

Coping with Traumatic Events: Advice for Managers

Traumatic incidents

Trauma is the exposure to an extreme stressor involving direct personal experience of an event and/or witnessing an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or threat to one's physical integrity. The person's response to the event may involve intense fear, or helplessness. In turn, the result can overwhelm a person's ability to cope.

Trauma can result from occurrences such as a 'near miss', a severe automobile accident, violent personal assault (e.g., physical attack, robbery, sexual assault, etc.), being kidnapped or taken hostage, terrorist attacks, natural or man-made disasters, etc. Witnessed events include, but are not limited to, observing the serious injury or death of another person due to violent assault, suicide, accident, or disaster, or unexpectedly witnessing a dead body or body parts.

Learning about events experienced by others can also result in trauma, and these include: learning about the sudden, unexpected death of someone close; or learning that one's child has been the victim of a violent criminal act, etc. Traumatizing events can take a serious emotional toll on those involved, *even if the event did not cause physical harm*.

It is important for a manager to remember that your employee's *perception* of the traumatic event can have a significant impact on how they will react, even if it becomes known later on that there was no real threat. People are different and they will react differently to the same traumatic incident.

Reactions to traumatic incidents

The normal physiological responses to extreme stress may include hyper-arousal and anxiety. When the fight-flight-or-freeze instincts take over, the sudden acceleration of cortisol and other hormones send signals to the brain to be alert. This stress response is useful and can be necessary in times of emergency to ensure our survival.

However, it is important to realise that how the perception of the event, combined with this physical response will influence how a person thinks, feels and behaves in the weeks following an incident.

Some people react strongly at the time of the traumatic incident and for them, the symptoms can vary greatly. The complexity of human nature means that it is not possible to predict how someone will react. Some will react immediately, some can have a delayed reaction i.e. months or years after the original incident, and still others may experience several traumatic incidents before having any reactions. Remember, not everyone reacts the same way or in the same time frame.

With the support of family, friends, and colleagues most people will gradually recover from the emotional effects of a traumatic incident. For some however, recovery will take longer.

Research has found that people are more likely to have a greater reaction to a traumatic event, i.e., having a higher risk of developing more severe symptoms and taking longer to recover if they:

- Have experienced other traumatic events
- Have poor coping skills
- Have a recent life stressors
- Have experienced a trauma where the severity, proximity, and type was notable
- Lack support at home

The manager's role

As a manager, you have an important role in assisting and supporting employees after an incident. Taking control of the situation, without overwhelming the people involved in the incident takes skill and knowledge about trauma. It is important to know what to look for and to notice signs of distress not only in other people, but also in yourself - so that you can respond most helpfully.

Being aware of the impact that traumatic incidents can have on your employees will help you to manage the situation effectively. It is important to listen to people; to encourage, support, and praise people efforts, and to avoid negative comments, as people often become more sensitive following an incident. Employees who feel supported and valued will likely recover more quickly.

Offering Support

Before - Pre- incident awareness

Both managers and employees can educate and familiarise themselves about trauma, the impact of traumatic stress, recognizing symptoms, as well as identifying ways to manage the effects of trauma. This awareness can help protect your work group. All employees should prepare for a critical incident by reviewing how to respond to an emergency.

During

Providing immediate support for those who may be experiencing psychological shock

Offering general comfort and care in the moments immediately after an incident.

After

Providing ongoing support including access to appropriate resources, for example the EAP or Occupational Health services

Immediate support

A person who has directly been involved in a traumatic incident may go into shock. Shock can last for up to 72 hours. Symptoms include:

- Physical numbness
- Faintness
- Tearfulness
- Flushed or pale skin
- Cold and shivery
- Hot and sweaty
- Shaking
- Talking loudly and/or quickly
- Irritability
- Stillness or becoming silent and withdrawn
- A sense of things not being real
- Feeling of being outside body
- Unaware of others around them

The following may be helpful to someone immediately following a traumatic incident:

- Take the person to a quiet room, away from the scene of the incident where there is somewhere comfortable to sit
- Protect their privacy and away from media intrusion
- Provide hot drinks or water
- Provide a blanket or warm coat
- Normalise and validate what has happened to them
- Be careful not to trivialise their experience
- If anyone is shaking, explain that shaking is normal and helps to relieve shock
- Encourage people to talk about what happened if they want to, but don't force anyone to talk or to listen
- If the symptoms appear severe to you or you feel that further treatment is needed for shock or other injury, follow your normal first aid procedures and seek immediate assistance and /or arrange for the person to be accompanied to the hospital
- When they are ready, and it has been agreed, make arrangements for them to go home

It is important to arrange a taxi or a lift home with a colleague – never allow someone who has had a shock to get themselves home. Also check whether someone will be at home. If the answer is no, offer to call a friend or relative for them. Check whether they would like someone to go home with them

After support

To assist employees to better cope with reactions to the incident, and return to routine duties, managers may wish to access additional support resources as provided by the EAP. Upon contacting the EAP, a trained EAP counselling specialist will help assess the most appropriate clinical response. This may include for example a group crisis intervention and/or a referral for individual counselling.

Talking to employees

The key to offering effective support to employees following a traumatic incident is to practice **active listening**. Active listening is an important skill to develop for anyone who manages people. The skill enables managers to offer good support whenever this is needed, but is also useful in all situations where good communication is vital.

What is active listening?

It is giving someone your full attention, putting everything else aside for a time. It involves trying to understand what it is like to be the other person, for example, what it is like to have experienced that incident and to be having this reaction. Many people report that just having someone listen to them is very supportive in itself. Here are some ideas which may help you to listen effectively, so that someone feels listened to and supported:

- Establish and maintain regular contact with the person – give some thought to where you do this – privacy is important.
- Find a time that is good for you (and them) and allow them some time to talk about how they are - ensure that you will not be interrupted.
- If you are seeing them face to face they may be more comfortable if they are able to bring someone with them.
- Show interest in them and how they are.
- Let them know you are concerned but without being overly curious.
- Encourage them to talk by listening, prompt and encourage when necessary.
- Ask general questions.
- Don't ask so many questions that it comes across as an interrogation.
- Check that you have understood correctly by summarising what you think they've said to you.
- Reassure them that their reactions to the incident are normal.
- Offer practical help or advice.
- Don't criticise, blame, or label them, or discount what they've said to you.
- Don't make them talk when they don't want to.
- If they want to talk about what happened, but become distressed, it is best to stop them – say something like: "it doesn't seem to be helping you to talk about this at the moment". A useful question at this point might be to ask them what is helping them to cope – get them to focus on something positive.
- Be supportive and be yourself.
- Remind them of the EAP counselling service – especially if the person is clearly distressed.

Practical questions you can ask:

- How have you been since it happened?
- What can I do to help you?
- What is helping you cope now?
- How are you sleeping?
- Are you able to get out and about?
- How are you feeling about work at the moment?
- Do you have any specific anxieties about work?
- How can I best support you through this?
- Would you like me to refer you for counselling?

Workplace Options (n.d). *Coping with Traumatic Events: Advice for Managers*. London, UK: Author.

Disclaimer: This document is intended for general information only. It does not provide the reader with specific direction, advice, or recommendations. You may wish to contact an appropriate professional for questions concerning your particular situation.