



How managers can help employees cope with trauma

The American Psychological Association defines trauma as “An emotional response to a terrible event”. The event itself could take many forms; it might be an accident, a violent crime or possibly a natural disaster. In the immediate aftermath of the event, there may be periods of shock and potentially even denial. Each person’s response to trauma may be different, as may be the time it takes to recover.

Reaction to stress tends to manifest itself in four ways:

1. **Physical** e.g. fatigue, extreme thirst, nausea, unusual sweating, breathing difficulty, increased heart rate.
2. **Cognitive** e.g. disorientation, memory loss, lack of concentration, a need to blame others, confusion.
3. **Emotional** e.g. a quick temper, anxiety, depression, a sense of panic, unexpected outbursts of emotion.
4. **Behavioural** e.g. increased drinking, antisocial behaviour, restlessness, withdrawal from friends and family.

As a manager or supervisor, it's important to be aware that your interaction with the traumatised employee may have a significant impact on their immediate (and longer-term) ability to cope with their exposure to the event.

How to help employees cope with trauma

- **Listen.** You don't have to have all the answers, but your employees need to know that you hear them and you care. Encourage employees to express how they're feeling by asking open-ended questions. Avoid offering unsolicited advice or sharing your own experiences. Let the person express their feelings. Have conversations in spaces conducive to privacy where you're less likely to be overheard and/or interrupted.
- **Show understanding.** Be supportive in verbal and non-verbal ways, e.g. posture, facial expressions, body language. Crying is OK for both of you. It's a normal and understandable reaction. As noted earlier, be prepared for different people to react very differently. For example, an employee may need to travel as part of their job but may be apprehensive about driving or flying due to the trauma. Encourage these individuals to call their EAP for help.
- **Give grace when possible.** Stress reactions may negatively impact work productivity. Be prepared to make some temporary adjustments in deadlines, workloads and expectations.
- **Take action.** People have a strong need to do something to help in this situation. Allow employees to come up with a plan of how they can contribute to recovery efforts. Examples include a department blood donation or a campaign to raise money for victims' surviving relatives. Try to arrange for water and/or non-caffeinated fluids to be available and, if possible, low-fat, low-sugar food.
- **Encourage self-care.** Remind employees to take care of themselves by eating well, exercising regularly and prioritising getting enough sleep.
- **Use the EAP as a resource.** Your EAP is also available to assist you with personal issues and also in your role as a manager. You may also refer employees who need additional support.
- **Take good care of yourself.** You cannot be in the position to manage and support others if you do not acknowledge your own needs. The EAP is for managers, too.

How the employee manages their post-traumatic incident stress can have a major effect on their physical and psychological recovery and the speed with which they can return to being a productive member of your team or group. The importance of your role in that recovery should not be underestimated.



This programme should not be used for emergency or urgent care needs. In an emergency, call 911 if you are in the United States or the local emergency services phone number if you are outside the United States, or go to the nearest accident and emergency department. This programme is not a substitute for a doctor's or professional's care. Consult your doctor for specific healthcare needs, treatment or medication. Due to the potential for a conflict of interest, legal consultation will not be provided on issues that may involve legal action against Optum or its affiliates, or any entity through which the caller is receiving these services directly or indirectly (e.g. employer or health plan). This programme and its components may not be available in all states or for all group sizes, and are subject to change. Coverage exclusions and limitations may apply.

Optum® is a registered trademark of Optum, Inc. in the U.S. and other jurisdictions. All other brand or product names are trademarks or registered marks or the property of their respective owners. Optum is an equal opportunity employer.

© 2023 Optum, Inc. All rights reserved. WF8463081 223388-092022 OHC