

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 i.e. posture, facial expressions, body language. Crying is okay 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 drive 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 available to assist you with personal issues, as well as 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.

Encourage employees to express how they're feeling by asking open-ended questions.

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