



## Leading Through Crisis

There are human and financial costs to any crisis impacting the workplace. Managers need to be prepared to effectively manage the challenges during a critical incident to help mitigate these costs. Managers should have guidelines to assess the impact of a traumatic incident.

### What is trauma?

- Exposure to an event directly as a victim or witness
- Indirectly learning or hearing about a traumatic event

The result is an extreme stressor that may impact individuals and disrupt the entire workforce. Traumatizing events can take a serious emotional toll on those involved and those indirectly involved, even if the event did not cause physical damage.

**Primary trauma** is often referred to as the direct exposure to an extreme stressor of either experiencing or witnessing an event that involves a threat, death, serious injury, or threat to one's sense of safety.

**Secondary trauma** can result when employees learn about events experienced by others. These events include, but are not limited to, employees hearing in detail of events such as a violent personal assault, accident, serious injury, or death.

**Aftershocks** can extend far past the direct or indirect victims of the incident, which can create a "ripple effect."

### Four common elements of a traumatic event

1. Event was **unexpected**
2. Person was **unprepared**
3. Person experiences a **lack of control**
4. Person has feelings of **powerlessness**

### Initial reactions to trauma

The following are common initial reactions staff may exhibit following a traumatic incident:

- **Physical:** muscle tremors, sweating, need for bathroom, nausea, hyperventilation, muffled hearing, disorientation, light-headedness
- **Cognitive:** difficulty making decisions, short-term memory problems, poor concentration, difficulty communicating feelings or needs
- **Emotional:** feeling overwhelmed, anxiety, self-doubt, fear, numbness, anger, sadness
- **Behavioral:** withdrawal, intimacy difficulties, engaging in bad habits, antisocial behaviors

Everyone reacts to traumas in different ways, and until a trauma happens, there is no way of knowing how we will behave and act. Some of these reactions will cause enough distress to interfere with adaptive coping, and recovery may be helped by support from compassionate and caring counselors and disaster responders.

## Behavioral responses to trauma at work

- Changing regular work schedules
- Being distracted from the task at hand
- Deteriorating work performance and customer relations
- Change in appearance
- Questioning when things will get back to normal
- Withdrawing from friends and coworkers

## Assessing workplace impact of a traumatic event

There are five components in assessing risks of a traumatic or critical incident:

1. **Nature of the incident:** What happened? Incidents that happen on the workplace floor, and events that are unexpected or have a rapid onset, can be considered potential high-risk incidents.
2. **Death or injuries:** Who was the victim? Any death, significant injury, high degree of threat to life, or serious exposure to death, especially on a worksite, is considered a potential high-risk incident.
3. **Victim impact:** Who was involved? The higher the number of employees exposed or witnesses to an incident, the greater the potential for a high-risk incident.
4. **Severity of incident:** What are the reactions? Vulnerable employees (due to recent losses or past trauma) may exhibit stronger reactions during or following an incident. Employees may be more impacted by a death or injury of a young or well-known employee or an employee with a young family.
5. **Organizational issues:** Is production affected? Events with continual or potential for recurrence are considered potential high-risk incidents.

## High impact assessment indicators

- Incidents that occur on the worksite
- Unexpected or rapid onset of a traumatic event
- Death or serious injury of an employee
- High degree of threat to life or exposure to death
- Lengthy exposure to a traumatic event
- Many employees affected by the trauma
- Strong potential for recurrence
- Widespread media impact

## Regulate your own reaction

- Lead by example
- Be visible at the scene
- Remain calm
- Speak to others in neutral tones
- Involve team leads and frontline supervisors

## Secure the workplace

- Deal with the immediate emergency.
- Follow all company policies and procedures.
- Contact any appropriate local authorities (fire, police, etc.) as needed.
- Continually deliver key safety messages.

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## Stabilize employees

- Stabilization is helping to address basic needs, which include one 's physiological and safety needs.
- If any employee or group of employees cannot be stabilized, access to medical or physical care may be needed.
- Offer to help move employees to a safe place.
- Provide food and beverage away from the impacted area.
- Remember your role is to foster resilience by supporting your employees in their recovery.

## Psychological first aid (PFA)

- Establish personal connections.
- Enhance immediate and ongoing safety and comfort.
- Calm and reorient emotionally overwhelmed or distraught employees.
- Help employees to articulate their concerns or needs.
- Offer practical information.
- Support employees in their recovery.

## Communicate as details unfold

- Not to respond IS to respond. In the event of a crisis, people talk.
- Information sharing may be determined by your company policies.

## 8 techniques to support employees

1. Provide an opportunity to normalize responses.
2. Ensure that individuals are ready to return to work.
3. Be aware that traumatic events may lead to extreme stress that can overwhelm an individual's ability to cope.
4. Be observant, and identify any behavioral changes.
5. Communicate openly, and brief employees frequently (be transparent).
6. Provide on-site support.
7. Be aware of secondary victimization.
8. Continually monitor the environment.

## Peer support and self-care

- Nurture team support.
- Create a peer system.
- Manage your own workload.
- Balance your lifestyle.
- Remember your own needs.
- Know what services are available.

## Unique events call for tailored strategies

- **Unexpected Death of Employee:** The intensity of grief reactions will vary among individuals.
- **On-the-Job Serious Injury or Death:** Common reactions may include heightened sensitivity around safety in the workplace, increased vulnerability and anxiety about returning to work.
- **Random Acts of Violence (Assault, Robbery):** Physically, the employee may experience shock or a fight-or-flight survival reaction in which the heart rate increases, perceptual senses become heightened or distorted, and adrenaline levels increase to meet a real or perceived threat.

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- **Restructuring or Reduction of the Workforce:** Dismissed employees can go through emotional stages starting with shock, denial, and disbelief. They may express fear and anxiety or anger and blame.
- **Natural Disaster:** Primary concerns may be physiological (food, water, shelter, safety) and being able to communicate with loved ones.
- **Terrorist Act:** Common reactions may include heightened sensitivity around safety in the workplace, increased feelings of vulnerability, and anxiety about returning to work. Fear of it happening again.
- **Pandemic Response:** Common reactions may include fear of contagion, hypervigilance, lock down fatigue, anger, grief and loss.

## Delivering bad news effectively

Pay attention to your attitude, the setting, and the message. Make sure you answer questions and follow up appropriately.

It is important to be culturally sensitive and aware if your organization or workplace is multicultural. Bereavement, loss, mental health, counseling, substance use, death by suicide are all topics that have differing interpretations and nuances in different cultures so it is important to be culturally sensitive and aware. And not assume that your interpretation and understanding of a situation or event will be the same as everyone else's.

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