

Responding to traumatic events that affect the workplace



How an Employee Assistance Program can help see to workers' well-being while minimizing the business disruption in the aftermath of a critical incident

Stories of natural disasters, crimes, accidents and other tragedies fill the daily news. While the media glare tends to focus on the human toll, businesses are often among the victims, left to grapple with the aftermath as they try to regain their foothold.

Business leaders have to walk a fine line between helping employees deal with trauma and restoring their workplaces to normal as quickly as possible. And today, with employees sharing news, comments, photos and video on social media, responding appropriately is more important than ever.

Fortunately, employers don't have to balance those burdens alone. Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) offer critical incident response services that can provide guidance and support for both employees and managers following a critical incident. It's important to understand how this resource works and when to call on it.

Traumatic events are sources of workplace disruption

Employees and managers alike often experience emotional and even physical reactions to events in the workplace, as well as in their communities. The potential reach of such events is huge, as recent statistics suggest:



While some critical incidents — workforce reductions, for example — leave room for planning, most critical incidents occur suddenly and without warning. Employers, then, need to be prepared to respond at any time.

What is a “critical incident?”

A critical incident is defined by the impact it has on individuals. It is an event that poses an actual or perceived threat to an employee's well-being or someone close to that employee. It may also be an event that produces a strong emotional response that temporarily overwhelms an employee's ability to cope.

The most common reasons employers contact critical response services are:

- Employee deaths
- Downsizing or closings
- Suicide by employee or employee's family member
- Crime in the workplace, such as robbery
- Workplace accidents

Evaluating employee reaction

Fires, storms and other disruptive events obviously fall into the “critical incident” category. In many cases, though, the severity and consequences of events that affect employee well-being aren’t always clear.

Such events include: an employee dies at home, an employee’s spouse commits suicide, a shooting happens in a nearby mall, rumors of a pending merger are spreading. It may be difficult to judge whether, and to what extent, managers and employees have been affected. There are, however, some telltale signs that a situation needs to be addressed:

- Declining productivity and apparent difficulty concentrating among employees
- Increased absenteeism
- Increased concerns about personal safety
- Irritability, anger or tearfulness
- Complaints about loss of appetite, headaches, shivering or rapid heart rates
- A sense that employees or managers are highly uncomfortable or overwhelmed
- Increased attrition

If managers notice any of these, it’s important to acknowledge and address them in a non-threatening, non-judgmental way. The EAP critical incident team can help with a plan to support employees and return the workplace to its normal level of productivity.

Critical incident checklist



Here are a few questions for management to consider when assessing a situation:

- Did employees witness or experience a highly unusual and/or stressful event?
- Were employees in danger, or did they believe they were in danger?
- Did an employee suffer serious injury or die unexpectedly?
- Did the police, fire department or other emergency workers respond?
- Has the event been called a “crisis,” “tragedy,” “catastrophe,” “disaster,” or “terrorism”?
- Has there been media coverage of the event?

A critical incident occurs. Here's what to expect from the EAP

Upon contacting EAP, employers are immediately connected to a professional with critical incident response experience. He or she asks questions to evaluate what's happened, what's needed immediately and how to respond over the days that follow. One option is on-site assistance for employees and managers.

Depending on the type and intensity of the event, the critical incident responder or response team may appear on site within a few hours. More commonly though, there is a short wait of 24 to 72 hours. Workers may be in shock in the immediate aftermath of a critical event and may not benefit from interacting with a professional responder right away. Depending on circumstances, the responder may stay for several hours, an entire day, or sometimes longer.

Responders are licensed clinicians — psychologists, social workers, marriage and family therapists, and professional counselors — who are trained in critical response. The purpose of on-site visits, though, is to comfort and educate, not to provide counseling or therapy.

The responders may conduct sessions with employees — sometimes jointly with managers — to review common reactions (emotional and physical responses felt by others who experienced similar events) and discuss coping strategies. Attendance is encouraged but not mandatory. The goal is to help employees realize that their reactions are understandable, reasonable, and likely temporary.

A responder may meet with a smaller group of workers (typically two to 12), on a voluntary basis, to provide an opportunity for them to share their feelings. The responder may also meet one-on-one with individuals who prefer anonymity or are uncomfortable in group settings.

Responders remind employees of the various services provided by EAP, including the availability of referrals for individual counseling sessions. They encourage leadership to continue to communicate the availability of EAP telephonic or face-to-face counseling afterward, too.



Critical incident response in action

Responding quickly to employees in distress



The Optum EAP received a call from a property management company the day after a resident in one of its apartment buildings was murdered. The victim was stabbed in the building's parking lot and dragged back to his apartment. Several employees witnessed the crime (the perpetrator was arrested). The employer requested immediate on-site assistance.



Optum quickly dispatched a trained critical incident specialist. In the meantime, Optum sent the property manager several articles and brochures on coping with random acts of violence and addressing trauma.



The responder arrived that afternoon and spent three hours meeting with office staff. The responder returned the following day, at the employer's request, to talk with the maintenance staff for two hours.



The property manager later reported that the services were greatly needed and very helpful. She said she felt much better after having offered them to employees.

Avoid these common mistakes

In today's world, mishandling a crisis will not only upset employees, but it could also lead to damaging publicity and reputational harm. News organizations regularly scan and check social media to gather information and find sources. A post from an employee on Facebook, Google+, Twitter, or elsewhere can have very negative repercussions.

Some of the common mistakes employers make include:

MISTAKE 1

Ignoring the situation

"We're OK overall. I don't think we need any special help." That's the assessment managers frequently make of their workers in the wake of a crisis. It's probably inaccurate. Just because employees seem fine, don't assume they don't have questions or concerns. Few managers know how to assess the impact of a traumatic event. It's better to leave that to the EAP mental health professionals.

MISTAKE 2

Delaying response

Waiting several hours or days to call EAP in the hope that "things will work themselves out" is a risky strategy. Contacting EAP is not a sign of managerial weakness, a suggestion that "we goofed" or an acknowledgment of blame. Rather, it takes true leadership to understand the value of an on-site response and bring in the proper resources.

MISTAKE 3

Stifling communication

It's far better to cultivate a workplace culture that encourages employees to report or discuss bad news or negative feelings that may affect day-to-day functioning and job performance. Employees need to talk about these significant events, and they will, with or without employer support. Bringing in an EAP professional to guide those discussions can help employees focus on resilience and positive coping mechanisms.

MISTAKE 4

Misunderstanding the purpose of a response team

The goal of on-site critical incident response is to support multiple workers affected by a traumatic event. Issues such as conflicts between two employees, poor job performance and sexual harassment claims should all be taken seriously and can be addressed by EAP services. Those are not, however, considered "critical incidents" necessitating an on-site visit.

Critical incident response gets results

According to several research studies, when properly delivered, critical incident response services help decrease symptoms such as severe stress experienced by individuals following a workplace trauma. And, while more research is needed, studies suggest that when integrated with other behavioral health programs, these services help reduce absences and disability and workers' compensation claims after a critical event.⁵

Make communication part of emergency response planning

Most plans address loss of, or disruption to, facilities, technology, and the supply chain due to power outages, floods, or other events. Alternate work sites for continuing business operations are typically included, along with plans for mission-critical tasks necessary to meeting customer obligations. But a key piece of the puzzle — the human element — is often missing.

If employees are unwilling to work in the aftermath of a crisis, it doesn't matter where the alternate location is. Operations will screech to a halt. So, plans must include how companies will communicate with and comfort their workforce after a crisis. That's where the EAP comes in.

A few planning tips:

Start with a written plan.

Preparation starts here, but it certainly doesn't end here. Whether it is called an emergency response plan or business continuity plan, it should spell out roles and responsibilities for dealing with a crisis. The plan should designate the safety officer, property manager or other leader as a point person who will coordinate the response and be the EAP contact. And, importantly, it should periodically — at least twice a year — be reviewed and updated.

Not sure where to start?

The EAP can help develop plans for managing employee communications following a critical incident. Companies may find it useful to consult templates available online at government agencies such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Government agencies also offer educational tools and other resources..

Train and test.

In order for the plan to make a real difference, managers should be trained to recognize the telltale signs of a critical incident listed above. Employers should also conduct annual emergency drills — such as practicing evacuating in case of a fire or natural disaster, or locking down in the event of an active shooter on the premises — coordinated by the point person.

Connecting with EAP immediately after critical events can make a huge difference in helping employees get back on their feet and minimizing workplace disruption. It also marks the employer as one who understands that investment in “human capital” is not only essential to success, it's the right thing to do.

Critical incident response bridges the path to normalcy

Feedback from Optum EAP customers reflects their gratitude to critical incident responders and confirms that the interventions provided solace to employees.

“The initial day of services went very well. The responders were busy the entire time. It was so successful and the employees were so pleased that we scheduled follow-up services. We were very grateful for both counselors who came to our site. They really helped us through a difficult situation.”

“We were very satisfied with the responders who were on-site. They arrived quickly, even though we requested help on short notice on both days. Both responders were very professional. Our colleagues were very appreciative of the services ... Colleagues felt cared for. This has been a hard hit to our team, and the critical response services helped us make our colleagues more at ease.”

Optum experts in EAP and critical incident response

Zachary Meyer

Senior Vice President, Wellbeing & Employee Assistance Programs, Optum

Zachary Meyer has decades of health care experience and an extensive background in developing innovative solutions and creating customer value in the EAP, work/life, and well-being arena.

Meyer began his health care career managing process improvement and quality management efforts in several large health care systems. From there, he moved into a series of senior leadership roles in national firms in the areas of behavioral health, EAP and work/life, health and wellness and absence management services. He was also a consultant in policy, system and environmental change that promotes healthier living wherever people work, live, learn, and play.

Joseph Hullett, M.D.

National Medical Director, Optum

Joseph Hullett, M.D., is responsible for helping Fortune 500 employers and consultants develop innovative and cost-effective behavioral health and wellness solutions that keep people healthy and productive. He also works to promote community awareness of mental health issues.

Dr. Hullett has been a board-certified psychiatrist for 25 years. He has spent most of his career in executive medical leadership roles with national firms, working to improve the integration of physical and mental health care and to increase the availability of behavioral health tools in the workplace. He has designed and implemented innovative programs to improve behavioral health services for large public and private employer groups as well as commercial and publically funded health plans.

Dr. Hullett was an assistant professor in residence at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where he taught and published psycho-biological research. He later served as an assistant professor at the University of California, Irvine, where he opened and directed an inpatient clinical research unit and served as chief of forensics.

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To find out more about our EAP and critical incident response services, please email us at info@optum.com or call us at 1-866-386-3404.



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