

SUPPORTING STAFF IMPACTED BY A CRITICAL INCIDENT



AWARENESS

As a manager or supervisor, you will sometimes be required to support employees following a personal crisis or critical incident. On these occasions, it is important to be vigilant for signs of stress overload, noting that the range and type of reactions and coping may be dependent on cultural and social differences. Common stress responses include:

- > Anger
- > Frustration
- > Irritability & interpersonal conflict
- > Withdrawal/isolation
- > Difficulty concentrating
- > Disorganisation
- > Feeling out of control
- > Physical complaints

These may be evidenced in the workplace through the following:

- > Confusion
- > Forgetfulness
- > Difficulty concentrating
- > Decreases in productivity
- > Attendance issues
- > Increases in accidents on the job

SUPPORT

Encourage a supportive work environment for a period of time after the crisis to enhance health and well being among employees. This can be done by:

- > Encouraging team work and cooperation
- > Confirming your support
- > Being available if an affected employee needs assistance

COMMUNICATION

Communicating with employees is pivotal in moving them through the recovery process. Aim to provide a supportive environment so that they feel comfortable discussing their concerns with you if needed. This can be achieved by:

- > Making yourself available to employees for confidential & non-judgmental discussions about their concerns
- > Acknowledging that this is a difficult time for some people and it's OK to share feelings of anxiety, fatigue or frustration
- > Negotiating realistic, meaningful contributions they can continue to make at work, coupled with expressions of optimism regarding return to full participation in due course
- > Monitoring and following up with them

COMMUNICATION

Your understanding and presence are the most important resources during this time. Following is a list of basic supportive communication skills to guide you in talking with employees:

- > Actively listen to employees when telling you about their experiences. Show empathy and understanding when they are speaking
- > You can communicate your understanding of what they have said by feeding back key aspects to them
- > Do not try to fix the problem but acknowledge it and offer support
- > Avoid comparisons such as “I know just how you feel because my brother...”. It is more important to focus on the other person’s experience
- > Avoid statements, although well intended, that may trivialise or devalue an employee’s experience or feelings – e.g. “I know how you feel” or “Everything will be just fine”

MODERATING STRESS

As affected employees may already be highly stressed and exhausted, it is important to be aware of additional stresses in the workplace which may lead to compounding distress and burnout. A failure to attend to this may result in decreased work performance or employee morale, burnout, conflict situations, absenteeism and possibly attrition. Consider the following steps in moderating workplace stress:

- > Be vigilant to signs of stress in employees
- > Identify potential sources of stress and attempt to reduce or eliminate these where possible
- > Take steps to prevent accidents and illness
- > Maintain a sense of routine so that employees feel some sense of control over their environment

IDENTIFYING RESOURCES

Identify potential resources available to employees if help is needed. These may include:

- > For emergencies Lifeline—13 11 14; or Emergency Services—000
- > Encouraging staff to talk to their social supports and to consult with their GP
- > UQ’s Employee Assistance Provider – Davidson Trahaire Corpsych (phone **1300 360 364**) for free, confidential counselling support
- > UQ’s staff website (note link to “*Disaster Information for Staff*”)
- > HR consultants
- > UQ’s Staff Support Rehabilitation Advisor (phone 3365 1146)
- > Manager Assist—for free, confidential advice for supervisors, regarding staff support (phone 1300 360 346)

SELF-CARE

Don’t underestimate the impact of stress on you as an individual. Take care of yourself too.