Helping Employees Cope With Workplace Trauma

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Employers may not be able to prevent work-related traumatic stress among employees, but through responses including critical incident stress debriefing, they can lessen the emotional impact on individuals exposed to a workplace trauma.

benefits

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Witnessing or experiencing violence at work can have far-reaching impacts on employees. The inevitability of a crisis occurring today seems to have grown, for example, as disputes among customers and co-workers become commonplace. An employer's response to a disruptive event affects all employees, no matter their role. The reputation of an organization also is at stake.

These events, also known as *critical incidents*, can undermine a person's health and well-being for months or even years.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016 *Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries* report, the number of deaths due to traumatic workplace incidents in 2015 was the highest recorded since 2008. Transportation incidents were the biggest hazard. Incidents like these, along with robberies, assaults and even the unexpected death of a co-worker, create trauma-induced stress among workers. Workplace bullying is a contributor to workplace trauma and can lead to mental illness for the victim if not addressed.

While overall occupational stress remains the largest culprit to employee absences and creates higher costs in medical and insurance fees to employers, costing businesses roughly $300 billion per year, disruptive events require employers to pay special attention to their employees.[1] More than half of all U.S. citizens who work outside their homes have witnessed, heard about or experienced a violent event or an event that could lead to violence at their workplace.[2]

Prevention Begins With Knowledge

Stress left unchecked can lead to back pain, fatigue, sleepless nights, gastric issues and headaches—or worse. Individuals who do not receive support or direction on how to cope after a crisis may become depressed or turn to substances such as drugs or alcohol to alleviate their stress. Depression and substance abuse are two of the costliest health problems employers face today.

With one million people per year skipping work because of stress,[3] giving a workforce access to interventions can alleviate longer term physical, emotional and psychological problems.

Ultimately, employers have a responsibility to ensure the workplace remains a place of safety and to provide open communication to all employees. When employers learn how to navigate a critical incident, employees will be able to focus, feel empowered and resume productivity rapidly.

Critical Incident–Defined

Assaults, threats, severe injury or death as a result of human error, an industrial accident, criminal behavior including kidnappings and shootings, major reorganization and layoffs, or a natural disaster all are unplanned disruptions to productivity in the workplace.

Employers should get a finger on the pulse of their organization. Have there recently been or will there be events that will heighten the sensitivity of employees? The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) explains trauma as "reactions to experiences that cause intense physical and psychological stress, which could be a single event, multiple events or a set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically and emotionally harmful or threatening, and have long lasting effects to the individual." The goal is to make the event not be traumatic through early intervention.

Mental health practitioners say employers are getting an increased understanding of how these incidents can affect an individual's morale and productivity. The days of telling employees to temper their emotions are long gone—along with the stigma of getting help for anxiety and depression from a licensed mental health counselor.

takeaways

- The number of deaths due to workplace trauma in 2015 reached the highest level recorded since 2008.
- Critical incidents at the workplace can include assaults, threats, severe injury or death as a result of human error, industrial accidents, criminal behavior, major reorganization and layoffs, or a natural disaster.
- Employee reactions to workplace trauma can include anger and irritability, difficulty sleeping or eating, difficulty making decisions, poor concentration, depression and anxiety.
- Employers can help reduce the impact of a critical incident on their employees by organizing a critical incident stress debriefing (CISD), which is a small-group, supportive crisis intervention process.

Put Together a Plan

Management can significantly impact whether an event results in increased stress and decreased productivity by addressing the situation actively with staff and bringing in experienced, well-trained practitioners to perform critical incident stress debriefings (CISDs) and implement the steps for their workforce to follow. Often after a critical incident, leaders do not know what to do—and they are affected by the event as well. By putting a plan in place or having a reliable resource on call, such as an employee assistance program (EAP), before an incident occurs, leaders will be able to effectively respond to their employees.

CISD is a specific, small-group, supportive crisis intervention process—It is not medical intervention. It does not include psychotherapy nor is it a substitute for therapy, but rather it is a crisis-focused discussion of a critical incident and its potential impact. The goal is to reduce stress and restore normalcy within a group. By implementing a CISD, employers inform and empower their employees. In addition, it can help reduce the risk of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety.

A CISD, however, is not the panacea to having workers immediately return to normal. Other services should be blended into a broader crisis support system. These may include preincident education, individual and family support services, referrals to the EAP, and postcrises education programs where needed.

Typically, a formal debriefing from management to employees within the first 24 to 48 hours of a crisis can lessen the emotional impact on personnel who have been exposed; however, depending on the nature of the crisis, such as a disaster, small groups of individuals may be dealing with the trauma in various ways until a more formalized debriefing can take place.

A CISD can last anywhere from one hour to multiple days. In general, the team members involved in presenting the CISD introduce themselves and describe what is happening, often encouraging all workers to participate in the debriefing process to begin the process toward recovery. Facts are shared—typically a brief overview of what happened. Each individual is then encouraged to offer thoughts and reactions.

The team members who lead the CISD seek information about any physical, emotional or behavioral symptoms within the workforce to lead into discussion on stress. The severity and specific incident that occurred will determine how the team will explain the nature of what took place. Handouts may be distributed, including contact information for an organization's EAP services and crisis counselors. These services will be a form of "psychological first aid" to the workforce and can include on-site care or continued telephonic support, depending on the nature of the trauma and the individual.

Researchers have discovered evidence that emergency workers, employees of the United States Postal Service and responders to crisis situations such as law enforcement at points in time develop short-term crisis reactions to a disruptive event.[4] Fire service research found that group and peer support, education on looking for warning signs and training of what is available within an EAP are the most effective elements of CISD.

Having a plan to rely on a CISD when employees experience workplace trauma also can accelerate the recovery from the event before harmful stress reactions damage work performance and overall well-being. Within a CISD process, employers can identify workers who may be struggling more than others and may need additional professional care.

Employers should keep in mind that traumatized workers are focused on survival, not on long-range plans or other people's well-being. Common reactions that immediately occur after an event include:

- Shock and denial
- Anger or irritability
- Difficulty sleeping or eating
- Confusion
- Difficulty making decisions

- Physical reactions—rapid breathing, increased heart rate, headache or stomachache
- Poor concentration
- Going over and over the event in your mind
- Guilt, depression or sadness
- Anxiety or fear it will happen again
- Sense of own mortality
- Feeling unsafe
- Wondering "what if"—thinking about how things might have been if you had acted differently.

After the CISD, employers should continue to keep the lines of communication open to begin the process of building trust and resilience. No matter how tempting it is to mislead employees with the thinking that it may cushion the shock of what they experienced, employers should continue to remain truthful and should periodically update employees as new information becomes known.

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Returning employees to preincident levels of functioning may take a long time, depending on the support received at work and from social circles and/or professionals. Employers should be aware of potential warning signs that may reveal an employee is suffering from the event. These signs could appear immediately or weeks after the event and include increased absences from work, tardiness and lateness completing projects.

The Downside of Failure to Address Workplace Trauma

When organizational leadership fails to address a critical incident properly, breakdowns occur in these areas:

- **Trust.** Employees want to feel an internal sense of safety and control; with access to support and professional care, they have the ability to comprehend and make sense out of a situation, therefore building resiliency. Without it, feelings of helplessness and distrust grow.
- **Productivity.** Presenteeism and absenteeism occur frequently after a trauma; workers do not feel motivated to stay committed to their jobs.
- **Communication.** Legal concerns or poorly managed communication efforts by an internal team lead to a companywide breakdown in communication. If senior leadership remains silent, rumors surface among all staff, which leads to anxiety, poor decision making and loss in productivity.

Managing a crisis can be the ultimate test of leadership. The goal of organizational leadership when faced with critical incidents is to provide their employees and themselves a sense of safety and the support they need. By relying on a broad-range plan that includes a CISD and provides outside resources, employers offer people what they need most during a crisis: hope. ☮

Endnotes

1. "Stress in the Workplace," American Psychological Association; Work-Related Stress on Employees' Health, Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), June 2016.
2. Violence in the American Workplace survey, conducted by Allied-Barton Security Services and David Michaelson and Co., February 2012. Potential: Workplace Violence Prevention and Your Organizational Success, Bill Whitmore, Highpoint Executive Publishing.
3. Employee Assistance Society of North America, www.easna.org.
4. Center for Fire, Rescue and EMS Health Research at the National Development and Research Institutes; Sara A. Jahnke, Ph.D.