

## **What Is a Traumatic Event?<sup>2</sup>**

Traumatic events can take many forms and occur anywhere. A traumatic event can be defined as any extreme event which:

- A person is subjected to or witnesses
- Falls outside the range of normal experience
- Is life threatening or could result in serious injuries
- Exposes the person to shocking scenes of death or injuries
- Could lead a person to experience intense fear, helplessness, horror or other reactions of distress.

## **Traumatic Events in the Workplace**

Examples of potential traumatic workplace events include:

- Death or serious injury of a person
- Witnessing a person die
- Violent physical attacks
- Physical threats
- Bomb threats, explosions, fire
- Intentional or unintentional release of chemicals or infectious agents
- Search and rescue activities
- Body recovery and site investigation following a major accident or disaster
- Attempted or completed suicide

## **Emotional Impacts of Traumatic Events<sup>3</sup>**

Since traumatic events are life-jarring experiences, few people walk away from them without being affected both physically and emotionally. Individuals affected by a traumatic event have to adjust to major changes in their lives. They may have to grieve for their losses, perhaps find new jobs, cope with physical or mental disabilities or injuries, or deal with physical or personal crises. Disruption in relationships, roles and routines can make life unfamiliar or less predictable.

Employers can play an important role in facilitating the physical and emotional recovery of employees, whether the traumatic event occurs in the workplace, at home or in the community.

## **Managing the Immediate Response to a Major Traumatic Workplace Event**

One of the characteristics of traumatic events is that they occur suddenly, often without warning. Examples include the sudden death of an employee, an employee who suffers a heart attack, the armed threat or shooting of employees by a disgruntled co-worker, the suicide of an employee, a fight between employees or a terrorist event.

The following guidelines will help you manage the incident, as well as the emotional effects of a traumatic event for the first few minutes and up to 24 hours.

Find out what has happened.

Assess danger.

Have designated response team members:

- call local authorities to assist, such as fire, police or ambulance;
- call the Occupational Health & Safety
- call senior management.

Account for your employees.

If appropriate, initiate the emergency workplace response plan.

**If you believe staff are in danger**, let them know **immediately** what has happened and what protective measures to take (e.g. take cover, stay out of the area, evacuate the workplace area or building, or wait for police, fire or ambulance to arrive).

**If you believe staff are not in danger**, let them know what has happened. Let them know they are safe and the situation is under control. Inform them of the measures being taken to deal with the traumatic event or injured persons. Let them know if they need to evacuate.

**Reassure employees that you and the response team are doing all you can to deal with the event.** This will help relieve some anxiety and fear.

## Providing Emotional Support to Employees

If this is a major traumatic event and employees have been killed or injured and the situation is now under control, have co-workers provide emotional support to employees affected by the event until EFAP counselors arrive.

Basic measures you or co-workers can take to comfort and support employees experiencing strong emotional reactions<sup>3</sup> include:

**Protect employees from shocking or gory scenes.** These will only add to their distress. Move them to a separate area where they can regain control over some of their stress reactions. Ask other employees to assist by providing support, being careful not to overwhelm those affected with more support than they need.

If this is a violent traumatic event—such as a shooting, fire or explosion—and if employees are out of danger, **suggest they phone their loved ones** to let them know they are safe.

**If some employees are experiencing acute stress reactions**, such as severe anxiety, fear, shock or show signs of confusion, **let them know what has happened, what is happening now and what is going to happen in the next few minutes.** Ask colleagues to help by sitting with them. Shock is an adaptive, protective mechanism which prevents

individuals from being overwhelmed by the acute reactions they are experiencing as a result of the event. People usually recover within a short period of time.

**Validate employees' reactions to the event.** Let them know that it's okay to experience fear, anxiety, shock, disbelief, anger or strong feelings of helplessness or powerlessness. Reassure them that these are typical reactions. Share your own reactions with them; since you can function rationally in spite of your reactions, they can do likewise.

**Provide comfort and reassurance** to those who are upset. Being with people who are understanding and supportive is most important for those affected.

**Listen attentively to employees who want to share their reactions to the event.** Acknowledge their reactions. Reassure them that these are common reactions to what has happened. Avoid empty promises such as: "Everything will be fine." Instead, acknowledge their feelings. **It's also okay if people do not want to talk about the event.** Everyone has their own way of dealing with stressful situations.

**Call your EFAP and arrange to have a counsellor on site,** or encourage employees and their family members affected by the traumatic event to contact your EFAP directly.

**Referrals.** If you are concerned about an employee's reactions, encourage the person to seek emotional or medical support. Suggest that the person take advantage of EFAP services.

## **Managing the First 24 hours of a Traumatic Event**

Once employees have returned home after a major traumatic event, affected workplace managers may want to meet with senior managers, Human Resources, Pay and Benefits personnel as well as EFAP advisors to discuss the following issues:

Assisting and supporting employees traumatized by the event

Assisting police or occupational health and safety personnel in the investigation of the event

Planning for the return of employees to the workplace

Arranging for employees to attend funerals, if close colleagues were killed

Providing contact information for your EFAP and encouraging employees to use the services offered by them once they return to work, or to assist and support injured employees in the hospital or at home

## Managing the Emotional Needs of Employees the First Few Weeks after a Traumatic Event

### Stress Reactions in the First Few Weeks

As employees return to their workplace following a traumatic event, the initial numbness, disbelief and bewilderment start to wear off and the reality of the losses experienced begins to set in. According to trauma experts, this is an important phase in the recovery process, as survivors:

- Begin working through their recent experience
- Try to understand its meaning
- Examine key learning points
- Make it part of their life experience.

Following are some common reactions you and your employees may experience in response to traumatic events, the impacts of which can be decreased through effective emergency preparedness and planning.

**Physical:** fatigue, headaches, dizziness, stomach problems, increase or decrease in appetite, neck and back aches, or sleep difficulties.

**In how you think:** memory problems, have difficulty concentrating, find it hard to stop thinking about the event, find it hard to remember day-to-day things, feel disorganized at work and at home, or have flashbacks.

**Emotional:** fear that a similar event may reoccur, sadness for deaths and injuries, grief for colleagues, guilt for being alive, anger at the injustice and senselessness of the event, feeling vulnerable and fragile or anxious about the future.

**In how you act:** overly vigilant to environment, isolated, impatient, irritable, change in communication patterns (talk a lot more or less), or use more alcohol, drugs or tobacco.

### Some General Emotional Support Guidelines

Following are key emotional support guidelines you need to keep in mind as employees settle back into the workplace and start integrating the traumatic event they experienced.

**Various reactions are natural in situations of stress.** It is reassuring to know that most reactions to a very stressful event are common and that most people do not disintegrate in response to a traumatic event.

**People are resilient and strong** and most will recover within a short period of time. Indeed, stressful events, even major crises, are part of life. In most cases, our life experience has given us the strengths and skills we need to gradually work through our feelings and reactions.

**Contact with colleagues and others whom they feel close to is important** when adjusting to a traumatic event. It encourages co-workers to share stories, to put their experiences into words and slowly and naturally achieve some understanding and integration of their experience.

**Reassuring employees about their safety at work** and explaining what measures are being taken to protect them **is an important step in helping them cope.**

**Responding to employees' emotional needs in a timely and sensitive manner will** foster a sense of loyalty and trust, **facilitate employees' reintegration in the workplace and reduce absenteeism.**

**Work has a healing value.** "Getting back to the daily routine can be a comforting experience." Getting up in the morning, returning to a safe environment, being surrounded by colleagues, and having meals at a regular time all contribute to increasing a person's sense of control, thereby reducing distress and restoring a sense of safety and security. It is important to remember that most people can work productively while still dealing with grief and trauma.

## Helpful Emotional Support Measures

Here are some emotional support measures to help you support your staff as they adjust and start absorbing their experiences:

**Being there with and for your employees** and listening to their stories and concerns in a caring way are the most helpful measures you can take in providing emotional support.

**Meet with staff regularly.** Check with each one individually and privately and also meet with them as a group. Ask them how they are doing. Find out their concerns. Contacts should be supportive and caring. You represent the organization to your employees, and your caring presence and genuine interest can mean a great deal in helping them feel supported.

**Build on the strengths of the group.** Encourage employees to take care of one another through such simple measures as listening to those in distress, offering practical help, visiting hospitalized co-workers, or going with an employee on a first visit to a feared site.<sup>10</sup> Encourage them to check with each other at work. "The more you have done to build a cohesive work group and to foster self-confidence in your employees, the better your staff can help one another in a crisis."