

How can I provide needed support?



MANAGING A TRAUMA IN THE WORKPLACE

Coping with a workplace trauma can be one of the most challenging events you and your team have to face. But while the event itself is difficult, the residual effects can be longer lasting if not handled effectively. Getting things back to “normal” is no easy feat, but a well-prepared organization plays a critical role in the physical and emotional recovery of employees.

By understanding the typical responses to a traumatic event, being able to recognize the signs of trouble and handling them before they become more serious, you and your team can work through post-traumatic issues. And while you may never forget the event, you can learn strategies and tactics to help everyone cope and begin focusing on the process of moving forward.

What is a Traumatic Event?

A traumatic event involves exposure to an extreme event that can be emotionally painful, distressful or shocking and, in some cases, even life-threatening. These incidents vary in nature and severity and can happen at work or away from the job. From a natural disaster, to a robbery, to the loss of a co-worker, to downsizing or layoffs; traumatic events can have lasting physical and mental impacts.

Everyone reacts to a traumatic event in their own way and reactions can change from day-to-day or even from moment-to-moment.

Responses to Trauma

Few people are able to walk away from a traumatic event unaffected. Initial reactions of numbness, shock and disbelief are common. Depending on the type of incident, some employees may experience:

Denial. In an attempt to forget and move on, some people try not thinking about the event and even refuse to talk about it. They may also avoid the places and people that remind them of the incident and become more and more isolated. An employee that throws him or herself into work to stay busy and preoccupied may be using denial as a coping mechanism.



Signs of Trouble

Because each person responds to a trauma differently, you need to pay attention to individual responses. Signs that you or another employee may be experiencing difficulty with the situation include:

- Problems functioning in daily life at home and at work
- Acting disconnected or emotionally numb
- Severe fear, anxiety or depression
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs, including prescription drugs

Feelings of fear, depression and bad dreams are all common after a traumatic experience. For most, these symptoms are short-lived and gradually fade away. However if the symptoms persist, become all-consuming and do not seem to improve over time, professional help may be needed to deal with what may have developed into Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This anxiety condition can take weeks and even months to develop and symptoms continue to get worse for months or even years with no signs of improvement. Without professional help, PTSD can seriously interfere with a person's life.

You should keep a watchful eye on employees for weeks and even months after a traumatic incident and be there to reach out and help or direct someone to needed support.

These tips will help my team and I move forward.



Intrusive recollection (“flashbacks”). A flashback is when a person can't stop thinking about the event and relives the trauma as if it's happening all over again. This is often coupled with emotions and sensory experiences that make it hard to distinguish between reality and the flashback—which can be frightening. Some individuals may begin to experience flashbacks about other traumatic events that occurred earlier in life.

Fear. An overwhelming feeling of hopelessness or despair is another common reaction to trauma. This may mean anxiety about the future, being consumed by thoughts that a similar event could happen again, or heightened anxiety about the well-being of loved ones. These feelings of fear can begin to impact daily life.

Anger. Many people feel intense emotional anger at the senselessness of a traumatic event and can start to lash out, act impatient or irritable. They may become consumed by guilt, place blame on others, or be angry with themselves.

Depression. A critical incident can cause overwhelming feelings of grief. When one's sense of control is taken away, depression may follow. This is an expected and common response but in most cases is short-term and manageable.

Traumatic events often have as big an impact on managers as they do on employees. The demands of your own role, combined with providing support for your team, can cause significant wear and tear on your emotions. Don't neglect your own feelings and accept you will also go through a similar process. Pay attention to your own well-being so you can support the health of your team.

Physical Responses

Common **physical responses** to traumatic events include: headaches, backaches, stomach problems, heart palpitations, sleep difficulties, appetite changes, concentration and memory problems and increased susceptibility to sickness.

All of these responses are normal and expected coping mechanisms after a traumatic event, but you should see continued improvement over time. Otherwise, they are a cause for concern.

Unfortunately, no workplace is immune to traumatic events. And it's undeniable: once a trauma happens, it can temporarily dissolve the comforting sense of community you once had within your workplace, leaving people feeling vulnerable and insecure. As a people leader, you play a pivotal role in helping your team and your team members work through the harsh realities of a trauma to overcome them. By remaining open and frank, keeping an eye out for signs of post-trauma trouble and leading people to the support they need to move on, you and your team can and will recover; learning how to move beyond that traumatic event and continuing to grow together.

How You Can Help

Provide support. Though it can sometimes be tempting to block the event out and pretend it never happened, it's important to touch base with employees on an ongoing basis to see how they're doing. It also demonstrates that you care for their well-being. Everyone experiences events in their own way, so your approach may change depending on the group or person you're meeting with. If you suspect certain employees are not coping well, encourage them to connect with your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or seek professional help.

Be flexible. Realize that your team's productivity can and will be affected by the event. You may need to push back deadlines, assign projects to a different group or temporarily enlist other employees for help. It's always a good idea to discuss these changes with your staff so they don't feel threatened. Some may actually find it helpful to keep busy.

Stay open. Let your team know you're always available for questions, to discuss concerns or just to listen. Remind yourself that you don't know all the answers and that it's okay to acknowledge your own fear, anger and grief to your colleagues. In fact, “sharing the pain” can encourage the team to work through the after effects of the trauma more openly and honestly.

If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your EAP. All contact between you and your EAP is completely confidential.

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