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# EAP SUPERVISOR ENHANCEMENT NEWSLETTER



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**DEER OAKS EAP PRESENTS:  
Supervisor Excellence Webinar Series**

*Strengthening  
the Team*

**Date: August 29, 2022**

**Time: 1:00-2:00 PM CT REGISTER**

# Coping with Traumatic Events: Advice for Managers

## Traumatic Incidents

Trauma is the exposure to an extreme stressor involving direct personal experience of an event, or witnessing an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or threat to one's physical integrity. The person's response to the event may involve intense fear, or helplessness. In turn, the result can overwhelm a person's ability to cope.

Trauma can result from occurrences such as a "near miss," a severe automobile accident, violent personal assault (e.g., physical attack, robbery, sexual assault, etc.), being kidnapped or taken hostage, terrorist attacks, natural or man-made disasters, etc. Witnessed events include, but are not limited to, observing the serious injury or death of another person due to violent assault, suicide, accident, or disaster, or unexpectedly witnessing a dead body or body parts.

Learning about events experienced by others can also result in trauma, and these include learning about the sudden, unexpected death of someone close, or learning that one's child has been the victim of a violent criminal act, etc. Traumatizing events can take a serious emotional toll on those involved, even if the event did not cause physical harm.

It is important for a manager to remember that your employee's perception of the traumatic event can have a significant impact on how they will react, even if it becomes known later on that there was no real threat. People are different and they will react differently to the same traumatic incident.

## Reactions to traumatic incidents.

The normal physiological responses to extreme stress may include hyper-arousal and anxiety. When the fight, flight, or freeze instincts take over, the sudden acceleration of cortisol and other hormones sends signals to the brain to be alert. This stress response is useful and can be necessary in times of emergency to ensure our survival. However, it is important to realize that the perception of the event, combined with this physical response, will influence how a person thinks, feels, and behaves in the weeks following an incident.



Some people react strongly at the time of the traumatic incident and for them, the symptoms can vary greatly. The complexity of human nature means that it is not possible to predict how someone will react. Some will react immediately, some can have a delayed reaction—months or years after the original incident—and still others may experience several traumatic incidents before having any reactions. Remember, not everyone reacts the same way or in the same time frame.

With the support of family, friends, and colleagues, most people will gradually recover from the emotional effects of a traumatic incident. For some however, recovery will take longer.

Research has found that people are more likely to have a greater reaction to a traumatic event, which means having a higher risk of developing more severe symptoms and taking longer to recover if they:

- Have experienced other traumatic events
- Have poor coping skills
- Have a recent life stressor
- Have experienced a trauma where the severity, proximity, and type was notable
- Lack support at home

## The Manager's role.

As a manager, you have an important role in assisting and supporting employees after an incident. Taking control of the situation, without overwhelming the people involved in the incident, takes skill and knowledge about trauma. It is important to know what to look for and to notice signs of distress not only in other people, but also in yourself—so that you can respond most helpfully.

Being aware of the impact that traumatic incidents can have on your employees will help you to manage the situation effectively. It is important to listen to people; to encourage, support, and praise people's efforts; and to avoid negative comments, as people often become more sensitive following an incident. Employees who feel supported and valued will likely recover more quickly.

## Offering Support

### Before—Preincident Awareness

Both managers and employees can educate and familiarize themselves about trauma, the impact of traumatic stress, recognizing symptoms, as well as identifying ways to manage the effects of trauma. This awareness can help protect your work group. All employees should prepare for a critical incident by reviewing how to respond to an emergency.

### During

- Provide immediate support for those who may be experiencing psychological shock.
- Offer general comfort and care in the moments immediately after an incident.

### After

Provide ongoing support including access to appropriate resources. If your company offers an employee assistance program (EAP) or occupational health services, now is the time to promote them.

### Immediate support.

A person who has directly been involved in a traumatic incident may go into shock. Shock can last for up to 72 hours. Symptoms include:

- Physical numbness
- Faintness
- Tearfulness
- Flushed or pale skin
- Cold and shivery
- Hot and sweaty
- Shaking
- Talking loudly or quickly
- Irritability
- Stillness or becoming silent and withdrawn
- A sense of things not being real
- Feeling of being outside body
- Unaware of others around them

The following may be helpful to someone immediately following a traumatic incident:

- Take the person to a quiet room, away from the scene of the incident where there is somewhere comfortable to sit.
- Protect their privacy and be away from media intrusion.
- Provide hot drinks or water.
- Provide a blanket or warm coat.
- Normalize and validate what has happened to them.
- Be careful not to trivialize their experience.
- If anyone is shaking, explain that shaking is normal and helps to relieve shock.
- Encourage people to talk about what happened if they want to, but don't force anyone to talk or to listen.
- If the symptoms appear severe to you or you feel that further treatment is needed for shock or other injury, follow your normal first aid procedures and seek immediate assistance. If needed, arrange for the person to be accompanied to the hospital.
- When the person is ready, and it has been agreed upon, make arrangements for him or her to go home.

It is important to arrange for a taxi or a ride home with a colleague—never allow someone who has had a shock to get themselves home. Also check whether someone will be at home. If the answer is no, offer to call a friend or relative for them. Check whether the person would like someone to go home with him or her.

### After support.

To assist employees to better cope with reactions to the incident and return to routine duties, managers may wish to access additional support resources as provided by the EAP. Upon contacting the EAP, a trained EAP counseling specialist will help assess the most appropriate clinical response. This may include for example a group crisis intervention or a referral for individual counseling.

### Talking to employees.

The key to offering effective support to employees following a traumatic incident is to practice active listening. Active listening is an important skill to develop for anyone who manages people. The skill enables managers to offer good support whenever this is needed, but is also useful in all situations where good communication is vital.

### What is active listening?

Active listening is giving someone your full attention, and putting everything else aside for a time. It involves trying to understand what it is like to be the other person, for example, what it is like to have experienced that incident and to be having this reaction. Many people report that just having someone listen to them is very supportive in itself.

Here are some ideas which may help you to listen effectively, so that someone feels listened to and supported:

- Establish and maintain regular contact with the person—give some thought to where you do this—privacy is important.
- Find a time that is good for both of you and allow them some time to talk about how they are—ensure that you will not be interrupted.
- If you are seeing them face to face they may be more comfortable if they are able to bring someone with them.
- Show interest in them and how they are.
- Let them know you are concerned but without being overly curious.
- Encourage them to talk by listening. Prompt and encourage when necessary.
- Ask general questions.
- Don't ask so many questions that it comes across as an interrogation.
- Check that you have understood correctly by summarizing what you think they've said to you.
- Reassure them that their reactions to the incident are normal.
- Offer practical help or advice.
- Don't criticize, blame, or label them, or discount what they've said to you.
- Don't make them talk when they don't want to.
- If they want to talk about what happened, but become distressed, it is best to stop them—say something like, "It doesn't seem to be helping you to talk about this at the moment." A useful question at this point might be to ask them what is helping them to cope—get them to focus on something positive.
- Be supportive.
- Be yourself.
- Remind them of the EAP Counseling Service—especially if the person is clearly distressed.

#### Practical Questions You Can Ask

- How have you been since it happened?
- What can I do to help you?
- What is helping you cope now?
- How are you sleeping?
- Are you able to get out and about?
- How are you feeling about work at the moment?
- Do you have any specific anxieties about work?
- How can I best support you through this?
- Would you like me to refer you for counseling?

*Source: Workplace Options. (Reviewed 2017). Coping with traumatic events: Advice for managers. London: Author.*

## Managing Layoff Survivors

When layoffs are announced, remaining employees feel not only for their departing colleagues, but also for themselves—with twinges of anxiety about their own job security.

Layoff survivors also feel the burden of increased workloads. While fortunate to have jobs, these survivors may now have to do the work of two, three, or more coworkers.

Many feel overwhelmed by the added tasks, yet dare not complain to managers for fear of losing their jobs in the next round of cutbacks.

At the same time, management is equally pressed to maintain maximum output with fewer workers. In lean times, as managers ask workers to take on more responsibilities, it becomes even more important to help workers succeed and feel satisfaction in their work.

Here are some ways that managers can begin making that happen for overwhelmed employees:

- Clearly explain expectations
- Give honest, consistent feedback

- Design optimum workloads
- Extend dignity and respect

### Clearly explain expectations.

When employees are given more responsibilities or bigger workloads, it raises questions in workers' minds. Is the job description the same as it was before the layoffs? What do managers expect of me?

Whether or not your employees directly ask you these questions, you can assume most of them are asking themselves—and many are uncertain of the answers.

Help them by eliminating the guesswork. Meet with each employee to clearly explain their roles, even if their responsibilities haven't changed. Discuss specific job responsibilities in light of the cutbacks, and your expectations for their performance.

By taking this initiative with each employee, you chart courses for them that greatly increase their potential for success. This makes for a more satisfied work force, and helps accomplish your goals as well.

## Give honest, consistent feedback.

Nothing dampens overwhelmed employees' morale more than uncertainty. Reducing a workforce creates significant worries among the retained workers. Add to that employees' apprehensions about whether they can do the assigned jobs, even after it's clearly explained, and you have a lot of potential anxiety.

Your job is to diffuse that anxiety as much as you can. You may not be able to assure them of job security, salary increases or better benefits—but you can lessen many fears by giving honest and consistent feedback. This kind of feedback works two ways.

First, it involves letting your employees know how they're doing. This is more than annual performance reviews—you should initiate ongoing conversations about what you see employees doing well, and what could be improved.

Frame the comments for improvement as compliments, instead of criticisms. For example: "Tom, I like the way you handle yourself with this client. They're a demanding group and you show a lot of poise. But watch your sarcasm in meetings, it could be easily misinterpreted."

It's much easier to hear the constructive comment when genuine affirmation is given first. Just make sure it's honest and not contrived—most employees see right through patronizing behavior.

The second part of honest feedback is inviting employees to express concerns and suggestions to you. This can feel threatening to some managers who like to remind their employees that they're in charge. But employees want to know they'll be heard and appreciated.

Invite their feedback, and take their concerns and suggestions seriously. Consider how you might implement them. Make conscious efforts to tell employees as soon as possible about the outcome of their feedback. If it's a change employees could be involved in, by all means let them participate. This enhances ownership for the change and encourages creativity.

## Design Optimum Workloads.

Don't ask your overwhelmed employees to strive toward goals they can't reach. That only promotes feelings of failure and discouragement. Overwhelmed employees need to know they can rise to the expectations set for them.

One of the best ways to accomplish this is to create an optimum workload; where the goals set are just beyond their comfort level, but not too far beyond their reach.



For this to work, you need to ask yourself two questions:

- Do my employees have the skills, experience and knowledge to fulfill their workloads? (Evaluate from employees' perspectives, not your own wishful thinking.)
- Do my employees have the resources—time, space, equipment, finances—needed to accomplish the challenges?

If you answer "no" to either of these questions, you're setting up your employees for failure. Either lower your expectations or provide more resources, to assure their ability to succeed. The idea is to build overwhelmed employees' confidence, which is the greatest deterrent to anxiety.

## Extend dignity and respect.

Respect the apprehension, anxiety and fear that your retained employees are likely to feel. A manager who ignores these emotions, or who treats employees as if they should feel indebted to the company for letting them keep their jobs, will be out of touch with workers.

Most employees want to do their jobs and to do them well. What they need in return from management is appreciation for their efforts, and reasonable understanding for the human side of life. It's hard to overstate how important this is, and how far it will go toward making the workplace an environment where managers and employees can succeed.

Overwhelmed employees won't stay overwhelmed—if they're certain of their roles and responsibilities, if they can expect to receive and give honest communication, and if they have workloads that build their confidence.

Add generous amounts of respect, and you no longer have overwhelmed employees—nor overwhelmed managers.

*Source: Gilles, G. (Reviewed 2018). Managing layoff survivors. Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.*

# Ask Your EAP!

**The following are answers to common questions supervisors have regarding employee issues and making EAP referrals. As always, if you have specific questions about referring an employee or managing a workgroup issue, feel free to make a confidential call to the EAP for a management consultation.**

*Q. I was discussing my employee's attendance problem when she mentioned that family issues were causing her lateness. She added that she would be contacting the EAP. I look forward to positive changes, but should I have done anything more?*

A. Beyond following up later and affirming the positive changes in her attendance, the situation with this employee seems to have been handled well. This is a self-referral and a great example of how EAP's perform, but there are a couple of tips worth considering. Depending on the seriousness of this attendance issue, offering the employee the opportunity to use your phone or to call the EAP "now" from your office might be effective in helping ensure she does in fact use the EAP. It's the employee's choice, of course. The second is to be firm and supportive but clear that if the attendance problem does not change, then you will be considering the next steps in correcting the problem. This will also facilitate follow-through because a disciplinary step is implied without it being committed to it yet.

*Q. Is a "constructive confrontation" with an employee an interview that always includes mention of some potential disciplinary action to help motivate the worker to feel more urgency about making changes in performance?*

A. The term "constructive confrontation" has many definitions and applications in human interaction, but in the work setting it typically refers to a purposeful and planned meeting with an employee experiencing performance or conduct issues to motivate the worker to make improvements or desired changes. Although a constructive confrontation may utilize mention of disciplinary action, this is not a required element. Most employees perceive the supervisor to be a legitimate authority figure who has control or influence over the disciplinary processes. This is a dynamic of authority, and it is not overlooked by employees when confronted by supervisors. This dynamic is also helpful to instill motivation. Supervisors who socialize frequently with

subordinates or are viewed by them as a friend may experience more difficulty in succeeding with constructive confrontations. This is because the dynamic of authority has eroded. Reasserting this authority can be tough because it requires choices that stress the friendship.

*Q. I have been a department head overseeing dozens of other supervisors for many years. I think many don't see all the benefits that come with managing a more complete relationship with a worker beyond simple concerns about work output. What benefits accrue from more engaged relationships with employees?*

A. As you point out, a more complete supervisory relationship with employees has many payoffs. Beyond focusing on quality or quantity of work, these payoffs include improved communication and a closer, more trusting relationship between the supervisor and employee. This reduces supervisor stress and negative emotions that create unwanted, unnecessary distraction when problems arise. Employees become more interested in their work, improve self-awareness, accomplish more goals, and experience improved job satisfaction, which can reduce turnover and loss of a valuable worker. Ultimately, proper employee management reduces conflict, too. Trust and respect between the worker and manager grow, and a collaboration develops that benefits the work unit. EAPs can help supervisors develop more engaged relationships with employees by helping analyze personnel problems, conflicts, and communication issues, as well as assist in finding creative approaches to help workers make changes that the supervisor can consider.

*Information contained in this newsletter is for general information purposes only and is not intended to be specific guidance for any particular supervisor or human resource management concern. Some of it might not apply to your particular company policies and available programs. This information is proprietary and intended only for eligible EAP members. For specific guidance on handling individual employee problems, consult with Deer Oaks by calling the Helpline.*

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