsafe or vulnerable
- Loneliness
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Intrusive imagery

**Common Mental Responses**

- Difficulty concentrating
- Confusion
- Difficulty remembering details of the event

**Tips for Those Affected by Stressful Events**

- Recognize that if you are experiencing any of the symptoms listed above, you are having a common reaction to a traumatic event. Do not measure your own response by the reactions of others—we are all different. With time and the emotional support of others, these stress reactions will pass more quickly. Take advantage of professional counseling through your EAP. This does not imply weakness or craziness. It simply indicates that this particular event was too powerful for you to manage on your own.

- Take good care of yourself. Eat well, exercise, and get enough rest. Avoid stimulants such as caffeine, chocolate and nicotine as well as depressants such as alcohol.

- Seek out comfortable, familiar surroundings and avoid spending too much time alone.

- Share your thoughts and feelings with those who are supportive and helpful. Don’t try to block recollections of the past—it helps to talk about them. Feel free to set boundaries with people who have not been helpful in the past.

- Give yourself time to recover. Difficulties with concentration, memory or decision-making are common but short-term reactions. Seek professional help if your responses are interfering with job responsibilities. Focus on concrete, easily achievable tasks.

- Remember that difficulty sleeping, nightmares, flashbacks and feelings of being “hyper-alert” are common and will diminish with time.

- Avoid personalizing or taking responsibility for how others are responding to the event. Do not compare or measure your reactions to those of other people—each experience is unique and personal.

- Communicate your feelings clearly. If you don’t, others may not know how to respond to you appropriately. Let others know which responses are helpful and which are not.

- Recognize that anniversary dates of a traumatic event may trigger feelings related to that event. This is normal.

- Seek help from a professional counselor if symptoms worsen or do not seem to be decreasing with time.

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