



Supporting your staff after a significant event

Vita Health Group are experienced in delivering support and advice in response to a critical incident or traumatic event in the workplace.

Following an unexpected and/or traumatic event one of the challenges for you as a manager is how to support your employees who have been exposed to potentially distressing situations.

It can be easy to think that you need to jump in and “do something” following a traumatic event, however the best action you can take is to provide calm, compassionate support, focusing first on the practical needs of your team.

Following this, active monitoring is recommended. Active monitoring is an approach that involves carefully monitoring symptoms to see whether they improve or get worse.

An individual may not react immediately or obviously following an incident and symptoms may occur further down the line. The NHS recommend active monitoring because the vast majority of people who develop problems after a traumatic experience get better within a few weeks without treatment.

Faced with situations that may be shocking, disturbing and distressing most people have a typical short-term reaction that may present in some of the following ways:

- Disturbed sleep
- Thoughts of the event
- Sadness
- Blaming self
- Feelings of guilt or anger
- Lack of concentration
- Irritability and impatience around others
Reduced work performance
- Feeling overwhelmed or unable to cope

You may notice that the individual is behaving out of character compared to how they were before the event.

It is likely in most cases symptoms will subside and that individual will return to their usual state with support from you as the Line Manager. This is best done through regular meetings, asking them what they need to feel supported, normalising their current feelings and allowing them to talk. In some circumstances further access to treatment and support may be required.

Mental Health assessment and treatment may be required where an individual has been present during a traumatic incident and experiences the following symptoms, affecting their day-to-day functioning, beyond the first month following the event:

- Recurrent and intrusive distressing recollections of the event – they cannot stop thinking about it even if they try
- Intrusive recollections of the event, appearing as if it is occurring in the present
- Attempting to avoid the thoughts/place where event occurred or any reminder about it
- Having a depressed or low mood and lack of interest in things they used to enjoy
- Continued difficulty sleeping, concentrating and having outbursts of anger
- Hypervigilance and being easily ‘startled’

Remember that you are not expected to be able to diagnose or identify mental health disorders in your employees, but you can be a valuable source of support and guidance to those you line manage.

Our dedicated telephone Helpline is available to provide support and advice to you as a manager, to augment the resources available to you within your organisation.

Finally, remember that if you have also been involved in the incident yourself, you need to look after your own wellbeing –you cannot help others if you are not first looking after yourself.

The following guidance is taken from the UK Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA.org.uk)

During traumatic incidents, an individual is confronted with an extreme situation that presents a direct or perceived threat to their life, safety or wellbeing. The stress, fear, anxiety or shock which is experienced can potentially overwhelm an individual's ability to cope, leading to physical, emotional or psychological harm and disruptive functioning. Trauma can be momentary or experienced over a prolonged or short period of time. It's important to consider that individuals directly or indirectly involved in a traumatic or critical incident can be impacted by these events.

It is important to recognise and acknowledge that the feelings following an event are a natural response to an occurrence which is atypical. During this period, individuals require time to process the experience in order to work through, manage and make sense of what has happened, enabling them to recover and return to their previous state. Most people will see a decrease in these symptoms over the first two to four weeks.

It is reasonable to expect that there may initially be a level of disruption to the company's working practice in the wake of a traumatic event. Managers are generally the first port of call in dealing with crisis situations so it is important that managers are aware of and understand the possible impact of work place traumatic events.

In doing this, there are a number of signs that managers should acknowledge in order to provide appropriate support:

- Anger and irritability possibly leading to arguments or conflicts
- Reduced work performance, due to temporary memory and concentration difficulties
- Feeling tearful, insecure & nervous
- An initial change in work atmosphere and mood of employees
- Avoiding certain areas or tasks
- Requests for time off
- Demonstrating significant difficulties over a prolonged period of six weeks or more

Helping employees to recover and return to business as usual

Managers and HR professionals are a primary point of contact in responding to employee trauma issues. The support which is made available to employees are essential for their treatment, recovery and on-going wellbeing. There are a number of effective ways for managers to engage and offer constructive support:

- Clearly acknowledge that an atypical event has taken place and that time and support is likely to be required. This will help the employee to deal with the situation and return to normal practice.
- Show empathy and understanding for those affected: listen without judgement and avoid making assumptions, ask open questions, including how are things going at the moment, what would be helpful for you right now and who would help you to feel safer or calmer?
- Maintain as normal a routine and structure as possible, making reasonable allowances for those impacted by the incident.
- Identify support options for the employees, for example, enabling them to take a break or continue with their work, or seeking medical attention.
- Provide information on the symptoms employees may expect following a traumatic event, including details on how to seek support. This can be in the form of a leaflet, intranet or your employee assistance programme contact details.
- Differentiate between what needs immediate attention and what is important. Initiate a plan and clear steps to address urgent issues
- Establish a clear Critical Incident Response Procedure (CIRP), which includes defined roles, action plans and communication processes. Train relevant staff in the CIRP and provide channels for feedback, review and adaptation.
- Maintain professional boundaries and be aware of your own needs and limitations.
- Seek advice and support from other teams and departments in your organisation, such as occupational health, human resources or your EAP provider.