

Supporting employees during traumatic events

Traumatic events that impact the workplace may include workplace violence, death of a colleague, natural and man-made disasters, accidents, and other incidents that create stress and anxiety among employees. Leaders who understand the wide-ranging impact of trauma can effectively guide employees through the aftermath of a traumatic event.

Assess the situation

The leader's first task is to obtain as much information about the event as possible. If there are immediate safety concerns, employees should be assisted in moving to a safe location where their basic needs can be met and they can contact family members. Misinformation and rumors are common in the wake of a traumatic event. Verify information given to employees and provide updates as needed. Designate someone on the leadership team or in Human Resources as the contact person that employees can call upon for help and resources.

Understand how people may react

People process traumatic experiences in different ways depending on the severity of the trauma, their ability to cope with stress, and the help and support they receive from family, friends, and others in the aftermath. Normal reactions to a traumatic event can include:

- Shock, confusion, and denial
- Intense emotional reactions such as fear and anxiety
- Flashbacks or "reliving" the event
- Feeling jumpy and being easily startled
- Sadness and depression
- Guilt, shame, or despair
- Anger and irritability
- Emotional numbness and feelings of detachment from others
- A sense of helplessness and vulnerability
- Problems focusing
- Physical reactions such as a racing heart, bodily aches and pains, dizzy spells, appetite changes, fatigue, and insomnia

Some people might recover quickly from stress reactions while others have delayed reactions. It is important for leaders to acknowledge that they too may be deeply affected by the traumatic event, and may also need emotional support as they assist their employees.



Strategies for supporting employees

How you can help

It may take some time for workplace productivity to return to a normal level. Ways to support employees during the recovery period include the following:

- Allow employees flexibility with schedules and time off as needed. Recognize that people may have difficulty concentrating and may need more time than usual to complete complex tasks.
- Provide resources such as educational materials and hand-outs on topics such as coping with trauma and loss and support groups.
- Post information about your program and remind employees that help and resources are available.
- Keep the lines of communication open and inform employees of any relevant news regarding the traumatic event.
- Provide opportunities for employees to discuss their feelings and experiences with coworkers.
- Be present and visible; show concern for employee's well-being.
- Stress the importance of the need for employees to take good care of themselves during this stressful period.

Leaders should check in with employees who may be particularly vulnerable, either because of their involvement with the event or their past experience with trauma. In addition, leaders should be aware of and sensitive to cultural differences and religious attitudes that influence people's responses to disaster and critical incidents.

A company response to the crisis, such as a memorial, vigil or community event, may also help employees process their emotions and provide closure.