

Managing a Trauma in the Workplace

Coping with a workplace trauma can be one of the most challenging events you and your team have to face. But while the event itself is difficult enough, the residual effects can be longer lasting if not handled effectively. Getting things back to “normal” is no easy feat, but a well-prepared organization plays a critical role in the physical and emotional recovery of employees.

By understanding the typical responses to a traumatic event, being able to recognize the signs of trouble and handling them before they become more serious, you and your team can work through post-trauma issues. And while you may never forget the event, you can learn strategies and tactics to help everyone cope and begin focusing on the process of moving forward.

What is a Traumatic Event?

A traumatic event involves exposure to an extreme event that can be emotionally painful, distressful or shocking and, in some cases, even life-threatening. These incidents vary in nature and severity and can happen at work or away from the job. From a natural disaster, to a robbery, to the loss of a co-worker, to downsizing or layoffs; traumatic events can have lasting physical and mental impacts.

Responses to Trauma

Few people are able to walk away from a traumatic event unaffected. Initial reactions of numbness, shock and disbelief are common. Everyone reacts in their own way. Reactions can change from day to day or even moment to moment. Depending on the type of incident, some employees may experience:

Denial. In an attempt to forget and move on, some people try not thinking about the event and even refuse to talk about it. They may also avoid the places and people that remind them of the incident and become more and more isolated. An employee that throws him or herself into work to stay busy and preoccupied may be using denial as a coping mechanism.

Intrusive relocation (‘Flashbacks’). A flashback is when a person can’t stop thinking about the event and relives the trauma as if it’s happening all over again. This is often coupled with emotions and sensory experiences that make it hard to distinguish between reality and the flashback—which can be frightening. Some individuals may begin to experience flashbacks about other traumatic events that occurred earlier in life.

Fear. An overwhelming feeling of hopelessness or despair is another common reaction to trauma. This may mean anxiety about the future, being consumed by thoughts that a

similar event could happen again, or heightened anxiety about the well-being of loved ones. These feelings of fear can begin to impact daily life.

Anger. Many people feel intense emotional anger at the senselessness of a traumatic event and can start to lash out, act impatient or irritable. They may become consumed by guilt, place blame on others, or be angry with themselves.

Depression. A critical incident can cause overwhelming feelings of grief. When one's sense of control is taken away, depression may follow. This is an expected and common response but in most cases is short-term and manageable.

Physical Responses

Common **physical responses** to traumatic events include: headaches, backaches, stomach problems, heart palpitations, sleep difficulties, appetite changes, concentration and memory problems and increased susceptibility to sickness.

All of these responses are normal and expected coping mechanisms after a traumatic event, but you should see continued improvement over time. Otherwise, they are a cause for concern.

Signs of Trouble

Because each person responds to a trauma differently, you need to pay attention to individual responses. Signs that you or another employee may be experiencing difficulty with the situation include:

- Problems functioning in daily life at home and at work
- Acting disconnected or emotionally numb
- Severe fear, anxiety or depression
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs, including prescription drugs
- Terrifying nightmares or flashbacks



Feelings of fear, depression and bad dreams are all common after a traumatic experience. For most, these symptoms are short-lived and gradually fade away. However if the symptoms persist, become all-consuming and do not seem to improve over time, professional help may be needed to deal with what may have developed into Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This anxiety condition can take weeks and even months to develop and symptoms continue to get worse for months or even years with no signs of improvement. Without professional help, PTSD can seriously interfere with a person's life.