

Helping Employees Cope after a Traumatic Event

Coping with a workplace trauma can be one of the most challenging events you and your employees face. It becomes even more difficult as a manager leading a team in a foreign culture. How people deal with trauma can vary substantially between cultures and so can the type of support needed. If not handled well, the effects of a distressing event can have a serious and lasting impact on your team's productivity and morale.

By understanding the many responses to trauma across cultures, recognizing the signs of trouble before they get out of hand and learning healthy coping tactics, you can help your employees work through the traumatic situation. You play a critical role in the emotional recovery of your staff and although you may not be able to forget the incident, you can help your team move forward.

What is a Traumatic Event?

A traumatic event is the exposure to an incident that can be emotionally painful, distressful or shocking and, in some cases, even life-threatening. These events 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 incidences can have long-term effects. Traumatic events often stress the limits of an individuals or teams ability to cope. As a manager you will need to find a way to allow people to cope and recover, as well as monitor and possibly intervene if it becomes clear that someone is not recovering and their symptoms are not fading away or if they are increasing over time (approximately six weeks to two months).

Personal Impact

It is always a challenge to support a team after a traumatic event as everyone's responses vary. Few people can walk away without being affected and their reactions can change from day-to-day and even moment-to-moment. Initial responses like numbness, shock and disbelief are very common but depending on the type of incident and cultural background, employees may experience:

Denial. In an attempt to forget and move on, some people try to not think 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. Employees that throw themselves into work to stay busy and preoccupied are probably using denial as a coping mechanism. Although it isn't affecting their productivity this is a very unhealthy coping strategy for the long term and is common in many cultures. However bear in mind that not all people and cultures cope through verbalizing.

Flashbacks. A flashback happens when a person can't stop thinking about the event and relives the trauma as if it's happening all over again. This is coupled with emotions and sensory experiences that make it hard to distinguish between reality and the flashback. Some people may even start to have flashbacks about other traumatic events that occurred earlier in life. This reaction can be particularly frightening in some cultures where it's believed that dreams contain messages from angry spirits or premonitions about the future.

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. High levels of fear about a loved one's safety is a common response in cultures that hold strong family values. This may express itself in absenteeism—people staying home with their families or for instance frequent calls home.

Anger. Many people feel intense emotional anger at the senselessness of a traumatic event and can start to lash out, act impatient or grow irritable. They may struggle with guilt, place blame on

others or be angry with themselves. As a manager you will need to balance understanding for an individual's angry response to a traumatic event with continuing to endorse a code of conduct and respect between staff and colleagues.

Depression. A critical incident can cause overwhelming feelings of grief. When one's sense of control or hope for change is taken away, depression may follow. This is an expected and common response but in most cases is short term and manageable. In some cultures depression holds a big stigma and in the long run this can become a very internal and silent battle. If you see a prolonged and significant change in your staff, you may wish to reach out and express your concern to them. You can call your Expat EAP 24/7 for a confidential consult on how to address concerns with your staff.

Physical Indicators

The physical responses below are normal and expected coping mechanisms after a traumatic situation. Regular responses include:

- headaches
- backaches
- stomach problems
- heart palpitations
- sleep difficulties
- appetite changes
- concentration
- memory problems
- increased susceptibility to sickness

Although common, if these symptoms don't improve over time, they can be a cause for concern.

Signs of Trouble

Each person responds to trauma very differently so make sure you pay attention to individual responses. The general signs you or another employee are having problems coping 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
- 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 become overwhelming and do not seem to improve over time, professional help may be advised. In some cases, unresolved trauma or repeated exposure to trauma can lead to 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. PTSD can seriously interfere with a person's life.

How You Can Help

Beliefs about how to heal from a trauma vary significantly from person to person and from one culture to another. Some members of your team may see something as deeply traumatic while others may not. You may also find that your offers of support won't be received well in some countries. Talk to your colleagues about what type of help is most effective in the culture you're working within. Keep a watchful eye on your employees for weeks and months after the traumatic

event because responses can be delayed. To help everyone settle back into the workplace:

Provide support. It's important to touch base with employees on an ongoing basis to see how they're doing and to show you care. Everyone experiences events in their own way, so your approach may change depending on the group or person you're meeting with. Don't force a disgruntled team member to talk to you, particularly if they're from a culture that views vulnerability as inappropriate or weak—let them come to you.

Stay open. Make sure your team knows you're always available for questions, to discuss concerns or just to listen. Remind yourself you don't know all the answers and that it's okay to acknowledge your own fear, anger and grief to your colleagues. In fact, "sharing the pain" can encourage the team to work through the after effects of the trauma more openly and honestly. In some cultures employees may fear that admitting their struggles could impact their employment. Be sure to dispel this myth. Make your open door policy well-known and consider group discussions, which may be better received.

Be flexible. Realize that your team's productivity can and will be affected by the event. You may need to push back deadlines, assign projects to a different group or temporarily enlist other employees for help. It's always a good idea to discuss these changes with your staff so they don't feel threatened. Some may actually find it helpful to keep busy.

Nurture yourself. A traumatic event often has as big an impact on managers as it does on employees. You may find yourself neglecting your own feelings particularly if you're working within a culture that doesn't express their own. Regardless, the demands of your role and expectations to support your team—especially without your regular support systems in place—can all cause significant wear and tear on your emotions. Make your well-being a priority and find ways to deal with your grief in your own way so you can support the health of your team.

Even if you're on a short-term assignment on the other side of the world, no workplace is immune to traumatic events. Trauma leaves people feeling vulnerable and insecure and as a leader you play a pivotal role in helping your team overcome these feelings. As you know, working in another culture can really open your eyes to the reality that everyone experiences and responds to life events differently. By modifying your approach to ensure it is culturally sensitive, remaining open, keeping an eye out for signs of trouble and offering your continued support you can help your team move beyond the traumatic event and grow together.