



Managing Employees When Disaster Strikes How to Use Your EAP During Times of *Crisis*

In the aftermath of disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, organizations scrambled to restore operations and reach out to employees scattered across the region by evacuations. The devastation wrought by these natural disasters was unprecedented, yet there are crises - such as store robberies, fires and workplace violence - that happen every day and can equally bring business to a halt. In these situations, managers often find themselves torn between the need to restart business and the need to show consideration for employees who have experienced trauma.

Because disaster can strike at any time, it is important to be prepared as a manager both in terms of how to manage employees and how to use the EAP after a traumatic event. Here are some insights and tips.

Stress reactions

Managers should be aware that employees often will have a wide array of reactions to a critical incident, including those that are physical (headaches, nausea), cognitive (difficulty thinking clearly or making decisions), emotional (being angry or wanting to cry) and behavioral (withdrawal or aggression). Following a trauma, it is common to feel fear, rage, vulnerability, sadness and guilt. It also can be difficult to handle aggressive impulses.

To minimize the impact of these reactions, it is important to take care of oneself. The following dos and don'ts are good post-trauma reminders for managers and employees alike.

DO:

- Get enough rest and maintain a good diet/exercise program
- Follow a familiar routine
- Talk to supportive peers and family about the incident
- Take one thing at a time
- Attend meetings regarding the traumatic event
- Spend time with family and friends
- Create a serene place of escape (through imagination or in reality)
- Expect the experience to be bothersome
- Seek professional help if symptoms persist

DON'T:

- Use drugs or alcohol to numb feelings
- Withdraw from significant others
- Reduce leisure activities
- Stay away from work
- Increase caffeine intake
- Look for easy answers
- Take on new major projects or make major changes
- Pretend everything is OK

The role of the manager

In the time following a crisis, employees often will look to managers for guidance and assistance. During this time of chaos, it is important for the manager to draw upon rational thinking skills to provide adequate direction and order to the situation. First and foremost, the manager should ascertain where employees are. Next, it is important to be understanding as employees may be dealing with their own personal realities. And because everyone reacts in their own way, it is essential to manage employees as individuals, not as a team. Finally, after the dust has settled, it is important to maintain structure in the work environment for employees and return to performance management - if a particular employee is having ongoing difficulty meeting his or her work responsibilities, the manager should express concern and remind the employee of the EAP, which can help in the healing process.

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