

## Critical incident preparedness guide



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### Critical incident preparedness guide

Managers/supervisors

When the workplace experiences a traumatic event, it is common and normal for employees to exhibit a wide range of emotional and physical reactions. Sometimes an incident produces such a strong emotional response, that an individual's ability to cope may be temporarily overwhelmed. Such responses can impact job performance, including productivity and absenteeism.

How quickly employees return to work after a workplace incident depends on the preparation done today. Each situation is unique but thoughtful preparation can help you and your employees respond more effectively when emotions are high and help to reduce the fear, anxiety, and stress associated with these types of unexpected events.

The articles in this guide can help you prepare by teaching you what you need to know to assist employees in processing their reactions, reduce performance concerns, and return to work after a workplace critical incident.

For additional information about our critical incident preparedness services please contact your Optum Behavioral Solutions account director.

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## Responding to emergencies in the workplace



**By Karen Clevering**  
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This article is intended to provide general informational content only. Please consult your company policies and procedures for specific guidance on this topic.

When confronted with an emergency at work, whether it's a natural disaster or an explosive employee, many of us react in the same way — we don't know how to react. This is very common, especially if you don't have the tools to deal with problems or you don't know your company's emergency procedures.

Emergencies are an inevitable part of life, so it's important to know what to do. If uninformed, you may make poor decisions because you feel out of control or powerless. Be in control by learning and using the tools provided by your company. This article identifies the basic safety features and policies to learn so that you may better handle emergencies.

## Types of emergencies

Emergencies which affect your workplace can come in many forms, but they typically fall into two categories: internal and external. An external emergency occurs outside the workplace and is unrelated to work, while an internal emergency occurs within the workplace and is usually caused by individuals.

### Types of emergencies may include:

- Earthquake or other natural disaster — external
- Explosion — external or internal
- Fire — external or internal
- Hazardous-substance threat — external or internal
- Medical — internal
- Weather-related event — external
- Threat of violence — external or internal

## Company policies and procedures

To prepare for the above-mentioned emergencies and others, read about your company's policies and procedures. Ask questions about what you do not understand or speak up if you feel something is missing. Below are some basic areas to cover.

## General building safety and emergency plans

- Where are the emergency exits?
- Where are the fire extinguishers and first aid kits?
- Are fire exits and doors unlocked?
- Have you practiced fire/emergency drills recently?
- What are the emergency and evacuation plans?
- Where is the post-evacuation meeting place?
- What are the local emergency numbers and where are they posted?
- Do you have personal emergency supplies at your desk?  
These should include:
  - Flashlight
  - Walking shoes
  - Water bottle
  - Non-perishable food

## Specific policies

- What are the basic "shut down" procedures for departments?
- How do you secure equipment, computers or merchandise?
- Who are the emergency contact individuals?
- What is your company's policy on:
  - Violence in the workplace?
  - Drug and alcohol issues?

## Reporting procedures

- What are the steps of the reporting process?
- Who do you contact to begin emergency procedures?
- Who is the designated individual who will be first reporter? Typically this is an individual responsible for documenting incidents and actions taken.
- How do you file reports?

## Special considerations for work-related violence emergencies

In many cases, employees hesitate to report work-related threats or emergencies, especially if they involve a fellow co-worker or manager. If unreported, however, these problems typically worsen and require more attention in the long run. Many employees admit that they will not or have not reported necessary emergencies for the following reasons:

- Fear of retaliation
- Belief that they are "tattling"
- Lack of confidence that the company will take appropriate or necessary actions
- Concern regarding the emotional shock of the situation

You are an integral part of a safe workplace, and it is your responsibility to report any behavior that you perceive to be potentially or actively violent or harmful. Refer to your company's policies and procedures for individuals to contact.

## Resources

Look to your company for help in dealing and coping with emergencies specific to the workplace. Because emergencies are unexpected, it is best to be proactive and educate yourself before anything happens. Here are some resources which may provide information for your company's policies and/or preparing and coping with emergencies:

- Manager
- Human resources professional
- Ombudsman
- EAP professional or counselor
- Company website
- Federal Emergency Management Agency at [www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov)
- American Red Cross at [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org)

Talk with your human resources representative if you have any concerns or questions about your building's safety or your company's safety procedures.

## Violence in the workplace



Department of Consumer and Business Services  
Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Division.

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Across the nation, violence in the workplace is emerging as a significant occupational hazard. All too frequently, employees become victims of violent acts that result in substantial physical or emotional harm. For injured or threatened employees, workplace violence can lead to medical treatment, missed work, lost wages and decreased productivity.

### Workplace violence: A preventive approach

Violence at work can take many forms: harassment, intimidation, threats, theft, stalking, assault, arson, sabotage, bombing, hostage-taking, kidnapping, extortion, suicide and homicide.

#### Workplace violence: A definition

- Any act that threatens your safety or that of a customer
- Any act that negatively affects your health, life or well-being, or that of a customer
- Any act that damages your property or that belonging to the company or the customer

### What is causing the rise in workplace violence?

#### Experts suggest there are many reasons:

- A general increase in tolerance of violence in society
- Increased accessibility to weapons
- A rise in unemployment, downsizing in organizations, and less control over the work environment
- Substance abuse
- Psychological factors, including stress, and breakdown of community support systems, such as supportive families or extended family groups

## Violence in the workplace

### How serious a problem is violence in the workplace?

Between 1980 and 1989, occupational homicide was the third leading cause of occupational death in the U.S. In 1992, it was the leading cause. Homicide has been the number one cause of death in the workplace since 1980. One of every four American workers will be attacked, threatened or harassed at work in their lifetime.

### Are there different sources of violence in workplaces?

Yes. Violent acts aren't always committed by strangers as part of a robbery or other criminal activity. Current or past customers, employees, employees' relatives, or patients may all be capable of violence. Violence in the workplace is a complex phenomenon. Therefore, violent acts are often placed in one of three categories:

- Type 1:** The person causing the violence has no legitimate relationship to the workplace. He or she enters a workplace to commit a criminal act. Example: A person enters a gas station with the intent to rob the station, and then kills the attendant.
- Type 2:** The person causing the violence is either the recipient or object of a service provided by the workplace, such as a current or former client, a passenger, or a customer. Example: A person receiving mental health counseling becomes angered over being rescheduled for an appointment and attacks the receptionist.
- Type 3:** The person causing the violence has an employment-related involvement with the workplace. This can either be someone who has a direct relationship, a current or former employee, or someone who has a relationship to a current or former employee. Example: An estranged husband or wife of an employee is angry, comes onto the work site, and confronts his or her spouse. The confrontation escalates into a physical attack.

### Should I be worried about violence at my workplace?

Yes. All workplaces have the potential for violence. Certain jobs and types of workplaces are recognized to be at significantly greater risk.

If you have one or more of the following factors at your workplace, you may be at a higher risk for a Type 1 or Type 2 violent act:

- An exchange of money
- Employees working alone at night and during early-morning hours
- A physical location in a high-crime area
- Valuable items, such as money and jewelry
- Public-safety employees
- Patients, clients, customers, or students known or suspected to have a history of violence

Workers' compensation claims as a result of violence are most likely to occur in cases where there is contact with clients, patrons, patients or co-workers (Type 2 violence). Workers in service occupations make up 56.5 percent of these claimants.

### **Do I have a legal obligation regarding workplace violence?**

Employers have an additional reason to be concerned about violence in the workplace — injuries from these types of incidents may lead to legal liability.

There are two principal sources of liability for violent episodes in the workplace: common-law negligence and violations of OSHA regulations governing workplace safety.

Courts have ruled that an employer may be liable for negligence in hiring or retaining individuals given to violent acts. Federal OSHA has stated that it is their policy to cite employers who fail to adequately protect their workers from acts of violence under Section 5(a) of the OSHA Act, which requires employers to maintain a safe workplace.

Employers can take several steps to reduce the risk of legal liability. For example, they can implement careful hiring, employee evaluation and discipline procedures and adopt appropriate workplace security procedures. However, employers must be careful not to violate laws protecting employee privacy rights, civil rights or rights created by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Employers conducting workplace violence risk assessments might want to consult with legal counsel.

### **What action should I take to prevent violence from impacting my employees and my company?**

The most effective action is to develop a workplace violence prevention plan. The plan should be part of your company's overall health and safety program. It should be developed and implemented in cooperation with your workplace safety and health committee or, where there is no committee, with the assistance of workers who are knowledgeable about the work site. The nature and extent of the plan should be based on the results of the initial risk assessment.

#### **Following are the essential components:**

- Conduct an initial assessment.
- Evaluate any past incidents of violence (they may not have been classified as "violence").
- Consider the physical location of your business.
- Determine the nature of the interactions between workers and the public. Are money transactions, drug dispensing, etc., part of your business?
- Review your hiring and termination procedures.

#### **Develop a written policy**

- State your overall approach to the prevention of incidents of violence.
- Clearly outline the responsibilities of managers, supervisors and workers.
- Indicate the direction and support of senior management.
- Convey "zero tolerance" for violence.

### **Do regular risk assessments**

- Provide for periodic risk assessments.
- Provide a means to document the risk assessments.
- Make the results available to workers.

### **Write prevention procedures**

- Develop written instructions detailing the violence prevention procedures to be followed by workers and supervisors.
- Explain the work environment arrangements implemented to prevent incidents of violence, such as barriers, guards, locks and sign-in procedures.
- Provide direction to workers outlining safe response methods and incident-reporting procedures. Provide worker and supervisor training.
- Train at-risk workers and their supervisors in correct response procedures.
- Ensure that violence prevention procedures and work environment arrangements are understood and followed.
- Maintain training records.
- Develop procedures for incident reporting and investigation.

### **Prepare policies, procedures and documentation for:**

- Reporting incidents of violence
- Supervisors' actions to address reported incidents
- Investigating incidents of violence
- Implementing corrective action
- Advising injured workers of available help

### **Provide incident follow-up**

- Review actions taken in response to incidents of violence to evaluate their effectiveness.
- Provide for EAP (employee assistance program services) or critical incident stress debriefing.

### **Do a program review**

- Plan an annual review to evaluate your program's effectiveness.
- Document the review.
- Revise the program as necessary.

### **Summary**

Due to the increase in violence in places of business, every company should assess their own situation and have a violence prevention plan in place. Each business should evaluate their physical security issues and crisis management policies and develop a plan for preventing and managing potential violence from any source. Check with your local police, mental health service or private consultants for help with your plans.

## The emotional effects of violence



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When violence affects you, a loved one or a co-worker, it's usually by surprise and without warning, leaving a lasting impression and sometimes an impact on your emotional and physical health.

Fear can be a debilitating emotion, and how you cope with that fear is as important as the safety measures you take. There are several things you can do to start coping. This article will sketch out the reactions most people feel, how to cope with those reactions and additional resources to contact for more assistance.

### Normal reactions to horrific events

No matter what the act, part of the difficulty with violence events is that they surprise us when we are not prepared. Mental health experts all agree there are common reactions and feelings to traumatic events — even if you are not directly involved.

#### Factors

There are a number of factors that can determine just how intense your feelings will become or if you will suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). They include:

- **How close you were to the events** — Whether disaster hits close to home or across the country can be a factor in how people react. If you are removed from the situation, by seeing events on television or reading about them in the newspaper, you are less likely to be as affected as someone close to the tragedy.
- **What you saw, witnessed or heard** — Watching a terrorist event over and over on television can have an affect on your feelings and fears about the event. According to the American Psychological Association, hearing first-person accounts of the events or seeing the events as they unfold can have an impact on your reaction.
- **Whether you or someone you love was injured during the event** — Being related to someone missing or killed due to violence or living through an earthquake makes you personally touched by violence and can bring the fears very close to home.

## The emotional effects of violence

- **If you are a past survivor of a traumatic event** — Those who have gone through a previous event and coped with those feelings will feel more fearful and panicked about their safety, according to the University of Pennsylvania's Center for the Treatment and Study of Anxiety.

### Workplace violence: A preventive approach

Experts studied the above factors after the events of the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. They found people who met all of these criteria often developed PTSD.

#### Reactions

According to the American Psychological Association, many people who have witnessed these events "may go into a state of acute stress reaction." These reactions include:

- **Intense and unpredictable feelings** — Irritation, sadness and radical mood swings are just some of the reactions people have to horrific events.
- **Repeated thoughts of the incident** — These reactions can occur for no reason and may lead to physical reactions such as sweating or crying. This can cause difficulty in concentrating and making decisions.
- **Recurring emotional reactions** — Anniversaries of the event, such as one week, month or year, as well as reminders, such as noticing airplanes flying overhead or aftershocks from earthquakes, can cause memories of the disaster. These reminders may make people feel like the event could be repeated and things are out of control.
- **Radical changes in behavior** — People may start to have a heightened sense of fear or nervousness. Many times these fears will make people stay inside and away from friends and family, where they will become isolated and depressed. Normal routines may be disrupted and some people will even feel survivor's guilt.

### How to cope after tragic events

While people tend to never forget tragic events, the feelings that are associated with these traumas can be eased by taking specific actions in your life. The following tips have been compiled from the Kansas State Cooperative Extension Service, the University of Illinois, the American Psychological Association and the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

- **Provide direct help in dealing with the disaster** — Help an elderly or homeless person who is affected by the disaster. Volunteer by helping your fire department or police department during their times of need. Many communities have Community Emergency Responder Teams for neighborhoods. This is a good way to help in times of need. If you are removed from the situation, give blood or money to charitable organizations that are helping with the relief effort.
- **Talk and listen** — Sharing feelings with others, especially family, friends and neighbors, helps people deal with and overcome anxiety and feelings of helplessness. On the same token, listening can help others cope with these same feelings. One of the best ways to help is to lend an ear.
- **Identify your feelings** — Understanding your feelings can help you realize that you are feeling the effects of stress and sympathy. Knowing yourself can help you cope with the abnormal situation you might find yourself in.

- **Show by words and actions that you care — Act.** Don't be afraid of doing the wrong thing, or offending someone, just try to help in any way you can. A word of support or a helping hand goes a long way to encourage other people who are also trying to cope in a difficult situation.
- **Realize that you are not alone** — There are many individuals, including those in numerous law enforcement and government agencies, that are trying to prevent and solve the problems of crime and terrorism. Knowing that you are not alone in this situation is an important step in dealing with your fears.
- **Get back to your daily routine as soon as possible** — You might not be able to do all the things you once did, but trying to get back to some sense of normalcy is important in the healing process. Make sure you also maintain good sleeping and eating habits.
- **Realize that not everyone heals at the same pace** — Don't be judgmental if you have found your way out of the emotional pitfalls of a disaster, but your spouse, son or neighbor is still feeling the pain.
- **Remember how you have overcome obstacles in the past** — Try to remember what you did in other difficult situations and see if those skills can be used in the current crisis.
- **Limit watching the news** — Watching the same event time after time will not help you in the healing process. Collecting important information is important, but watching just for the sake of shock is not healthy.
- **Avoid major life decisions** — When people are under stress or bereavement, they cannot make logical decisions. Immediately after a traumatic event is not the time to change careers, move or change your relationships. Give it time, and then make the decision.
- **Keep helping** — The disruptions caused by a traumatic event may continue for a long while. Recovery may take even longer. Friends, family members and neighbors will need regular acts of kindness and understanding to maintain their morale and put their lives back together.

## Conclusion

We never know when a terrible event may occur, but by knowing how we can cope, behave and react in a positive way, we can be in control.

## Resources

The following is a list of resources to contact for more assistance.

- **National Organization for Victim Assistance**  
510 King Street, Suite 424  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
1-800-TRY-NOVA  
[www.trynova.org](http://www.trynova.org)
- **Federal Emergency Management Agency**  
1-800-621-FEMA  
[www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov)
- **American Red Cross**  
1-800-HELP-NOW  
[www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org)

## Making your workplace safe



A publication of the National Crime Prevention Council, 2003 ([www.ncpc.org](http://www.ncpc.org)).

Whether you are at home or at work, crime prevention is everybody's business. When you go to work, don't leave your crime prevention sense at home. Almost any crime that can happen at home or in your neighborhood can happen in the workplace.

As you read through the checklists, make sure the person responsible for your building, be it the owner, manager, or landlord, has taken care to create a safe workplace. If not, volunteer to lead a group to work with management to make sure that your work environment is safe.

### Preventing office crime

- Keep your purse, wallet, keys or other valuable items with you at all times or locked in a drawer or closet.
- Check the identity of any strangers who are in your office — ask whom they are visiting and if you can help them find that person. Don't forget to request identification from service or utility workers as well. If this makes you uncomfortable, inform security or management about your suspicions.

## Making your workplace safe

- Do not allow visitors to be alone in your office space. Be sure to provide an escort at all times.
- Be discreet. Don't advertise your social life or vacation plans and those of your co-workers to people visiting or calling your place of work.

### Check the locks and doors

Good locks are the first line of defense. Volunteer to lead a team of employees to work with management to ensure the physical security of your workplace.

- Check for high-security locks or electronic access control units on all doors — closets that have private information or hazardous materials, outside doors and basements are a few to consider.
- Verify that any electronic access control unit in use has secure key bypass utilizing patented control of duplication of keys. Any access control unit is only as good as its mechanical override devices.
- Make sure all doors are solid. Look for sheet steel on both sides of back and basement doors. Make sure doorframes and hinges are strong enough that they cannot be pried open.
- Lock steel bars or door barriers with high-security padlocks that have a hardened steel body and shackle to resist drills, hammers, blow-torches, and bolt cutters.
- Be certain all windows are secure.
- If doors only have a locking knob or lever, install, or have installed, a deadbolt for additional security.
- Have management change locks before you move into a new office unless they can account for all keys and provide assurance that keys have not been made without their knowledge.
- Don't assume someone else has reported a door, window, or lock that is broken or not working properly. Report these problems immediately.

### Check the lights

Your workplace should be protected with proper lighting.

- Install motion-sensitive as well as constant outside lights.
- Illuminate dark places around the building by trimming shrubs, adding lighting, etc.
- Leave some interior lights on even when the business is closed.

### Check the common trouble spots

- **Reception area** — Is the receptionist equipped with a panic button for emergencies, a camera with a monitor at another employee's desk, and a high-security lock on the front door that can be controlled?
- **Stairwells and out-of-the-way corridors** — Don't use the stairs alone. Talk to the building manager about improving poorly lighted corridors and stairways.
- **Elevators** — Don't get into elevators with people who look out of place or behave in a strange or threatening manner. If you find yourself in an elevator with someone who makes you nervous, get off as soon as possible.
- **Restrooms** — Make sure restrooms are locked with high-security locks and only employees have keys. Be extra cautious when using restrooms that are isolated or poorly lighted.

## Making your workplace safe

- **Mailrooms** — Is the mailroom accessible only to authorized personnel? Do all employees know what the signs of suspicious mail include?
- **After hours** — Don't work late alone. Let someone know where you are and how long you intend on staying. Create a buddy system for walking to parking lots or public transportation or ask security to escort you. Never open the door to a stranger after hours.
- **Parking lots or garages** — Choose a well-lighted, well-guarded parking garage. If your building has its own garage, work with your facility manager if you do not feel safe. Always lock your car and roll the windows up all the way. If you notice any strangers hanging around the parking lot, notify security or the police. When you approach the car, have the key ready. Check the floor and front and back seats before getting in. Lock your car as soon as you get in — before you buckle your seat belt. Write down the license number of any vehicle involved in a possible crime.

### Keeping insider information inside

Remember that not only the physical aspect of your workplace is vulnerable to crime, but also some of the company's most valuable property — its information. From telephone directories and training materials, to budgets and product research, to employee and customer profiles, more and more people see stealing this information as an easy way to take advantage of businesses. When insider information leaks outside, everybody loses. Profits drop, reputations are damaged, employees lose jobs and morale plummets.

- Think before talking about the details of your job in public places, such as restaurants, airplanes, classrooms and parties.
- Know who is on the other end of the line — telephone, email, fax — before giving out any sensitive information.
- Keep your work area clear. When you'll be gone for a few hours and at the end of the day, put your papers in a locked drawer or file cabinet.
- Think about what's on a piece of paper before you toss it in the trash. If it's sensitive information, tear it up or use a paper shredder.
- Protect identification badges, office keys and codes as you would your own credit cards. Immediately report them missing if one is lost.
- Have a formal document destruction policy that defines when documents should be destroyed and how. Be wary of offsite destruction services for the most sensitive documents.

### Keeping information inside your computer

Technology creates complicated security issues. Being able to communicate with people in an instant also means that your computer and the information stored there can be vulnerable to crime. If your company uses an outside Internet provider, it is important that you familiarize yourself with that company's privacy policy and email service. Understand the type of protection it offers and what, if any, backup policies it has. Remember the following:

- Do not share sensitive information with unknown individuals in chatrooms or other Internet discussion forums.

- Verify that you have an encrypted connection when providing credit card or other financial information online.
- Use a password that cannot be easily guessed — mix up letters and numbers in a random fashion. Change your password regularly.
- Back up all systems regularly. Keep backup information in a fire safe or, better yet, off the premises.
- Use virus protection software.
- Use a firewall or gatekeeper between your computer and the Internet.
- Disconnect computers from the Internet when they are not in use.
- Regularly download security patches from your software vendors.
- Don't send confidential, financial or personal information on your email system.

### Keeping violence out of the workplace

Violence in the workplace takes many forms, from raised voices and profanity or sexual harassment to threats, coercion or intimidation, to robbery or homicide. Many of us think that workplace violence consists solely of a disgruntled employee committing homicide. More commonly, it is a robbery gone awry. With proper planning, an employer can prepare the workplace for incidents of violence. To assess a workplace's vulnerability to violence, ask yourself the following questions.

#### Is your office secure?

- Do you have easy-to-use phone systems with emergency buttons, sign-in policies for visitors, panic buttons, safe rooms, security guards, office access controls, good lighting and safety training?
- Does your employer take care in hiring and firing? Before hiring, are employment gaps, history, references, and criminal and educational records thoroughly examined? Are termination procedures defined clearly with attention to advance notice, severance pay and placement services?
- Could you recognize potentially violent employees? Signs of stress that could erupt into violence include:
  - depression
  - frequent absences
  - talking in a louder-than-normal voice
  - concentration and memory problems
  - being startled easily
  - increased irritability
  - impatience
- Are you encouraged to report unusual or worrisome behavior?
- Is there a clear, written policy that spells out procedures in cases of violence and sanctions for violators?
- Do you know to whom you should report unusual behavior?
- Do you work in a supportive, harmonious environment?
- Is there a culture of mutual respect?
- Does your employer provide an employee assistance program?

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Once you have assessed your workplace's vulnerability to violence, you should take steps to implement a workplace violence prevention program, if one is not already in place. This comprehensive program is supported by all levels of employees and addresses physical security, hiring and firing practices, and employee vulnerabilities. Work with upper management to encourage them to evaluate your workplace and help start a workplace violence prevention program where you work.

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## Communication tips for managers



By Karen Clevering  
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Good communication is essential in the workplace. It improves morale and helps business run smoothly. For managers, it is especially important for leading your team and facilitating a healthy and cooperative work environment.

### Communication basics

As a manager, you interact with your workplace on many different levels — face to face, electronically, and through interactions with the workplace as a whole. Each of these areas is unique and requires specific attention.

#### Face to face

Regardless of your personality or your management style, it is often difficult for employees to talk one-on-one with their managers. As your goal is to have a productive discussion or problem-solving session, it's important to keep this in mind and do your best to make your employee as comfortable in this situation as possible. During a meeting, consider the following:

- **Observe.** Before you can begin to work with your employee, it's important to understand this person's perspective. Observe this by reading the person's body language, listening to the tone of voice, and paying attention to silences. For

example, if someone comes to you with a problem and you observe that he speaks very loudly and visibly looks angry, you can assume that he won't be able to listen openly to what you have to say. Though you may have a reasonable solution, you may have to help the person relax and calm down before addressing the problem.

- **Listen.** One of the biggest mistakes that people make when listening is trying to form a response before the speaker has finished. If you find yourself quickly trying to find a solution in this way, you aren't really listening to everything the person is saying. Although you may find silences uncomfortable, it's okay to have few moments to collect your thoughts after your employee has finished talking. If you need more time, simply state, "I need a few minutes to think about what you shared with me."
- **Ask questions.** Clarification is critical. Your goal is to understand what the other person is saying so that you can help problem-solve and increase productivity. For this reason, stay away from questions that can be answered with a yes or no. It's also best not to begin your questions with "why," as this tends to make people feel defensive and less likely to be cooperative. Ask questions that encourage the other person to share his/her opinion or perspective on the situation. Here are a few examples:
  - What leads you to that conclusion?
  - How can we work together to solve this problem?
  - Who else is affected when this happens?
  - When do you think you can begin to work toward your new goal?

#### Electronically

Email is practically a staple in the workplace. It's fast and cost-efficient, but it can also have its problems. Managers and employees need to remember that emails don't always communicate what the author intended. Here are a few tips for email etiquette:

- **Use email as one of many ways to communicate.** It may be tempting to communicate solely through email, especially when you are very busy, but you don't want to lose the irreplaceable interaction with people in the workplace.
- **Write short and clear emails.** If an email takes up more than the screen, it's too long. Face-to-face meetings may be more effective if directions or communications are that detailed. When forwarding or replying to emails, be sure to keep the email threads short as well.
- **Include a subject.** This is a great tool for highlighting priorities and for organization.
- **Encourage employees to respond with questions.** Asking for questions or feedback at the close of the email continues the dialogue, furthers communication and, like an open door policy, contributes to a healthy work environment.
- **Do not send angry or disciplinary emails.** When you are unhappy about an employee's performance, you owe it to this person to meet face-to-face to discuss the issue. Angry emails are often regretted the moment they are sent.
- **Schedule time each day to answer emails.** If emailing plays an important role in your team's communications, make responding to email a priority.
- **Use spell check and a thesaurus.** Many email programs offer this function. Just because email is quick does not give you the excuse to misspell.

#### Communication in the workplace

Even if you repeatedly express to your employees that you have an open door policy or that you encourage feedback, many employees are likely to be hesitant to approach you

if they rarely see you outside the office. In fact, they may have a very different perception of your management style than you think. That's why it's important to communicate well with your team as a whole in addition to one-on-one communication.

- **Interact with employees in the workplace.** Talk with your employees at their workstations or in the break room. The more they see you outside the office, the more approachable you will become.
- **Give recognition for a job well done.** Recognition and appreciation strengthen a positive work environment and support employees. This support, in turn, makes employees more comfortable addressing concerns and conflicts.
- **Solicit feedback.** Show that you are serious about communication and improving your skills. Ask if you are fulfilling expectations, if your communications are understood and if there are areas in which you can improve.
- **Interact informally with your employees.** Take the opportunity to discuss things outside the workplace. Not only does this encourage a good work/life balance, but it also reaffirms that you are just another person. You may even want to schedule a team lunch or coffee break once in a while.
- **Establish a schedule to disseminate information.** If you regularly receive information that needs to be passed along to your employees, establish a schedule so that you are efficient in your communication. Employees will then know when to expect information.

#### Manager's role in workplace communication

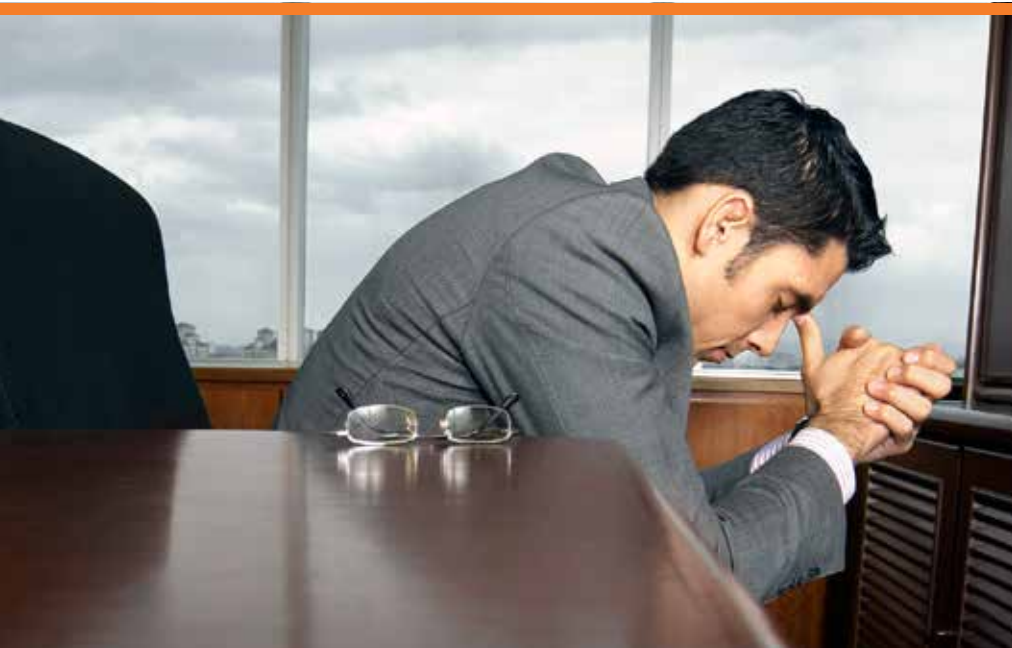
Your role is not only to improve your communication skills but also to create an environment in which you encourage better communication for the entire workplace. Work to establish a healthy culture and work environment in order to reap the many benefits of good communication. To get started, here are three things to focus on:

- **Foster communication skills.** For the most effective communication, all participants need to have the same understanding of goals and the same skills. Fostering communication skills depends on your current work environment. You may want to have a workshop or training about what you expect or do informal coaching and training at meetings.
- **Model good communication.** As manager, you are setting the standard. Your employees will be looking to you for guidance, if not directly, then by observation. If you make the effort, your employees are more likely to do the same naturally.
- **Make communication a priority.** Though good communication is greatly beneficial in the long run, it can often be overlooked or pushed back when deadlines or large projects appear. As with any business goal, good communication needs to be a priority. Set aside time to establish a goal and create steps to achieve it. This will keep you on track even when times get stressful.

#### Conclusion

Good communication is a skill that requires ongoing attention and work, but it plays an integral role in a productive and healthy workplace. Developing your communication skills as a manager is well worth your time and will provide continuing benefits to you, your employees and the entire workplace.

## Reactions to change in the workplace



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Changes at work, such as company mergers and downsizing, can be stressful. People react differently to change for a variety of reasons. Often people tolerate it better when they feel they have some control over change and/or their feelings about change. Some people will view change as an opportunity to learn new skills and work toward advancement. Others may respond with a sense of helplessness or victimization.

There are common warning signs that may indicate a negative reaction to change. Most managers recognize problem signs. The key is to address the concern early when the problem is small in scope. Immediate attention should be paid to unpredictable behavior, aggressive behavior and threats. Managers should encourage employees to use the Employee Assistance Program's (EAPs) wide range of services, which include assessment, counseling and referral for issues such as conflict resolution, stress management and substance abuse.

### Common warning signs

The following common warning signs can indicate stress reactions. It is important to note sudden and escalating changes in the employee's behavior patterns. When managers become aware of these signs, the employee should be referred to the EAP for assistance. Threats, even when mentioned in an offhand, joking manner, should initiate an immediate referral to your human resources or employee relations department.

#### Check observed behaviors

- **Complaints increase** — The employee is irritable and complains about decisions, tasks and/or requirements. The employee feels that he/she is being singled out and treated unfairly.

## Reactions to change in the workplace

- **Social withdrawal** — The employee is unusually and uncharacteristically quiet at meetings. Behavior changes may include loss of interest and/or decrease of normal social and work interactions.
- **Defensiveness or irritability** — It is difficult to have objective, rational conversations with the employee. Cooperation diminishes and interactions with other employees becomes difficult. Conflict occurs.
- **Sudden change in behavior patterns** — The employee exhibits unpredictable mood swings. He/she is emotional, easily upset or prone to angry outbursts.
- **Blaming behaviors** — Others are blamed for mistakes or failures.
- **Customer/co-worker complaints** — Other employees or customers describe difficulty and frustration when dealing with the individual.
- **Initiative declines** — The employee procrastinates and must be pushed or reminded to complete tasks.
- **Work quality decreases** — Errors increase. Work is sloppy and sometimes incomplete. Assignments and/or projects are late.
- **Focus declines** — Following instructions or taking directions becomes difficult. Instructions have to be repeated. The employee provides excuses as to why tasks cannot be completed. He/she complains of feeling overwhelmed by the demands of the job.
- **Absences from work station increase** — The employee is not available as required or needed. Co-workers may not know where to locate the individual. Absenteeism and/or tardiness increase.
- **Substance abuse** — Work site evidence of drug or alcohol use is detected or suspected.
- **Physical complaints** — The employee complains of illness, headaches, stomach problems, sleeplessness, fatigue, restlessness, anxiety, etc.
- **Threats** — Direct or indirect threats of retaliation or violence are made. Threats may be stated in a joking, offhand way.

**Defuse employees' anger before it can explode or spread** — (Reprinted with permission from *HR Reporter*, © 1996.) Negative emotions can flare up at work or fester for a long period of time. Either way, angry or upset employees are potential sources of problems. Avoid this by helping employees deal with their emotions before they get out of control.

- Be a good observer and notice any changes in an employee's behavior. Do not accept simple answers or explanations about the problem behavior.
- Document observable behavior and be specific.
- Prepare in advance when meeting with the employee. Plan what you are going to say and how to say it. Get to the point quickly and provide examples of the behaviors that you have noticed.
- Ask the employee for his or her input.
- Ask how you can help. Have the employee come up with solutions with you.
- Identify the steps that the employee must take to change his or her conduct.
- Plan at least two or three follow-up meetings to check on progress. If necessary, modify the plans with the employee's input.

## Stress at work



Adapted from "Stress at Work" by The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH): [www.cdc.gov/niosh/stresswk.html](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/stresswk.html). This article is intended to provide general informational content only. Please consult your company policy and procedures for specific guidance on this topic.

Job stress can be defined as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources or needs of the worker. Job stress can lead to poor health and even injury.

The concept of job stress is often confused with challenge, but these concepts are not the same. Challenge energizes us psychologically and physically, and it motivates us to learn new skills and master our jobs. When a challenge is met, we feel relaxed and satisfied. Thus, challenge is an important ingredient for healthy and productive work. The importance of challenge in our work lives is probably what people are referring to when they say "a little bit of stress is good for you."

In some situations, this is different — the challenge has turned into job demands that cannot be met, relaxation has turned to exhaustion, and a sense of satisfaction has turned into feelings of stress. In short, the stage is set for illness, injury and job failure.

### Common warning signs

Nearly everyone agrees that job stress results from the interaction of the worker and the conditions of work. Views differ, however, on the importance of worker characteristics versus working conditions as the primary cause of job stress. These differing viewpoints are important because they suggest different ways to prevent stress at work.

## Stress at work

According to one school of thought, differences in individual characteristics such as personality and coping style are most important in predicting whether certain job conditions will result in stress — in other words, what is stressful for one person may not be a problem for someone else. This viewpoint leads to prevention strategies that focus on workers and ways to help them cope with demanding job conditions.

Although the importance of individual differences cannot be ignored, scientific evidence suggests that certain working conditions are stressful to most people. Such evidence argues for a greater emphasis on working conditions as the key source of job stress and for job redesign as a primary prevention strategy.

### NIOSH approach to job stress

On the basis of experience and research, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) favors the view that working conditions play a primary role in causing job stress. However, the role of individual factors is not ignored. According to the NIOSH view, exposure to stressful working conditions (called job stressors) can have a direct influence on worker safety and health. But, as shown in the following pages, individual and other situational factors can intervene to strengthen or weaken this influence. Examples of individual and situational factors that can help to reduce the effects of stressful working conditions include the following:

- Balance between work and family or personal life
- A support network of friends and co-workers
- A relaxed and positive outlook

### Job conditions that may lead to stress

- **The design of tasks** — Heavy workload, infrequent rest breaks, long work hours and shiftwork; hectic and routine tasks that have little inherent meaning, do not utilize workers' skills and provide little sense of control.  
*Example: David works to the point of exhaustion. Theresa is tied to the computer, allowing little room for flexibility, self-initiative, or rest.*
- **Management style** — Lack of participation by workers in decision-making, poor communication in the organization and lack of family-friendly policies.  
*Example: Theresa needs to get the boss's approval for everything, and the company is insensitive to her family's needs.*
- **Interpersonal relationships** — Poor social environment and lack of support or help from co-workers and supervisors.  
*Example: Theresa's physical isolation reduces her opportunities to interact with other workers or receive help from them.*
- **Work roles** — Conflicting or uncertain job expectations, too much responsibility or too many "hats to wear."  
*Example: Theresa is often caught in a difficult situation trying to satisfy both the customers' needs and the company's expectations.*
- **Career concerns** — Job insecurity and lack of opportunity for growth, advancement or promotion; rapid changes for which workers are unprepared.  
*Example: Since the reorganization at David's plant, everyone is worried about their future with the company and what will happen next.*
- **Environmental conditions** — Unpleasant or dangerous physical conditions such as crowding, noise, air pollution or ergonomic problems.  
*Example: David is exposed to constant noise at work.*

## Job stress and health

Stress sets off an alarm in the brain, which responds by preparing the body for defensive action. The nervous system is aroused and hormones are released to sharpen the senses, quicken the pulse, deepen respiration and tense the muscles. This response (sometimes called the “fight or flight response”) is important because it helps us defend against threatening situations. The response is preprogrammed biologically. Everyone responds in much the same way, regardless of whether the stressful situation is at work or home.

Short-lived or infrequent episodes of stress pose little risk. But when stressful situations go unresolved, the body is kept in a constant state of activation, which increases the rate of wear and tear to biological systems. Ultimately, fatigue or damage results, and the ability of the body to repair and defend itself can become seriously compromised. As a result, the risk of injury or disease escalates.

In the past 20 years, many studies have looked at the relationship between job stress and a variety of ailments. Mood and sleep disturbances, upset stomach and headache, and disturbed relationships with family and friends are examples of stress-related problems that are quick to develop and are commonly seen in these studies. These early signs of job stress are usually easy to recognize. But the effects of job stress on chronic diseases are more difficult to see because chronic diseases take a long time to develop and can be influenced by many factors other than stress. Nonetheless, evidence is rapidly accumulating to suggest that stress plays an important role in several types of chronic health problems, especially cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders and psychological disorders.

### Early warning signs of job stress include:

- Headache
- Sleep disturbance
- Difficulty concentrating
- Short temper
- Upset stomach
- Job dissatisfaction
- Low morale

## Job stress and health: What research tells us

- **Cardiovascular disease** — Many studies suggest that psychologically demanding jobs that allow employees little control over the work process increase the risk of cardiovascular disease.
- **Musculoskeletal disorders** — On the basis of research by the NIOSH and many other organizations, it is widely believed that job stress increases the risk for development of back and upper-extremity musculoskeletal disorders.
- **Psychological disorders** — Several studies suggest that differences in rates of mental health problems (such as depression and burnout) for various occupations are due partly to differences in job stress levels. (Economic and lifestyle differences between occupations may also contribute to some of these problems.)

- **Workplace injury** — Although more research is needed, there is a growing concern that stressful working conditions interfere with safe work practices and set the stage for injuries at work.
- **Suicide, cancer, ulcers and impaired immune function** — Some studies suggest a relationship between stressful working conditions and these health problems. However, more research is needed before firm conclusions can be drawn.

– From the *Encyclopedia of Occupational Safety and Health*

## Stress, health and productivity

Some employers assume that stressful working conditions are a necessary evil — that companies must turn up the pressure on workers and set aside health concerns to remain productive and profitable in today's economy. But research findings challenge this belief. Studies show that stressful working conditions are actually associated with increased absenteeism, tardiness and intentions by workers to quit their jobs — all of which have a negative effect on the bottom line.

Recent studies of so-called healthy organizations suggest that policies benefiting worker health also benefit the bottom line. A healthy organization is defined as one that has low rates of illness, injury and disability in its workforce and is also competitive in the marketplace. NIOSH research has identified organizational characteristics associated with both healthy, low-stress work and high levels of productivity. Examples of these characteristics include the following:

- Recognition of employees for good work performance
- Opportunities for career development
- An organizational culture that values the individual worker
- Management actions that are consistent with organizational values

## What can be done about job stress?

Here are two examples of different approaches for dealing with stress at work.

### 1. Stress management

The company provides stress management training and an employee assistance program (EAP) to improve the ability of workers to cope with difficult work situations. Nearly one-half of large companies in the United States provide some type of stress management training for their workforces. Stress management programs teach workers about the nature and sources of stress, the effects of stress on health, and personal skills to reduce stress — for example, time management or relaxation exercises. (EAPs provide individual counseling for employees with both work and personal problems.) Stress management training may rapidly reduce stress symptoms such as anxiety and sleep disturbances. It also has the advantage of being inexpensive and easy to implement. However, stress management programs have two major disadvantages:

- The beneficial effects on stress symptoms are often short-lived.
- They often ignore important root causes of stress because they focus on the worker and not the environment.

## 2. Organizational change

In contrast to stress management training and EAP programs, companies may try to reduce job stress by bringing in a consultant to recommend ways to improve working conditions. This approach is the most direct way to reduce stress at work. It involves the identification of stressful aspects of work (e.g., excessive workload, conflicting expectations) and the design of strategies to reduce or eliminate the identified stressors. The advantage of this approach is that it deals directly with the root causes of stress at work. However, managers are sometimes uncomfortable with this approach because it can involve changes in work routines or production schedules, or changes in the organizational structure.

### How to change the organization to prevent job stress

- Ensure that the workload is in line with workers' capabilities and resources.
- Design jobs to provide meaning, stimulation and opportunities for workers to use their skills.
- Clearly define workers' roles and responsibilities.
- Give workers opportunities to participate in decisions and actions affecting their jobs.
- Improve communications — reduce uncertainty about career development and future employment prospects.
- Provide opportunities for social interaction among workers.
- Establish work schedules that are compatible with demands and responsibilities outside the job.

– From *American Psychologist*

As a general rule, actions to reduce job stress should give top priority to organizational change to improve working conditions. But even the most conscientious efforts to improve working conditions are unlikely to eliminate stress completely for all workers. For this reason, a combination of organizational change and stress management is often the most useful approach for preventing stress at work.

### Preventing job stress — Getting started

No standardized approaches or simple “how-to” manuals exist for developing a stress prevention program. Program design and appropriate solutions will be influenced by several factors — the size and complexity of the organization, available resources, and especially the unique types of stress problems faced by the organization. In David's company, for example, the main problem is work overload. Theresa, on the other hand, is bothered by difficult interactions with the public and an inflexible work schedule.

Although it is not possible to give a universal prescription for preventing stress at work, it is possible to offer guidelines on the process of stress prevention in organizations. In all situations, the process for stress prevention programs involves three distinct steps: problem identification, intervention, and evaluation. For this process to succeed, organizations need to be adequately prepared. At a minimum, preparation for a stress prevention program should include the following:

- Building general awareness about job stress (causes, costs, and control)
- Securing top management commitment and support for the program

- Incorporating employee input and involvement in all phases of the program
- Establishing the technical capacity to conduct the program (e.g., specialized training for in-house staff or use of job stress consultants)

Bringing workers or workers and managers together in a committee or problem-solving group may be an especially useful approach for developing a stress-prevention program. Research has shown these participatory efforts to be effective in dealing with ergonomic problems in the workplace, partly because they capitalize on workers' firsthand knowledge of hazards encountered in their jobs. However, when forming such working groups, care must be taken to be sure that they are in compliance with current labor laws. (The National Labor Relations Act may limit the form and structure of employee involvement in worker-management teams or groups. Employers should seek legal assistance if they are unsure of their responsibilities or obligations under the National Labor Relations Act.)

### Steps toward prevention

Low morale, health and job complaints, and employee turnover are often the first indications of job stress. But sometimes there are no clues, especially if employees are fearful of losing their jobs. Lack of obvious or widespread signs is not a good reason to dismiss concerns about job stress or minimize the importance of a prevention program.

#### Step 1 — Identify the problem

The best method to explore the scope and source of a suspected stress problem in an organization depends partly on the size of the organization and the available resources. Group discussions among managers, labor representatives, and employees can provide rich sources of information. Such discussions may be all that is needed to track down and remedy stress problems in a small company. In a larger organization, such discussions can be used to help design formal surveys for gathering input about stressful job conditions from large numbers of employees.

Regardless of the method used to collect data, information should be obtained about employee perceptions of their job conditions and perceived levels of stress, health and satisfaction. The list of job conditions that may lead to stress and the warning signs and effects of stress (mentioned previously) provide good starting points for deciding what information to collect.

Objective measures such as absenteeism, illness and turnover rates, or performance problems can also be examined to gauge the presence and scope of job stress. However, these measures are only rough indicators of job stress — at best.

Data from discussions, surveys, and other sources should be summarized and analyzed to answer questions about the location of a stress problem and job conditions that may be responsible — for example, are problems present throughout the organization or confined to single departments or specific jobs?

Survey design, data analysis, and other aspects of a stress prevention program may require the help of experts from a local university or consulting firm. However, overall authority for the prevention program should remain in the organization.

**Tips for organizations:**

- Hold group discussions with employees.
- Design an employee survey.
- Measure employee perceptions of job conditions, stress, health and satisfaction.
- Collect objective data.
- Analyze data to identify problem locations and stressful job conditions.

**Step 2 — Design and implement interventions**

Once the sources of stress at work have been identified and the scope of the problem is understood, the stage is set for design and implementation of an intervention strategy. In small organizations, the informal discussions that helped identify stress problems may also produce fruitful ideas for prevention. In large organizations, a more formal process may be needed. Frequently, a team is asked to develop recommendations based on analysis of data from Step 1 and consultation with outside experts.

Certain problems, such as a hostile work environment, may be pervasive in the organization and require company-wide interventions. Other problems such as excessive workload may exist only in some departments and thus require more narrow solutions, such as redesign of the way a job is performed. Still other problems may be specific to certain employees and resistant to any kind of organizational change, calling instead for stress management or employee assistance interventions. Some interventions might be implemented rapidly (e.g., improved communication or stress management training), but others may require additional time to put into place (e.g., redesign of a manufacturing process).

Before any intervention occurs, employees should be informed about actions that will be taken and when they will occur. A kick-off event, such as an all-hands meeting, is often useful for this purpose.

**Tips for organizations:**

- Target the source of stress for change.
- Propose and prioritize intervention strategies.
- Communicate planned interventions to employees.
- Implement interventions.

**Step 3 — Evaluate the interventions**

Evaluation is an essential step in the intervention process. Evaluation is necessary to determine whether the intervention is producing desired effects and whether changes in direction are needed.

Time frames for evaluating interventions should be established. Interventions involving organizational change should receive both short and long-term scrutiny. Short-term evaluations might be done quarterly to provide an early indication of program effectiveness or possible need for redirection. Many interventions produce initial effects that do not persist. Long-term evaluations are often conducted annually and are necessary to determine whether interventions produce lasting effects.

Evaluations should focus on the same types of information collected during the problem-identification phase of the intervention, including information from employees about working conditions, levels of perceived stress, health problems and satisfaction. Employee perceptions are usually the most sensitive measure of stressful working conditions and often provide the first indication of intervention effectiveness. Adding objective measures, such as absenteeism and health care costs may also be useful. However, the effects of job stress interventions on such measures tend to be less clear-cut and can take a long time to appear. The job stress prevention process does not end with evaluation. Rather, job stress prevention should be seen as a continuous process that uses evaluation data to refine or redirect the intervention strategy.

**Tips for organizations:**

- Conduct both short- and long-term evaluations.
- Measure employee perceptions of job conditions, stress, health and satisfaction.
- Include objective measures.
- Refine the intervention strategy and return to Step 1.

**More about NIOSH**

NIOSH provides information and publications about a wide range of occupational hazards, including job stress. NIOSH information about job stress can be found on the NIOSH Stress at Work Internet page, [www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/stress](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/stress), or call 800-35-NIOSH.

**National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)**

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## Handling angry people



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Handling angry people is an important skill in today's world of increasing stress and pressure. It is not unusual to encounter angry customers, co-workers, family members, and even strangers who lash out at us. It is important to be able to handle these attacks in a way that prevents escalation of the angry behavior.

### Common warning signs

Anger in the workplace is becoming increasingly common. It can adversely affect the ability of employees to work together in a positive, productive manner. In addition, it undermines morale and causes increased stress and tension among co-workers. If anger is not handled constructively by managers and employees, it can escalate to more aggressive, threatening and potentially violent behaviors.

## Handling angry people

The first step in dealing with an angry person is to disengage oneself emotionally from the disruptive behavior by separating the behavior from the person. While the angry behavior may be inappropriate and must be addressed as inappropriate, it is also important to validate the real emotional discomfort and pain the individual is experiencing. Treating the angry person with respect is a powerful tool to reduce the emotional intensity the person is feeling.

Handling angry, aggressive behavior with assertive communication techniques can have a positive impact on the angry person and the situation in a number of ways:

- You help the person define the specifics of the problem.
- You explain the limitations of what you can and cannot do.
- You limit emotional and aggressive behavior.

The following assertive communication techniques are very effective in dealing with angry people.

### Define the specifics of the problem

The first assertive strategy in handling a complaint or an upset person is to help the person specifically define the problem. This requires selective listening that cuts through the emotional and irrelevant issues and focuses on the facts of the central issue. Assertive strategies include:

- **Attentive listening** — Let the person fully state the issues and express his/her feelings. Make it clear that you want to understand.
- **Be specific** — Help the person focus on the main facts by asking for more specific information with questions like, "Please tell me specifically what happened."
- **Paraphrase** — Paraphrase the content of what the person said. Ask if he or she agrees with your understanding. A good way to frame the paraphrase is, "Let me see if I understand correctly. [State the person's issues in your own words.] Would you agree that this is correct?"
- **Empathic reflection** — Aggressive, angry communication and behavior are often indirect expressions of wants and needs. Acknowledging feelings helps the person feel understood and may help to reduce the emotional level. Examples of empathic reflection are:
  - "I can see that you are irritated..."
  - "I understand that this is upsetting for you..."
  - "This has been a difficult and frustrating process for you..."Simply acknowledge the feelings in a non-judgmental way.

### Explain the limitations of what you can and cannot do

Once you and the person agree on the source of the problem, clarify what you can and cannot do. A concise statement of how you can help will establish the parameters for cooperative problem-solving. Or, you may refer the person to someone who is in a better position to handle the problem.

### Limit emotional and aggressive behavior

Dealing with an angry person who will not remain focused and who continues to vent in an angry, aggressive manner requires a strong, assertive stance. Assertive strategies include:

**1. Ignoring** — Ignore the aggressive and personally-directed negative comments and stick to your goals of clarifying the issue and maintaining the limits of what you can and cannot do. Listen for and respond to only the elements that are relevant to your goals. Here is an example:

A consultant was hired to help sales managers brainstorm ideas on how to improve personal service. During the first meeting, where the consultant was wearing slacks and a blazer and the sales managers were in suits and ties, one manager stood up and pointed his finger at the consultant.

**Manager:** "I know one way to improve services. I think we need a different consultant who wears a suit and tie and has his hair cut; someone managers can relate to."

**Consultant:** "So, your suggestion is to hire a new consultant who wears a suit and tie and has his hair cut."

**Manager:** "Right."

**Consultant:** "OK, that's another suggestion."

The consultant wrote this on the board and continued the brainstorming process. He chose not to respond to the manager's angry manner nor the personal assault. He remained focused on the goal of brainstorming.

**2. Dismiss and redirect** — This assertive strategy denies the relevance of a put-down or irrelevant comment and redirects the discussion to the main issue. For example: "The way another employee was treated in a similar circumstance is something I cannot help" (dismiss). "However, I can try to help you with your problem if you will give me more specific information on exactly what happened to you that you believe was unfair" (redirect).

**3. Broken record** — The broken record technique is useful when you must say "no," or deal with a person who will not accept what you have to say. It has three steps:

- Phrase your message in a short, specific, unemotional statement. Offer no excuses or apologies.
- Calmly and firmly repeat your statement after each person's response. Do not allow yourself to be thrown off track. It may be necessary to repeat your assertive statement many times before the other person acknowledges your message.
- Briefly acknowledge the person's feelings or wishes, using paraphrase or empathetic reflection, before returning to your broken record statement. For example:

**Person:** "I want to speak to your boss now."

**You:** "May I have your name?"

**Person:** "You don't need my name."

**You:** "I cannot call my supervisor unless I know your name and the reason for your call."

**Person:** "This place is so screwed up I can't believe it!"

**You:** "Please give me your name and the reason for your call, and I will see how I can help you."

**Person:** "You're just as worthless as the rest. I have talked to seven idiots before you, and no one knows anything. I want to speak to the boss."

**You:** "I understand you are feeling frustrated. Please give me your name and the reason for your call, and I will see how I can help you."

**4. Direct negative feedback** — By providing direct negative feedback, you let the person know how the behavior is preventing a resolution to the problem. "When you continue to yell and interrupt and use profanity, I am unable to work with you to get to the root of the problem. Please call back when you are calmer so I can find a way to help you."

**5. Contrasts** — The contrast between your own calm and reasonable manner and the other person's aggression may make the person aware of his/her inappropriate behavior. The more agitated the other person, the more you must control any reflection of irritation or frustration in your manner.

There are a number of ways to help yourself remain calm:

- Keep a professional distance. Do not take the anger or comments personally. Do not allow yourself to be drawn into the person's anger.
- Be aware of what triggers your emotional responses. Tension in your body, shallow breathing, quickening heart rate, etc., are among the signs that you have been emotionally drawn in. Take a mental time-out to calm down and think.
- Breathe deeply and slowly. When under pressure, there is a tendency to take fast, shallow breaths, which only increases the tense feelings.
- Slow down. We often talk faster when faced with aggression and conflict. Slowing down gives you an increased sense of calm and more time to appropriately respond to the person.
- Keep it short. Respond to aggressive behavior in short sentences. Make your statement and then be quiet and wait for the person's response. Do not fall into the trap of filling in silences with more than you intended to say.
- Deepen your voice. Stress can tighten vocal cords and cause your voice to sound higher than normal. A high pitch will sound as if you are emotionally vulnerable. A firm tone of voice enhances your assertive message and reflects authority. It reinforces the limits you place on the aggressive behavior.

Treating an angry person with respect and using assertive communication skills to find the best way to help can often turn a negative situation around and lead to a cooperative problem-solving process. It can improve customer relations, increase workplace productivity through increased cooperation and enhance personal relationships. It is important to keep in mind that, like any other skill, to become an effective, assertive communicator, it takes conscious effort and practice, practice, practice. The rewards will be great when you master these skills.

## The need for critical incident response service



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When something sudden or traumatic happens in the workplace, it's important to take steps to ensure your workplace's safety and the employees' mental health. The professional crisis services of a Critical Incident Response Service (CIRS) help employees manage their feelings and can have a very positive impact on morale and productivity.

The need for critical incident response service

### The effects of a critical incident

When a traumatic incident occurs, it impacts everyone involved, producing very powerful external stressors that often push people beyond their normal capacity to cope. This kind of stress is often referred to as traumatic stress.

Critical incidents can be very disruptive to an organization. The emotional responses to the incident often cause employees to be distracted and unable to concentrate or focus. Employees may experience irritability, conflict, and physical or emotional illness. Organizations may also experience low employee morale. These negative responses to a critical incident can continue for weeks, even months. Productivity is reduced as employees find it difficult to get back to "business as usual."

During times of tragedy, it helps for management to have a structured, immediate response for dealing with the human side of crisis, such as through an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or a Crisis Management Team. Here are just a few of the situations in which CIRSs can help:

- Grief debriefing
- Employee with terminal illness
- Employee suicide
- National disaster
- Natural disaster
- Serious injury at the workplace
- Threat of injury at the workplace
- Workplace violence
- Threat of violence

### CIRS sessions

CIRSs are led by trained EAP counselors with quality experience in helping traumatized persons who may need intervention services, such as Group Critical Incident Response sessions. EAP counselors can provide assistance to managers and employees.

#### Management

EAP counselors can assist management in assessing and providing psychological first aid to traumatized personnel immediately after the event. They can also give direction as to how to manage the first de-escalation meeting for employees before they leave on the day of the event. Typically, a group debriefing scheduled 24 to 72 hours after the traumatic event provides employees with the opportunity to vent emotions and share what they have experienced.

#### Employees

The debriefing provides employees with the opportunity to fit the pieces of the event together, so they can make sense of it. A group debriefing is a time to normalize reactions, educate the employees that these reactions are part of the human response to an abnormal event, and explain that these reactions are normal and time-limited. This group discussion can help the employees place their experience into a manageable perspective. Group debriefings also assist employees in understanding and managing their reactions to a traumatic event and facilitate their return to work.

### Do you need a CIRS?

What information do human resources and management personnel need to determine if a CIRS might be indicated? You should look for events that might cause impact and traumatic stress to your workforce. Ask the following questions:

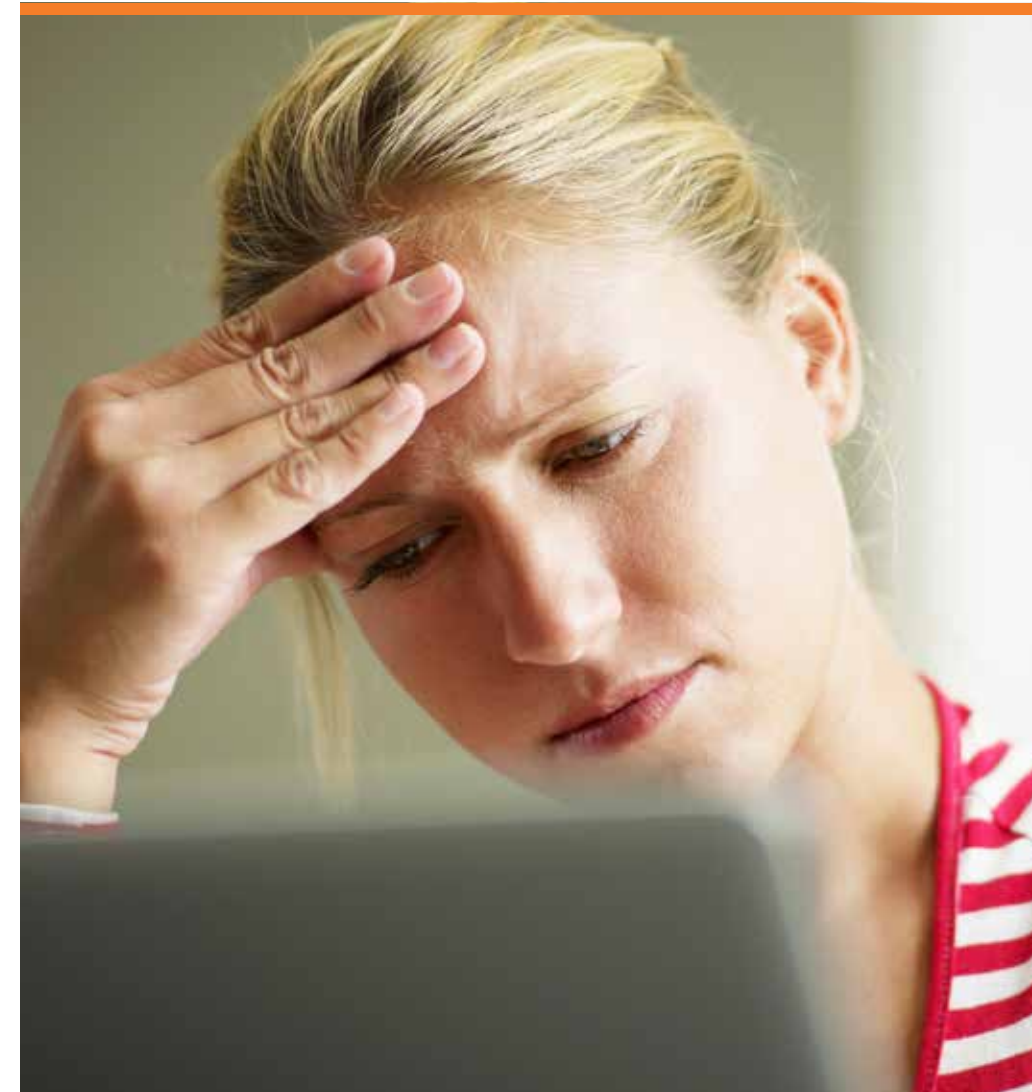
- **Was any employee killed?** How many employees are hurt? If any employee was killed or physically injured, you have a traumatized workforce that may need assistance.
- **Is there any continuing threat to life (real or perceived)?** When people are assaulted, robbed or victimized in some manner, the fear that the perpetrator will find them and hurt them is very strong. When personnel perceive an ongoing threat to their safety, they are traumatized.
- **Could this incident have been highly stressful to those involved?** Keep in mind that to be involved does not necessarily mean that employees were present (e.g., a co-worker committing suicide on the weekend). Use your EAP to help understand the kind of stressors that place people at risk.
- **Have there been any other recent crises or stressful events within the organization or within this specific work group?** Keep in mind that individuals may perceive events differently, and it's possible for some that stressful events may have a cumulative effect.
- **Did the incident happen in the workplace?** Did the incident happen in proximity to employees while they were working? When the incident happens in the workplace or close by, chances are that many more employees will be impacted. While not all employees are impacted with the same intensity, many experience "secondary stress" as they witness police or other rescue personnel doing their jobs.

Every crisis or traumatic event in the workplace does not require a CIRS, but every event needs to be assessed to determine what kind of intervention may be helpful to assist those impacted.

### Conclusion

Research has shown that when organizations recognize the emotional impact of a critical incident and provide safety, support and understanding, their employees return to a normal level of functioning more quickly. Providing employees with a CIRS and EAP counseling services is known to reduce the potential long-range negative impact on the workplace.

## How managers can help employees cope with trauma



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### Keep in mind:

- Everyone responds to trauma in different ways and individual healing times may vary. Respect your own feelings and those of others.
- Employees may have difficulty concentrating and making decisions. Forgetfulness, irritability and anger may be apparent. These are normal reactions to this situation and they will diminish over time.
- There may be an increase in absenteeism and missed deadlines.
- Some employees may be reluctant or unable to work in certain areas.
- Various odors, sounds and other sensations may upset them. They may also have difficulty with changes in their work routine or responsibilities.
- Work relationships may be impaired and an increase in employee turnover is a potential occurrence.

### What you can do:

- Give employees opportunities to vent or discuss their emotions within a structured setting. Contact the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to allow for a Critical Incident Response Service (CIRS), a constructive way to process feelings surrounding the trauma.
- Employees sometimes see management as insensitive and in a hurry to get back to work. It is vital to acknowledge employees' feelings and reactions and let them know that you care about them. Tell them you understand, while gently reminding them that getting back to a routine can help contribute to the healing process.
- People have a strong need to do something to help in this situation. Allow employees to come up with a plan of how they can make a contribution to recovery efforts. Examples include a department blood drive or a campaign to raise money for victims' surviving relatives.
- Some employees will have a strong reluctance or refusal to fly; other phobias may also surface. Urge these individuals to call their EAP for help.
- Be prepared to make some temporary adjustments in deadlines, workloads and expectations. Encourage employees to take breaks away from their work area for a few minutes.
- Practice being a great listener. You don't have to have all the answers. Suggest the EAP as a resource.
- Remind employees to take care of themselves through eating well and getting enough sleep and exercise. Be aware that in stressful situations, some individuals may have a tendency to try to "numb the pain" by abusing alcohol or drugs.
- Take good care of yourself. You cannot be in the position to manage and support others if you do not acknowledge your own needs. The EAP is for managers, too.
- Use the EAP as a resource in dealing with employees who don't seem to be showing that they are bouncing back in a reasonable period of time (generally after a few weeks — it's different for everyone depending on their closeness to the trauma and previous experiences). Call your EAP and request a management consultation.

## Recovering from a traumatic event and common symptoms



Written by M.A. Legaz, MSW  
Prepared by Optum Behavioral Solutions.

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After a frightening situation, overwhelming danger or a sudden loss of security, you may experience what is commonly called "post-traumatic stress." Even a perceived or imagined threat of violence or danger can be as emotionally disturbing as a real one. When we experience an event as life threatening, it shatters our basic assumptions about ourselves and the world we live in.

We all handle traumatic events differently. It is not unusual to feel hyperalert or jumpy, to have difficulty going to sleep, or to feel any number of physical or emotional symptoms.

The following suggestions are designed to help you deal with the reactions and feelings you may experience around traumatic events, such as September 11th, and those events' anniversaries.

- **Talk to someone.** Your friends, family and co-workers need to know what you're going through. Don't shut them out or underestimate their ability to understand life's traumas. Share what you saw, heard, touched, smelled, etc. It will help you deal with what affected you the most. Involve the important people in your life in ways they can support you, such as meeting for lunch, taking you to or picking you up from work or going for a walk together.

- **Use your community.** Call your minister, physician, counselor, the local crisis line, employee assistance programs, etc.
- **Use precaution.** Precautions, such as building a disaster preparedness kit, allow you to regain a feeling of control over your life.
- **Take care of yourself.** Find time to exercise and eat well. Avoid drugs and alcohol. Ask for assistance from family and friends, delegating simple daily tasks that may feel overpowering right now.

If you are still experiencing tension, poor concentration, the need for longer lunch breaks, tardiness, sleeplessness, nightmares, irritability, crying spells, etc., you may need to allow yourself more time to grieve and heal at your own pace. Continue talking to people over time and share what has been happening to you in the time since the event. Keep in mind that your personality and values, social support and previous life experiences will all affect the resolution of a traumatic event. Reactions fade over time. However, new events and anniversaries may cause them to resurface or bring up new worries or feelings. If this happens and you find it hard to concentrate on work or maintain relationships with others, please consider seeking professional counseling.

Normal responses to an abnormal situation include:

**Emotional:**

- Anxiety and worry
- Guilt
- Mood swings
- Anger
- Depression
- Grief
- Frustration
- Agitation and irritability
- Fear
- Helplessness
- Easily discouraged
- Apathy
- Easily startled

**Intellectual:**

- Forgetfulness
- Shortened attention span
- Dulled senses
- Poor concentration
- Negative self-talk, overly critical
- Confusion
- Difficulty making decisions

**Physical:**

- Appetite changes
- Rashes
- Tension
- Fatigue
- Nausea
- Dizziness
- Headaches
- Insomnia or nightmares
- Sweating

**Behavioral:**

- Social withdrawal
- Loss of interest in activities
- Emotional outbursts
- Lashing out at others
- Difficulty in getting to work on time
- Lowered sex drive
- Inability to perform previously common or simple tasks
- Nagging
- Increase of alcohol and drug use

## Dealing with trauma and tragedy: What you can do for others



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As we face tragedy, whether it is a local event like a shooting or a fire or a national event such as September 11th, we often feel a natural inclination to help friends and loved ones cope with the difficult time. But we may not always know the best way to help. Friends may simply need to talk or they may need someone to help them take care of everyday tasks for a few days.

The following ideas may provide some guidance for reaching out to loved ones during a traumatic time. Remember to take care of yourself first. Only then can you effectively help others.

### Listening

- Listen carefully.
- Acknowledge feelings as normal.
- Be sensitive to individual circumstances and different points of view.
- Don't respond with "You're lucky it wasn't worse." Instead, say that you are sorry such an event has occurred and you want to understand and help.
- Don't take emotional responses like anger personally.
- Respect an individual's need for privacy. If someone doesn't want to talk about the incident or his or her feelings, don't insist.

### Reaching out at work

- Organize support groups at work to help one another.
- Offer a "listening ear" to someone who hasn't asked for help but may need it.
- Give encouragement, support and understanding with on-the-job issues.
- Identify resources for additional help (Employee Assistance Programs, mental health benefits and human resources department).

### Helping family and friends

- Offer help with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking and caring for the family.
- Respect their need for privacy and time alone.
- Suggest available help (EAP, community resources, church groups, etc.).
- Keep communication open — be available and accessible.

## Dealing with death and grief in the workplace Part 1: Employees



By Kirsti A. Dyer, MD, MS

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These days, most people spend more of their waking hours at the workplace than at home. People who work together may become close like an extended family. Therefore when a colleague dies or one is grieving a death or a loss, the impact on his/her co-workers can be tremendous and can influence the workplace in a variety of ways.

Productivity can be compromised and the dynamics of the workplace can change. When the death is unexpected, in a violent act or an accident, the grief response can be quite traumatic for the survivors, further impacting work.

Grief and loss occur both at work and home, but these two realms can be difficult to separate. Serious illness and death in the family commonly affect a person's workplace performance. Typically, the grief response results from a personal crisis — divorce, fire, work-related or auto accident; sudden death — heart attack, stroke, suicide, accident, homicide; chronic or terminal health problems; or job termination — layoff or dismissal.

Each person's experience of loss and each grief response is unique. However, there are some common feelings and symptoms often experienced by the grieving. These include: sadness, betrayal, anxiety, fear, mistrust, irritability, guilt, anger, tension, depression, and loss of confidence. Grieving people often develop physical symptoms such as abdominal pain, headaches, insomnia, fatigue, changes in appetite, increased drug or alcohol use, restlessness, absentmindedness, and poor concentration. These emotions and symptoms of grief response can significantly impact a person's ability to function.

Thus, grief can upset workers and hamper the work environment. Unfortunately, most businesses cannot afford to halt production, sales or services to accommodate the grief response. Instead, they continue on in the mode of "business as usual."

When an employee experiences a loss or an illness, the ability to deal with the grieving process can become even more prolonged if the person does not feel aided by his/her manager, supervisor or employer. Those who feel cared for and supported are more likely to have improved recovery.

### Death in the workplace

People go to work expecting things to be business as usual. At the end of the day, they go home to their families. The last thing anyone expects is for a co-worker to die in the workplace, either from natural causes or as a result of a tragic event.

When a death occurs in the workplace, the normally orderly environment can quickly turn to one of chaos. If the death occurred as a result of an industrial incident, fire, murder, or similar tragic incident, workers have to deal with other concerns in addition to the shock: the death of a co-worker and the loss of safety in the work environment. Workers and management may be concerned about how and why the incident occurred and what sort of steps are being taken to ensure that another accident will not happen and/or how security is being increased to protect them from future acts of violence. Death in the workplace may result in feelings of anger, guilt, unease, fears for personal safety plus the pervasive need for someone or something to blame.

Workers who witness a fatal accident should consult with their employer to determine what arrangements the employer may have in place for conducting an immediate critical incident debriefing or short-term counseling services.

After a death in the workplace, some families who have lost loved ones at work may wish to see the site of the death or offer thanks to co-workers who helped their loved one. Similarly, having direct contact with the family may be helpful for some workers. Others may avoid contact with their co-worker's family due to the painful memories it may cause. In addition, the family will likely appreciate that management contact them promptly. Management should also be available to answer any questions or to give help to the family, particularly in the early days following the death.

### Coping in the workplace with significant loss

Management and co-workers may not appreciate the hardship that grief can cause, particularly in the workplace. A grieving worker may find it helpful to send a letter informing his/her supervisors of the loss and allowing them to pass the information on to colleagues. In doing this, the bereaved can let people know what is happening and avoid having to tell and retell the story of the loss over and over again to everyone in the office.

A death of a family member or close relative occurs and workers are given a few days to two weeks off at the most for "bereavement leave" to deal with the immediate issues surrounding the funeral. This may not be sufficient time to make funeral arrangements or for the bereaved person to begin to process the grief. The worker is expected to return to work with the grief still fresh. There is also the implicit, societal expectation that after two weeks one should be "over it" and back to normal.

In contrast, another major loss occurs, such as the diagnosis of a major medical condition, the breakup of a long-standing relationship, the death of a friend, or the loss of a cherished pet, but these losses do not meet the criteria for bereavement leave. Thus, no time (other than "personal days") is available to take off. People are expected to show up and keep functioning — business as usual. There is no time to grieve.

#### What to do if you suffer a significant loss

- Accept that grief is a normal response to loss and healing takes time.
- Anticipate that there will be times when the grief recurs and you may be overcome with the intense emotions anew. Be cognizant of special dates — holidays, anniversaries and birthdays.
- Realize that not everyone is comfortable dealing with grief. Friends and loved ones may not be able to handle your grief response.
- Search out supportive people who will listen to your story of grief.
- Find other creative ways of coping with the loss.
- Share your feelings with friends and family.
- Ask about the company's policy on bereavement leave and ask for additional leave if needed.
- If necessary, talk with your supervisor or manager about how much time to take off or arrange for a temporary adjustment in work hours or workload. Negotiate flexible hours if needed.
- Prioritizing tasks can ensure the most important jobs will get done. People respond to loss differently. Some find it very difficult to return to work, whereas others find it helpful to keep busy — their work diverts them away from grieving, sadness and mourning. For other workers, simply getting back to standard routines and avoiding any special activities or remembrances related to the loss or death may be the best way of putting the event behind them.

#### Benefits of returning to work

- Enables the person to return to a known safe environment surrounded by friendly colleagues.
- Encourages the person to resume a regular daily routine again, one of the recommendations for coping with grief.
- Takes the mind off the loss and enables the worker to feel normal for a while.
- Finishing work-related tasks and completing work projects may help the bereaved to feel they are still contributing something as part of a team, thus increasing their confidence and raising their self-esteem.

#### Difficulties of returning to work

For some people, returning to the workplace is an overwhelming burden on them in addition to their grief. They may need extra time off. Once back at work, some workers experience reduced work performance caused by:

- Lack of concentration and memory
- Tiredness from emotion and sleepless nights
- Feelings of depression
- Reduced patience and short temper

#### Guidelines for dealing with co-workers and grief

Acknowledge the co-worker's grief. Let him/her know you recognize the magnitude of the loss. However, rather than worrying about finding the best words to use, it is much more important to connect with the grieving person. A sincere expression of sympathy, "I'm sorry for your loss," will let the person know you care.

Many people are uncomfortable with displaying their emotions publicly and furthermore, may feel uncomfortable responding to others' public emotions, especially feelings of grief.

Those who find tears or expressions of strong emotions unsettling instinctively avoid a grieving co-worker. This avoidance makes the co-worker feel even more isolated. One way of handling the co-worker who recently experienced a loss is to write a note or send flowers expressing sympathy rather than sharing the sympathy face-to-face in a conversation at the office.

It is also important to listen to the grieving co-worker. Listening requires a little more emotional energy, but it can be very valuable to the bereaved. Each time the person has a chance to tell the story, the loss becomes more real. In addition, he/she gains a bit more perspective, which ultimately helps to lessen the stress of the loss.

#### When a co-worker experiences a personal loss

- Acknowledge the co-worker's grief.
- Let the co-worker know you empathize with the impact of the loss.
- Expect tears and sadness.
- Express sympathy openly and from the heart — whether in person or in writing.
- Expect to listen to the story of the grieving colleague again and again.
- Respect the grieving person's desire for privacy. Honor closed doors and silence in conversation.

- Offer specific and appropriate assistance — cooking a meal, caring for children or pets, helping with shopping or other errands.
- Remember to include the co-worker in social plans. Let him or her decide whether to accept or decline the invitation.
- Accept less than the best performance from the co-worker for a while, but expect a return to the best over time.

#### When a co-worker is seriously ill

- Stay in touch. Let the person know she/he is still part of the team.
- Designate one person to be the office liaison responsible for passing along information.
- Learn what information can be shared with others and what should remain confidential.
- Help the co-worker with practical concerns. Check the company's sick leave and other related policies.
- Organize a plan of calls, notes, food deliveries and other gestures of workplace support that don't require the sick person to interact.

#### When a co-worker dies

- Arrange for a company meeting. This gives employees permission to grieve and share their feelings. Sudden, accidental or violent deaths may require additional times for people to talk.
- Those who were particularly close with the deceased may need additional support.
- If appropriate, choose someone to serve as the family liaison to organize the company's expression of sympathy, be it flowers, cards, donations, etc.
- Take the time to grieve. Honor the person who died in an appropriate way. Some suggestions:
  - Create a memorial board or book.
  - Collect money for a charitable donation.
  - Hold or participate in a fundraiser.
  - Create an office memory book for the family.
  - Share tributes in employee newsletters.
  - Conduct a workplace-only event for co-workers to acknowledge their notable relationships with the deceased.
  - Attend the funeral or memorial service.
- Bring in help if you need it. A trained grief counselor can meet and talk with staff.

#### Helping the bereaved worker

- Immediately acknowledging the death with a note or flowers sent from management and workers can demonstrate support for the grieving person.
- A workplace representative at the funeral can also convey the company's condolence.
- Asking how the bereaved worker is doing and then listening to his or her response can be helpful.
- Providing some flexibility in work hours — even time off — can help the worker cope with the combined stressors of work and grief.
- Being patient and understanding that the grieving process takes time and that the worker will not quickly "snap out of it" will also help.

#### Supporting the workplace

- Let the person grieve in his or her own way. If the person finds working to be therapeutic, do not lighten the workload. If the grieving person is slow to move back into work, try to ease his/her workload.
- Accept that the grieving person's moods may be changeable for some time. It helps to be aware that intense feelings can suddenly re-emerge which are beyond the person's control.
- Expect tears. They are a normal part of the grieving process.
- Avoid being judgmental of how the co-worker grieves. Some people may become numb and the grieving process is delayed for weeks or even months after the death.
- Respect the co-worker's privacy, need for solitude and confidentiality.
- Watch out for other employees. Old memories, feelings and grief may be triggered as a result of the co-worker's loss. It may be necessary to honor the old grief separately from the newly grieving co-worker.
- Be careful in sharing stories of your own losses unless you're certain the person can tolerate it.

#### Workplace-specific changes

Many times, significant life or work changes contain elements of loss that can be overwhelming and very devastating. Events specific to the workplace include downsizing, reduction-in-force, layoffs, mergers and promotions. These can all potentially produce grief-like responses as workers adjust to the change. The lives of the survivors and the victims of work changes will be transformed.

The victims of work changes must cope with social, interpersonal, and financial adjustments. Those who remain must deal with changes in supervision and reporting lines, loss of co-workers, additional or redesigned work, and uncertainty of their role and value to the company. All of these issues can heighten the sense of loss. Both groups have encountered changes that will forever change their lives, causing them to go through transitions. Workers often feel that the change "happened to them," rather than it being their choice or something that was within their control. How people react frequently depends on the individual, their previous work and personal experiences, and their history of past losses. Most workers' reactions to the workplace event will be more about the secondarily associated losses than about the actual change itself.

#### Ways of coping with downsizing or restructuring

- Acknowledge feelings of anger, betrayal, rejection, disappointment or loss.
- Share these feelings with family, friends, and if appropriate, fellow co-workers.
- Check into specific company policies regarding transfers, replacements and rehiring.
- If necessary, seek advice from the company's employment or human resources department.

## Dealing with death and grief in the workplace Part 2: Management



By Kirsti A. Dyer, MD, MS

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- Check into specific company policies regarding transfers, replacement and rehiring.
- If necessary, seek advice from the company's employment or human resources department.

### Guidelines for managers and supervisors

Managers and supervisors must assure that the work responsibilities are being met and, at the same time, their employees feel supported and valued. Balancing these two needs becomes more challenging when employees have been impacted by personal and/or job loss, accident, or serious or lengthy illness.

Management may have little to no experience in knowing what to do following a death, illness, or work-related death of an employee, especially in dealing with grieving families and employees.

Make sure the employees are informed about whatever public facts surrounding the loss or death are known, including what happened, plans for funeral or memorials, family wishes, etc. Providing factual information will help suppress any rumors regarding the death or event.

It is also helpful to let employees know of resources and grief counselors that can help them cope during the stressful times. If possible, employer-provided professional grief counselors should be made available. Counselors specializing in grief can support employees and management with their grief and help restore order in the workplace.

In addition, employees, drawing on their friendships, can support and share with each other. They should be encouraged or invited to participate in expressions of condolences to families and loved ones. It may be helpful for someone who knows the family well to be the contact person in the workplace. This person can talk to the family about what they want, and how best to achieve it, while also considering the needs of the company and its workforce. For families dealing with the death of a loved one in the workplace, the deceased's employer and the claims agent need to be contacted to help in managing the death claim.

Sudden deaths — accident, homicide, suicide, heart attack, overdose — can cause employees to be in a state of shock and disbelief, asking questions such as “What happened?” and “Why?” These deaths need to be discussed openly to clarify facts, dispel rumors and allow grieving to begin. In the case of sudden death, it may be helpful to utilize professional grief counseling to facilitate employee meetings.

It is helpful for companies to have a plan in place to assist in responding effectively to a workplace death. Included in this plan should be the use of critical incident stress debriefing for those employees who were directly or indirectly impacted by the death. Employees and managers should know about and be prepared for an investigation of the death in the workplace by workplace insurance agents and the coroner.

Following the death of an employee, the remaining staff members must take on the additional workload. This may cause employees to feel as though a tornado has touched down in the middle of the operation, creating chaos. Managers and supervisors need to determine, divide and distribute the workload. It is also important to thank the employees and acknowledge the strain on the co-workers who are taking on additional workloads while coping with their own feelings of loss and grief.

If the grief impacts many staff members and disrupts normal operations, it may be necessary to arrange for coverage or back-up services to help keep the company or organization running.

Regardless of the cause of death, it is helpful if the management:

- Sends a clear, simple message of support to the grieving person and to other staff to help them cope with the event
- Maintains an “open door policy” for their staff
- Provides for a qualified counseling service

### **Ways management can help the grieving employee**

- Establish contact with the grieving employee(s) as soon as possible.
- Ask about specific things you might do to help: Do they want any information shared with others? Do they need time off? Do they need an adjustment in their work schedule? Do they need help with their work?

- Not knowing what to say and feeling awkward is normal. It is important to acknowledge the grieving employee's loss and grief.
- Handle the situation in a sensitive, straightforward manner.
- Ensure time off for the bereaved employee and any closely affiliated associates to attend the funeral. This gives the employee a chance to say goodbye to his/her loved one without guilt.
- Recognize that intermittent tears and sadness are normal.
- Respect the confidentiality of personal or medical information unless permission has been given to share it with others. Be sure to find out what can be shared and what is confidential.
- Be patient, compassionate and most of all, available to listen. Anticipate that an employee will need to talk about the loss many times, especially on special dates.
- Don't expect that the grieving person will “snap out of it” or expect his/her grief will resolve quickly.
- It is important to create an accepting environment where grieving is seen as a normal process that occurs over time, but during which work can still progress.
- Expect the best from grieving employees. However, accept less than the best for a time.
- As tasks are redistributed, be sure to thank the employees dealing with the additional work for their efforts.
- If an individual is not coping well, showing signs of depression or their grieving response is beyond the range of emotions seen in others, seek consultation or refer for counseling.

### **Helping other employees**

Other employees may need to be helped in dealing with the death of an employee. Some suggestions:

- Organizing activities in remembrance of the deceased colleague
- Encouraging thoughtful gestures of sympathy
- Ensuring bereaved employees have time off to attend the funeral — friends of the employee should have the chance to say goodbye
- Holding a special ceremony at the workplace
- Taking up a collection or establishing a memorial fund for the family
- Planting a tree onsite or elsewhere
- Publishing a tribute in the newspaper or company newsletter

## Grief in the workplace



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Few people know how to react when a co-worker is grieving, particularly if grief is over the loss of a loved one. That awkwardness can stem from several things, including:

- Not knowing if the bereaved person wants to expose their pain at work
- Not understanding the grieving process
- Whether or not you are close to the grieving person

Each experience of grief is unique. People who are grieving tend to feel chaotic and out of control as their emotions fluctuate so quickly. From moment to moment, they may experience intense regret, guilt, anger, sadness, depression, relief or anxiety. And, unfortunately, there is no “fix.” Grieving just has to be lived through no matter how long it takes.

Author Alice Koller explains that if grief is over death, to everyone else that death is an event in the past. But for the people who are grieving, the death is only the beginning of a life without their loved one. The grieving process may change over time, may emerge for months and even years, but may never really end. Remember to be sensitive.

### Helping a co-worker cope

Acknowledge your co-worker's grief — even if it feels like you can't find the right words. Because there are no “right words” and words can't soften the pain, what is really important is your effort to connect. A sincere “I'm sorry for your loss” is enough to let your co-worker know you care. However, if a note seems more appropriate than a conversation at the office, trust your instincts and write.

Listen. Listening may take a little more emotional energy, but it is even more valuable than talking. Each time people have a chance to tell their story, they gain a bit more perspective, which usually lessens their stress. If you want to do more, the following are ways you can show your caring. Make your offers simple and direct. Choices can seem overwhelming to someone who is grieving.

### During illness

- Offer to provide a meal or childcare.
- Offer to care for pets or garden.
- Offer to do shopping or other errands.
- Listen and accept any feelings that are expressed.

### Before the funeral

- Offer to house-sit during the funeral (burglary prevention).
- Offer transportation from the airport for out-of-town relatives or friends.
- Offer to provide food.

### After the funeral

- Stay in touch individually or select one person from the office to speak for the group.
- If you're close to the grieving person, offer to share information with other employees. Ask the grieving person what he or she wants co-workers to know.
- Listen if he or she feels like talking.

### Back at work

- Let the person grieve in his/her own way. If diving into work is what's needed, don't attempt to lighten the workload. Or, if moving back into work is going slowly, see if you can ease the workload.
- Accept that moods may be inconsistent for a long time. Intense feelings re-emerge beyond the survivor's control.
- Understand that some people may experience a kind of numbness and their grieving may not begin until months after the death.
- Give your co-worker privacy and confidentiality.
- Avoid being judgmental of how the survivor grieves.
- Don't share stories of your own losses unless you're certain they can tolerate more pain. (If an old grief surfaces in connection with your co-worker's grief, honor it, but not necessarily with your newly grieving co-worker.)

### Respecting your needs

Many people are uncomfortable displaying their emotions publicly. And, many people are uncomfortable responding to open emotions. Be aware that if tears or strong emotions are disquieting to you, you will instinctively move away from a grieving co-worker, and that will make the person feel even more isolated. In order to not increase their feelings of isolation and to respect your own discomfort, consider sending flowers or a card instead of sharing your sympathy face to face.



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