

Your EAP | Here4TN! for leaders

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**PARTNERS
FOR HEALTH**
EMPLOYEE
ASSISTANCE
PROGRAM

Workplace critical incidents and their effects on employees

A critical incident is an event outside the range of normal human experience that would be distressing to anyone. Examples of critical incidents might include any of the following scenarios:

- The organization is restructured and widespread layoffs are implemented
- A bomb threat is made at the organization
- A group of school children are in a school bus accident with injuries
- A tornado occurs in an area where employees or their family members are affected
- Workers at a road construction site witness the accidental death of one of their co-workers

These types of incidents are rare, but when they occur they often have a profound effect on those involved and those who witness or are otherwise impacted by the event. Supervisors and managers play an important role in their employees' recovery.

Crisis planning is necessary. Critical incidents usually have the following elements in common: they represent a threat to the organization; they occur suddenly and unexpectedly; and they compel leaders to respond very quickly. Today it's necessary to have crisis response plans in place.

Certain trauma effects are common. Depending on the circumstances, exposure to critical incidents can cause employees to experience distress and strong emotional reactions. This can involve physical shock, uneasy or anxious feelings, recurring thoughts about the event, mood changes, restlessness, fatigue and more.

Reaction times and impacts will vary. Leaders need to be aware of the diverse reactions that staff may experience after a critical incident. While some employees are resilient and seem to bounce back quickly, others don't experience the full weight of the event until months later. Some employees may become less productive or be absent more than others. Some may turn to drugs or alcohol to alleviate their discomfort. Some may experience relationship problems.

Common stages of emotion after a crisis

A workplace critical incident involving death, serious injury or other wide-scale trauma can be devastating to the workforce. People's ability to cope with such crises depends on their existing coping skills when facing stress, how serious the trauma was, and how much support they get from family, friends and professionals soon after the crisis. No two people have the same reaction experience, but there are common emotional stages:

- Initial emotions include shock, disbelief, and denial. People may feel temporarily numb and disconnected from life.
- The cascade of ensuing emotions can include fear, confusion, sadness, guilt, shame, anger, frustration and grief.
- In time, once emotions subside, people develop a sense of equilibrium based on the new post-trauma reality.

When you call the ParTNers EAP at **1-855-437-3486**, select option 4 to speak with a Magellan Workplace Support consultant.



The employee assistance program (EAP) is a vital resource.

It's beneficial to both employees and leaders to engage the counseling support of the ParTNers EAP. Accessible 24/7, the EAP's professional clinicians are trained to help work teams overcome the distressing physical and emotional effects of trauma. If a critical incident occurs, encourage your employees to take advantage of the EAP, not as a reflection of weakness or illness, but as a way of preserving their health and well-being.

Steps to take after a critical incident

When a crisis occurs in your workplace, there are a number of steps you can take as a leader to help staff deal with the trauma and move toward recovery and the return to typical work routines.

- **Focus on staff's well-being.** Quickly move all employees from the vicinity of the trauma to a safe location. Conduct an informal "defusing" meeting to help bring closure to the incident. Allow employees to express any immediate concerns.
- **Access existing crisis resources.** Activate your organization's established plan for communicating during emergencies. Be aware that professional counselors from your ParTNers EAP are available to assist you every step of the way.
- **Be in charge but flexible.** Your professional yet compassionate attitude in addressing the traumatic event will help staff better handle their distress. Role-model the behavior you would want to see in your employees. Inform employees about the actions you and the organization are taking, and what the employees need to do.
- **Expect a range of intense reactions.** Be prepared for employees to exhibit emotions such as shock, disbelief, denial and depression over the event. Help them know that overwhelming distress is a normal reaction to a crisis.
- **Don't trivialize employees' reactions.** Avoid making statements such as, "I know how you feel" or "Everything will be all right." These statements can make some people think that you're not fully acknowledging their experiences.
- **Arrange for support as soon as possible.** Remember that the professionals at your ParTNers EAP are available at any time to assist those affected by trauma. They can provide group debriefings and individual counseling to help prevent severe post-traumatic stress reactions.
- **Take care of yourself.** It is also important that you look after your own mental and physical health. A critical incident can affect you just as deeply as it does your staff.

Supporting your employees

After a crisis, your employees need to know that you and the organization support them and are there to help them. Here are some ways in which you can help employees cope:

- Give employees a chance to talk about what they experienced during the crisis.
- Remind employees to look after their daily needs—such as eating regular meals and resting—rather than dwelling only on the incident.
- Remind employees that EAP counselors are available to help them. Ideally, you should contact your EAP in advance so they are aware of what your employees have experienced.
- Allow flexibility with employees' schedules and time off.
- Provide information about coping with stress or dealing with grief.
- Since there can be delayed reactions encourage them to seek continued counseling as needed.
- Remind employees that the EAP is a confidential resource, and they have up to five counseling sessions available at no cost to them.