Coping with crisis in the workplace: trauma and grief toolkit

The following information is intended to assist you in creating a supportive workplace environment after experiencing a traumatic event, and to provide education to all who were touched by the trauma. An important component of coping with trauma in the workplace is providing information in an effort to normalise feelings and to educate on methods for coping in the aftermath of a traumatic event. The information offered is based on current knowledge and practice derived from research and the experiences of crisis workers.

Traumatic events are defined as any extreme occurrence that falls outside of the average person's realm of normal experience. Many times, people are not only traumatised by the event itself, but also by a lost sense of security, as tragedy can take place in many forms and can occur anywhere- at home, in the community, and at the workplace. Examples of traumatic workplace events include the death of a co-worker, workplace injury, layoff, violence or the threat of armed violence, and terrorist threats. The focus of this information is to address grief issues in the workplace as they apply to understanding trauma.

Understanding the impact of trauma

Traumatic experiences have the ability to shake people to the core and few are able to walk away without being affected physically and emotionally. Secondary traumatic stress can occur when someone you know and care about experiences trauma. We not only feel empathy for our co-worker or loved one, but we may fear for our own safety and security. Everyone affected by the traumatic event has to adjust to major changes in their lives: grieving, coping, and growing.

The reactions that we have to traumatic experiences can include, but are not limited to, shock, terror and rage. These feelings impact our bodies as a whole, including our brain chemistry, and the chemicals that are released into the body. The connection we had to ourselves and society can be altered as a result.

These common reactions may be experienced in response to trauma. But, the impact can be decreased through education, awareness, and sensitivity.

- **Physical:** Fatigue, headaches, dizziness, stomach discomfort, fluctuation in appetite, disrupted sleep, and body aches
- **Cognitive:** Decreased ability to focus, racing thoughts, memory problems, feelings of disorganisation, and flashbacks
- **Emotional:** Fears that a similar event may occur, sadness, survivor guilt, anger at the senselessness, feelings of vulnerability, and anxiety
- **Behavioural:** hyper-vigilance, decreased desire for socialisation, isolation, irritability, change in communication patterns, and increased substance use

Anxiety, depression, grief, emotional numbness, apathy, shame and low self-esteem can all be reactions to a severe stressor. Either experiencing a trauma first hand or as a secondary witness can change people's belief systems about themselves and the world they knew.

Remember that everyone is touched by trauma in a unique way. Although a group may have been present at the event, the chance of those all remembering and interpreting it the same is slim. Their past, their coping skills, their family, and their friends will all influence the impact.

If you are experiencing symptoms of depression following a traumatic event, consider these suggestions:

- **Give yourself a break.** Recognise that you are going through a difficult time and allow yourself to feel your emotions. Consider speaking with your primary care physician and making an appointment with a counsellor. Your EAP is available for support 24/7 and can assist you in connecting with a counsellor in your area.
- **You are not defined by the trauma.** The event is one experience in your life, and know that the feelings of depression should pass.
- **Monitor your diet.** Maintaining a nutritional diet and limiting your sugar and caffeine intake will prove helpful in balancing your brain chemistry. Sugars can cause artificial highs and lows and caffeine releases stress hormones into the system.
- **Exercise.** Including just 20 minutes of exercise into your day can decrease stress levels. Aerobic activity causes the brain to naturally release serotonin, the 'feel good' chemicals, and can lift your mood.
- **Find things that you enjoy and do them!** Take a bath, listen to music, visit with friends, try something new, read a book or start a journal; tap into your memory and get moving!
- *Remember that you are not alone in experiencing depression following a traumatic event.* Depression is temporary and you can overcome it, even though it may not feel like it right now. Be sure to share your thoughts and feelings with loved ones and/or professionals who are there to help you get back to being you.

Promoting a supportive workplace environment

The workplace can be a good place for you or a co-worker to be following a traumatic event, as it provides an opportunity for healing.

The workplace environment allows for the following:

- Meet in a familiar place, surrounded by familiar colleagues
- Talk about what happened with others who have shared in the experience
- Meet voluntarily with an EAP counsellor, if appropriate
- Initiate the grieving process
- Console, comfort, and reassure one another
- Plan a workplace memorial
- Arrange to visit an injured co-worker
- Arrange to attend a colleague's funeral

Some people, however, may need to take time to grieve. As you return to work following a traumatic event, the initial shock, numbness, and disbelief may begin to wane and the reality of the loss sets in. This is an important phase in the recovery process as survivors…

- Begin working through recent experiences
- Try to understand the meaning of the event
- Try to learn from the loss or trauma
- Figure out the impact of the event on daily life and move forward

As you or a co-worker work through your loss and settle back into a routine, the following guidelines are helpful to keep in mind:

- **Different reactions are natural in situations of stress.** Prior experience and exposure to traumatic events throughout life can elicit responses of varying degrees. It is important to keep this in mind and to refrain from making judgments about coping styles.
- **People are resilient and strong.** Stressful events and crises are a part of life; build on past successes of overcoming traumatic events in your or your co-worker's life to remind yourself that you are able to persevere in times of adversity.
- **Promote contact with friends and family.** Social connection encourages colleagues to share stories, to put their experience into their own words and to naturally achieve an understanding of the experience.
- **Talk with managers and supervisors if you have concerns about your safety at work**, especially after an injury or death. Perhaps, learn what measures have been implemented to promote security.
- **There are healing values associated with work.** Returning to a supportive work environment, being surrounded by colleagues, and maintaining a schedule increases a person's sense of control, which in effect decreases distress. It is important to remember that most people can continue to work productively while still dealing with grief and trauma.

Recognising a struggle

People react in a variety of ways to traumatic events - some will react strongly at the time of the event, while others' reactions may be delayed for several days, weeks, or even months. Delayed reactions can be confusing, not only for the person experiencing the feelings, but also their family, friends, and co-workers.

With the support of family, friends, and colleagues, most stress symptoms decrease over time and people gradually recover. A small minority, particularly those whose lives were threatened or those who may have been more vulnerable because of other stressful events in their lives, may experience delayed resolution of their related trauma symptoms.

The following trauma reactions indicate that you or a co-worker may need to seek further support and are encouraged to contact the EAP:

- Decreased ability to focus at work or home
- Frequent and unexpected crying spells long after the event
- Ongoing feelings of sadness or anxiety
- Fluctuation in eating habits
- Appearing tired and lethargic
- Disrupted sleeping patterns
- Increased use or abuse of drugs and/or alcohol

Self-care

Experiencing trauma and working through the emotions involved can be exhausting. Remember that although you play a critical role in facilitating the physical and emotional recovery of those around you, you have also experienced the traumatic event and need to heal. Trying to support others while you are under stress can take a toll on your physical and emotional wellbeing.

Common sources of stress that you may experience include:

- Caring for others at the expense of yourself
- Mental, emotional and physical demands
- Heavy workloads
- Extended work hours
- Time pressures
- Decreased or limited resources
- Competing priorities
- Organisational pressures

You have the ability to increase your resistance to these stressors by taking care of yourself and staying healthy. You will be more helpful to your co-workers and to your organisation if you pace yourself and listen to the needs of your body.

Stress relieving activities:

- Exercise; even a 15 minute walk over lunch or a coffee break is an opportunity to be physically active.
- Eat sensibly and drink plenty of water. Try to avoid excessive alcohol and caffeine during times of stress.
- Know and respect your limits; if you need a break, take it.
- Spend time with family and friends.
- Be on the lookout for changes in your attitude, habits, or mood.
- Share your reactions with co-workers.
- Include yourself on the list of people of whom you are taking care. Taking care of yourself will put you in better shape to help others.
- Contact your EAP for support.

Grief and loss

Because most people spend so much of their time at the workplace, co-workers can become extremely close, much like an extended family. In this workplace family, people take on roles and develop special relationships with one another. When a member of this system dies or is grieving, the loss can be as devastating as losing a member of one's own family. If a death occurred at the workplace, you may feel "survivor guilt," anger, and concern for your own personal safety.

Learning of the death or terminal illness of a work colleague can have a strong impact. It is helpful to be aware of the possible degrees of that impact so that you can understand your own responses and needs. Although grief is expressed in a variety of ways, dependent upon the individual, it is helpful to have knowledge of the widely accepted stages that most people go through in response to a grief and loss.

- **Shock, denial, and isolation:** Common feelings include "This didn't really happen" or "This can't be happening to me."
- **Anger, rage, and resentment:** Common feelings include "Why me?" and "This isn't fair."

- **Bargaining:** Common feelings include “I will do XYZ if you just make it better.”
- **Depression:** Common feelings include “It’s no use” or “Why bother with anything.”
- **Acceptance:** Common feelings include “I acknowledge what has happened and I can get through it.”

Coping with death in the workplace

When people go to work each day, they expect to return home to their families and friends after their shift is over; they anticipate they will resume their life’s routine. When a trauma occurs at the workplace that claims the life of a co-worker, whether natural or tragic in nature, there is a lost sense of security and safety and a realisation of human morality.

A death in the workplace can transform even the most orderly and efficient organisation into chaotic and dysfunctional circumstances. In the event of a death that is the result of violence, fire, or industrial accident, workers not only have to cope with shock and the loss of a co-worker, but also the loss of safety in the working environment. When working with someone affected by a trauma, expect a variety of emotions, including guilt, anger, fear, unease, and the need for someone or something to blame for the loss.

People may experience an increase of depressive symptoms and loneliness following the funeral of a co-worker or loved one. Since extended family, friends, and co-workers have gone back to their lives, they may no longer be readily available to offer support. These feelings should subside over time, as the person grieving comes to accept the reality of the situation and shifts from mourning their loss to celebrating the deceased’s life and memories.

There are many things that you can do to cope with tragedy:

- **Feel your feelings**. Allow yourself to feel sad and to cry, either privately, with loved ones, or with a professional counsellor. Bottling your feelings hinders the healing process and makes moving on more difficult.

- **Vent your emotions.** Some people like to write letters to the deceased telling them how they felt about them, how they miss them, or about things that they did not get the chance to tell them in person. This type of release can often bring closure for the living. Other people may take comfort in spirituality or faith and should consider speaking with a clergyperson.

- **Be a comforter for someone else who is also mourning the loss.** Taking on a caregiver role in times of tragedy can be empowering and help you to find the courage to better cope with your own grief.

- **Honour the deceased.** Write a poem or a speech or create a photo album of the person who died and share it at an office memorial service or at the funeral services. Honouring their memory in such a way can provoke others to share fond memories of the deceased and to celebrate the life that they led.

- **Maintain routine.** Getting back into the routine of everyday life, both at home and at work is important so that you can enjoy living and make the most of your opportunities. Returning to the work routine can promote healing if employees make an effort to uphold values held by the deceased. For example, “Bob liked to go above-and-beyond for clients, let’s keep his spirit of customer care alive.”

- **Avoid treating a new employee as a "replacement" for the employee who passed away.** Reorganising responsibilities and moving furniture can help spare the new employee and others the painful experience of having somebody new at "Bob's desk" doing "Bob’s job" or being compared to “Bob.”

- **Consider contacting your EAP for support** and connection to a grief counsellor in your area.

Coping with the death of a co-worker outside of the workplace

News that a co-worker has died from an illness or from a tragic accident can cause a great deal of shock. Because you may have spent the previous day working side-by-side with your now deceased co-worker, it is natural to experience feelings of disbelief, sadness, anger, and guilt.

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Supporting a co-worker who is grieving

It is sometimes difficult to know how to respond to a co-worker who is going through a personal loss. It can feel awkward and you may be at a loss for words, particularly if your relationship with your co-worker is minimal. An often-appreciated response in such situations is to acknowledge the co-worker's loss and let them know that you recognise the magnitude of their pain. Sincere expressions of sympathy are often the best and can come in the form of a simple "I'm sorry for your loss."

Many people are uncomfortable with expressing strong emotions publicly and will likely find responding to others' public emotions unsettling. As a result, there is a tendency for them to shy away from a grieving co-worker. This reaction to loss

may leave the grieving coworker feeling isolated and you feeling guilty for not responding in a more supportive manner. One way to negotiate this is to write the grieving coworker a note, send a card, or bring the person flowers. These expressions of sympathy shows support without a face-to-face conversation at the workplace.

Taking the time to really listen to a grieving coworker is also a very important way to demonstrate support. It involves a bit more emotional energy, but this is a positive way to help the grieving employee to accept the reality of the loss. Talking about their loss will allow them to increase their acceptance of the death.

These tips can help you support a co-worker who is grieving:

- Acknowledge that your co-worker is grieving and offer heartfelt support, either in person or in writing.
- Expect temporary changes in your co-worker; increased sadness, tearfulness, or isolation.
- Respect a closed door or desire for privacy.
- Offer appropriate assistance, such as cooking a meal, helping with errands, or caring for children or pets.
- Continue to include the co-worker in social plans and let them decide if they are ready to accept the invitation.
- Listen to the story of their loss.
- Consider the coordination of a group acknowledgment, such as flowers, a card, or group attendance at a service.
- Ensure that support continues when the employee returns to work, as the first few days back at the office may be challenging for them.
- Be sensitive to upcoming holidays or other triggers that might be challenging for your co-worker.
- Recognise that grief and loss rituals vary across cultures. Consider learning about your co-worker's customs in order to demonstrate cultural sensitivity.