

Manager's Guide: Helping Employees Deal With Traumatic Events

When people experience a major traumatic event, they may feel a sense of helplessness, serious injury or a threat of death. Major traumatic events affect survivors, rescue workers, members of the media and friends and relatives of the victims. They may also have an impact on people who have seen the event either firsthand or on television.

The period that follows a traumatic situation is not easy. Such events may leave emotional scars that may take time to heal. During this time, it is normal to feel a range of emotions. It is important to acknowledge these feelings, let them run their course and allow for enough time to properly process the event. This is part of the healing process.

What are common responses to tragedy?

Emotional responses to a traumatic event vary. People may exhibit feelings of fear, grief and depression. Physical and behavioral responses include nausea, dizziness and changes in appetite or sleep pattern, as well as withdrawal from daily activities. Responses to trauma can last a few days, weeks or months before people resolve their reactions to the event.

Some of the emotions a person may experience include:

- **Shock.** Feelings of disbelief.
- **Fear.** The feeling that the event may happen again.
- **Anger.** Many people feel rage against a perpetrator or the circumstances that led up to the event.
- **Alienation.** Feeling misunderstood by others or feeling that the event has made the person experiencing the trauma different from others.
- **Helplessness.** Feelings of frustration for being powerless over the event.
- **Guilt or blame.** Feeling responsible for what happened or guilty for surviving the event when others did not.
- **Mistrust.** Feeling unfounded doubts or mistrust about others or similar situations.
- **Sorrow.** Feelings of great sadness about the event.

Stages of Coping

Most people respond to traumatic events through a series of coping stages. These stages may vary from person to person:

1. **Shock.** This stage usually occurs shortly after the event. The survivor can feel confused, dazed, anxious and exhausted as he or she tries to process the reality of the event.
2. **Denial.** As a defense mechanism, the survivor may ignore his or her feelings, refuse to talk about what happened or shut down emotionally.
3. **Intrusion.** Memories and emotions may invade the survivor's consciousness as he or she struggles to accept the loss. The survivor may experience mood changes, irritability, encounter difficulty concentrating, become sensitive to external stimuli and encounter sleep disturbances.
4. **Working through.** The survivor has learned to accept what has happened and adopt strategies to cope with the aftermath.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Most people report feeling better within three months after a traumatic event. If the difficulties in daily functioning become worse or last longer than one month after the event, the person may be suffering from a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Post-traumatic stress disorder is an intense physical and emotional response to thoughts and reminders of the traumatic event. The symptoms of PTSD fall into three broad types: re-living, avoidance and increased arousal.

- Symptoms of re-living may include flashbacks, nightmares and extreme emotional and physical reactions to reminders of the event. Emotional reactions can include feelings of guilt, extreme fear of harm and numbing of emotions. Physical reactions can include uncontrollable shaking, chills, heart palpitations and tension headaches.
- Symptoms of avoidance may include staying away from activities, places, thoughts or feelings related to the trauma or isolating from others.
- Symptoms of increased arousal may include being overly alert or easily startled, difficulty sleeping, irritability, outbursts of anger and lack of concentration.

Other symptoms linked with PTSD may include panic attacks, depression, suicidal thoughts, drug and alcohol abuse and inability to complete daily tasks.

When To Get Help for PTSD

About half of those with PTSD recover within three months without treatment. Sometimes symptoms persist and may last for more than three months. This may happen because of the severity of the event, direct exposure to the traumatic event, seriousness of the threat to one's life, the frequency of the event, history of past trauma and psychological difficulties prior to the event.

People should consider seeking professional help when symptoms affect their relationship with family and friends, or affect their daily level of functioning, including job performance. You can contact your Employee Assistance Program or talk with a health care provider to get help.

Tips for Employees Dealing With a Traumatic Event

The following tips can help those coping with a traumatic event:

- Understand that the reactions are normal, especially right after the event.
- Keep your usual daily routine.
- Take the time to resolve day-to-day conflicts so they do not add to your stress.
- Do not shy away from situations, people or places that remind you of the event.
- Find ways to relax and be kind to yourself.
- Turn to family, friends and others for support. Talk about your experiences and feelings with them.
- Participate in leisure and recreational activities.
- Recognize that you cannot control everything.
- Recognize the need for professional help and contact your Employee Assistance Program.
- Reach out to others for support. Take comfort in the love and care of family and friends. Join a local support group for survivors of trauma.
- Take care of your body and your mind. Get plenty of rest. Eat right and exercise.
- Avoid unhealthy coping behaviors. Do not turn to drugs or alcohol to help you cope. Find positive outlets and expressions, such as exercise, volunteer work or involvement in support groups.
- Find healing through writing. Many survivors find that keeping a journal and detailing their experiences through writing becomes a healthy, positive expression and coping technique. Try a daily gratitude journal by writing everything for which you feel grateful that day.
- It will take time to readjust and get back to your daily routine after a traumatic event. Be patient during this period, and do not rush the healing process.
- There may be setbacks and emotional relapses along the way. Do not ignore your feelings or reactions. Be honest with yourself and others. Make a commitment to learn from your experiences and turn difficult events into positive life lessons.

Tips for Managers to Help Employees Cope

- Give your employee the gift of being listened to empathically. Helping your employees feel that their concerns are being heard can be more powerful than trying to come up with solutions.
- Though some temporary adjustments in deadlines and expectations can be helpful for employees having a difficult time, remember that a return to routine is also a part of healing.
- Be flexible and support employees as they resume their usual responsibilities. Express confidence in their ability to perform their jobs under difficult circumstances.
- Remember that everyone reacts differently and at a different rate. Some of the factors in how an employee recovers include past trauma, personality traits such as optimism and coping skills.

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