

Coping with Traumatic Events

A Toolkit for Staff in Times of Crisis



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Human experience is often marked by moments of crisis. Some crises are experienced at a personal level, organizational level, or societal or global level. They come in various forms – natural disaster, pandemics, conflicts, economic downturns, and personal loss and hardships.

When facing moments of crisis, taking action helps us regain a sense of control. By seeking the right support and engaging in healthy activities, we can get through these periods and emerge even more resilient and productive, and have energy and creativity to face any future challenge.

Stress response and how it can affect you

The stress response or “fight, flight or freeze” response is the emergency reaction system of the body. The human stress response is similar in disasters, violence, and trauma; certain situations and conditions can impact the severity of our response to these situations (see Risk and Resiliency below). Each person’s reality in times of crisis is unique, however there are some common responses to traumatic events.



EMOTIONAL

Emotional responses can include: sadness, denial, fear, shock, guilt, shame, helplessness, denial, loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities, lower motivation.



INTERPERSONAL

Interpersonal reactions may include: performance concerns or problems at work or school, irritability, disinterest in intimacy, feeling abandoned, increased conflict with others.



PHYSICAL

Physical responses may include: fast heart rate, dizziness, fatigue, tension, insomnia, body aches and weakness, weight loss/gain, startling easily, changes in appetite, nausea, changes in sex drive, high blood pressure, frequent urination, diarrhea, light headache, hot flashes and dry throat.



BEHAVIORAL

Behavioral responses may include: withdrawal, poor hygiene, neglect, sexual problems, sleeping, fidgeting, reckless spending, smoking, bad eating habits, increased alcohol use.

More severe reactions to distressful events include nightmares, flashbacks, absence of emotion, increased substance use, panic attacks, extreme agitation, and violence.

Severity of stress reaction can be impacted by risk and resiliency factors listed below.

- Experiencing a disaster first-hand increases risk of lasting impact. However, those who are close to victims, experience impact in their community, or are exposed to news stories of the event(s) can also experience stress or a trauma response.
- Typically, traumatic events and disasters are more stressful to those who are caring for others in distress, are juggling multiple responsibilities or stressors, were not well prior to the incident, experienced threat to life during the incident, suffered significant property loss and/or were displaced or separated from family as a result of the situation or event.
- Those who fare better following a traumatic event or disaster are those who have social supports and can access practical assistance or resources post-disaster or a traumatic event. In particular, those who manage the impact of a crisis well can identify with one or more of the following - that their responses are normal, they have confidence that the situation will improve, or are able to see that they have some control over the future.



After a traumatic event, it is helpful to:

Review what you know about stress, trauma, and coping. Avoid being in denial; allow yourself to cry if need be. It is okay to expect the incident to bother you. It is also important to remind yourself you may be experiencing normal reactions to abnormal events.

Communicate. It is helpful to talk about your experiences, feelings, and reactions to the incident with people you know and trust. Talk about the specifics of the event with your friends, family and co-workers – tell them it's important for you to talk it out. Do not, however, let people try to force you to talk about the event. It needs to be on your own terms.

Practice stress management and relaxation techniques. Help yourself relax by doing things you enjoy. This can include reading, writing, physical activities, visiting some beautiful places, listening to music, or watching movies. You can also set aside some time to experiment with various relaxation techniques including therapeutic massage, yoga and warm baths.

Get plenty of rest. Take adequate time to rest even if you can't sleep. Remember that sleep disturbances and change in sleeping patterns are common with trauma.

Eat good, well-balanced meals. Eat regularly even if you're not hungry. Drink lots of water and avoid excess caffeine or alcohol.

Write about your experiences and reactions. Without overthinking it, write down your thoughts. Research have shown that it can be therapeutic to write about your experiences and feelings after distressing events.



Be intentional about readjusting to work. Try to maintain a normal routine but avoid tasks and activities that are too demanding or require intense concentration.

Make decisions about routine daily events. Make decisions about your normal routine and activities as much as possible. This will help bring back some feeling of control over your life.

Maintain social activities to avoid isolating yourself. Structure your day so that you spend some time alone and some time with others. Spending time with family and friends can be important and may help you feel less isolated.

Avoid making any big life decisions or changes. Don't make decisions about things like quitting your job or getting a divorce immediately after a traumatic event. You are probably not at your best, and it is not ideal to make critical decisions at this time.

Get help from a mental health professional. Contact a counsellor or therapist if you feel especially overwhelmed or in need of some extra support during this time.



How can I support a family member?

Family can be a great support in times of crisis and trauma. Here are some tips on support that you can give as a family member.

- **Listen.** Encourage openness and listen to whatever they need to say, however many times it needs to be said. Avoid giving advice, just listen. Avoid minimizing. Remember, this person needs to tell, and may need to repeat their story.
- **Contain your reactions.** Maintain focus on what actually occurred and how the person is feeling.
- **Encourage the family member to go back to work (if it is safe to do so).** Although they may feel like quitting, it will not change what has already happened and may prevent full recovery.
- **Include the whole family in the healing process.** Include all family members in discussions so that they can gain perspective and cope with their feelings as well as the person affected. Remember that children also need to be part of the healing process. (Please find resources for communicating with children after a traumatic event on the next page.)
- **Watch for signs of strain in your relationship.** An incident can intensify problems in the relationship, whether new or pre-existing. Family members can access counseling through your employee assistance program.
- **Take care of yourself.** You will be able to best support someone if you are eating well, getting enough sleep, and asking friends and other family members to help.



Supporting children through times of crisis

During times of crisis or trauma, it is important that children are also provided with the right support. Communicating is very important, and the way things are communicated is even more important. Click on the links below to access some tips on supporting and communicating with children.

[Explaining the News to Our Kids \(Common Sense Media\)](#)

[Helping Children Cope with Frightening News \(Child Mind Institute\)](#)

[Helping Children Cope with Terrorism: Tips for Families and Educators \(National Association of School Psychologists\)](#)

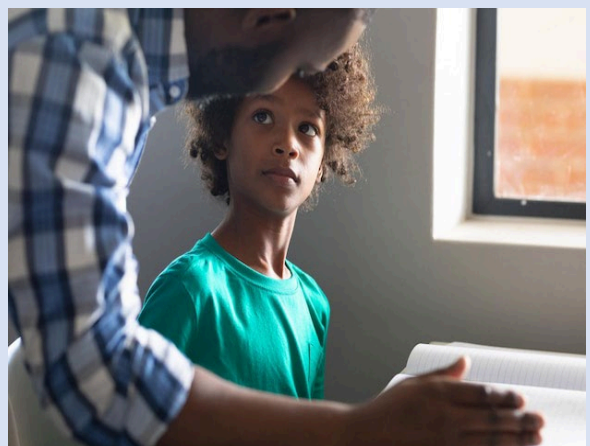
[Helping Children Cope After a Traumatic Event \(Child Mind Institute\)](#)

[How to Support Your Child's Resilience in a Time of Crisis \(Healthy Children\)](#)

[Talking to Children About Disasters \(American Academy of Pediatrics\)](#)

[Talking to Children About Tragedies \(American Academy of Pediatrics\)](#)

[Talking to Children About Violence: Tips for Parents and Teachers \(National Association of School Psychologists\)](#)



We spend a substantial amount of time with our coworkers. For many, work is a place where they find purpose. Receiving support at your place of work can also be beneficial when experiencing trauma. Here are some tips on how you can support as a coworker.

Acknowledge the event. Don't pretend it didn't happen. Be an attentive listener. Don't ask a lot of questions; let your co-worker set the pace.

Listen and empathize. One of the most important ways to support a colleague going through a crisis is to listen to them and empathize with their feelings. Listening means giving them your full attention, avoiding interruptions, and asking open-ended questions to show interest and understanding. Empathizing means expressing your sympathy, validating their emotions, and refraining from giving unsolicited advice or criticism.

Offer long-term support. There is no set recovery period for traumatic experiences.

Offer practical support. An invite to lunch or an offer of a ride home can help.

Be observant. Sometimes, a colleague may not openly share their situation with you, but you may notice some changes in their behavior, mood, or performance. For example, they may seem distracted, irritable, withdrawn, or less productive than usual. These signs may indicate that they are struggling with a personal problem and need some compassion and flexibility. During this time, acknowledge that they are going through a tough time and offer your support if they need it.



Tips for managers to support staff during times of crisis

Crisis and traumatic events can affect the well-being and performance of employees. Examples include accidents, violence, natural disasters, or health emergencies. As an organizational leader, you have a key role in supporting your employees during and after such events. Here are some tips on how to do that effectively..

Recognize the impact

Different employees may react differently to a critical incident, depending on their personal and professional background, their coping skills, and their level of exposure to the event. Some common reactions include shock, anger, fear, sadness, guilt, or numbness. These are normal and understandable responses to an abnormal situation. However, if they persist or interfere with daily functioning, they may indicate a need for professional help. As a leader, you should be aware of the signs of distress and offer empathy, compassion, and respect to your employees.

Communicate clearly

Communication is vital during and after crisis. You should provide accurate and timely information about the event, the actions taken, and the resources available. You should also create a safe and supportive environment for your employees to express their feelings, concerns, and questions. You should listen actively, acknowledge their emotions, and avoid judging or minimizing their experiences.

Provide support and resources

Your employees may need different types of support and resources depending on their situation and needs. You should offer flexible and reasonable accommodations, such as adjusting work schedules, assignments, or deadlines. You should also encourage your employees to take care of themselves physically, mentally, and emotionally, by getting enough rest, eating well, exercising, and seeking social support. If your team's work involves looking at images or reading stories from the conflict, alternate who gets those assignments. Also, to the extent possible, allow people to keep working on their passion projects and not just focus on the crisis.

Additionally, you should refer your employees to appropriate professional services, such as employee assistance programs, counseling, or crisis intervention, if needed.



How can managers support employees through times of crisis?

Follow up and monitor

The recovery process from a crisis may take time and vary from person to person. As a leader, you should follow up and monitor your employees' well-being and performance regularly. Schedule one-on-ones with your staff. If you are meeting regularly, you will identify issues and find solutions before they escalate. Having a pre-scheduled appointment normalizes the interaction rather than making the employee wonder what they are doing wrong if you ask to meet with them unscheduled.

You should provide feedback, recognition, and appreciation for their efforts and achievements. You should also check in on their coping strategies, challenges, and needs, and offer ongoing support and resources. You should also be alert for any signs of prolonged or severe distress, such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, or post-traumatic stress disorder, and seek help accordingly.

Learn and improve

Times of crisis can also be an opportunity for learning and improvement. As a leader, you should evaluate the effectiveness of your response to the event, and identify the strengths and weaknesses of your organization's policies, procedures, and systems. You should also solicit feedback from your employees, and involve them in developing and implementing solutions and improvements. You should also review and update your emergency preparedness and crisis management plans, as well as conduct regular training and drills.

Involve employees in decision making

In times of great uncertainty and stress, employees usually appreciate leaders who seek their opinions, invite them to raise critical issues immediately, include them in discussions when decisions are made to address the crisis, and organize regular open forums for them to ask questions and share thoughts.



Practice and create a culture of self-care

During a crisis, remember that you are being affected, too. You may be experiencing primary trauma (lost a loved one in the conflict), secondary trauma (affected by images you have seen on the news) or vicarious trauma (you are identifying with the suffering of others.) You should demonstrate resilience, optimism, and confidence in yourself, your team, and your organization. You should also show gratitude, humility, and compassion for your employees, your stakeholders, and your community.

Model, as a manager, that getting help for yourself is normal. You should learn to communicate your own feelings and expectations, and model healthy coping behaviors. You should improve your self-awareness and seek your own support and resources, while taking care of your own well-being and performance. By doing so, you can inspire and motivate your employees, and foster a positive and productive organizational culture.

Lastly, create a culture of self-care. It's more effective to consider self-care a regular part of a workplace routine than a complete departure from it. Recognizing self-care within the organization can make a huge difference for leaders and employees during times of crisis.

What to avoid following a traumatic event

- Do not require employees to share their stories or participate in debriefing activities.
- Avoid simple reassurances such as "everything will be all right." Instead, ask how you can help or access help.
- Do not require employees to participate in remembrance or related post-incident events – this may cause stress or retrigger difficult emotional responses.



The loss of loved ones and grieving impact each aspect of our lives. Grief is one of the most painful things we'll experience in our lifetime. If your colleague is grieving a death or loss, the impact on co-workers can significantly affect the workplace. It can be challenging for colleagues and managers to know how best to support grieving employees.

- Managers need to acknowledge their employee's loss during this critical period by being flexible and understanding.
- Allow the individual grieving a loss to decide whether they wish to talk about it with you, and ask for permission before you share the news of an employee's loss with team members.

Returning to work after a loss

- Discuss your loss with your manager before returning to work, so you can agree on a plan of how you will integrate back into the workplace. Being honest about your feelings and how you are coping will help them to better support you.
- Set expectations around your privacy with your manager. Management may want to notify your team members of your loss.
- Consider how you will deal with moments when reality hits you. Be intentional about taking breaks to process your feelings.
- Prepare for how you will respond when people around you are at a loss for what to say to you. There may be awkward moments when colleagues may say some things, trying to be helpful but strike a nerve instead. They probably mean well, but just don't know how best to articulate it.
- Even if you think you can manage your emotions by yourself, talking with someone can help. A therapist can help you identify and practice problem-solving skills to help you get things back in order, which can help relieve any residual stress you may be feeling.



How to support a grieving colleague

Offer support and respect privacy. Some people may appreciate your involvement and assistance, while others may prefer to keep their personal matters private or deal with them on their own. You should follow their cues and signals and not pressure them to share more than they are comfortable with. You should also respect their confidentiality and not gossip or spread rumors about their situation. Additionally, you should avoid being overbearing or intrusive, and give them some space and time to cope and heal.

Try not to avoid contact with the person who is struggling with a loss. You could say something as simple as “I was sorry to hear about your loss” and allow the griever to simply respond with “thank you” or take the opportunity to talk about their loss.

Make their return to work easier; adjust your expectations for grieving employees and give them time to readjust to work.

Touch base with them about how they are feeling a week after they have returned and a month after their loss.



Verbal and non-verbal communication is important when dealing with grief and loss. Words matter when trying to support an individual or group going through grief and loss. Here are some examples of unhelpful comments and helpful alternatives for when you want to offer support but can't seem to find the words.

Do not say:

I know just how you feel. It is God's will.

You can always have more children (or at least you have more children).

He/she/they had a very full life. Be strong.

Something good always comes out of tragedy (or every cloud has a silver lining).

They are better off. Call me if you need me.

You must be strong for your children.

Instead say:

I am so sorry.

I know this is very painful for you. He/she/they was very special.

I know you will miss her/him/them. Take all the time you need.

<Hug>/or This must be very hard.

<Silence> Listen

We will all miss her/him/them.

I will call you tomorrow. In the meantime, if you need me, here is my number.,

How are you managing with the children. Do you need some "downtime?" Can I help?



You can get therapy

Check with your insurance to see what mental health resources are available. You can also research therapists at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us> and filter by location and type of insurance.

If you would rather have therapy sessions in the comfort of your own home, that is possible too. Most therapists offer Telemental Health visits too.

Other tools to support your mental health

Headspace app with relaxation and meditation exercises. Enroll [here](#) using your personal, not MSF email address.

Yoga is beneficial to mental health. For those who would rather do something more active Yoga can be a great activity. Look up Yoga classes near you.

Take an anonymous online **mental health test** thanks to Mental Health America: <https://screening.mhanational.org/>

Unfortunately, in times of crisis, substance abuse and family violence may increase. In an **emergency**, call 911

Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: call or text 988

Crisis Line for LGBTQ Youth (**Trevor Project**) call 1-866-488-7386 or text START to 678-678

National Domestic Violence Hotline : call 1-800-799-7233 or text START to 88788



Avoid Substance Abuse

Under stress, normal coping mechanisms can turn into excess.

SAMHSA's **Helpline** provides information and referral on substance abuse treatment, 24 hours/day, 365 days/year in English and Spanish: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

12 Step recovery programs, offer free in-person or online meetings several times a day in most cities.

Alcoholics Anonymous has a [free app](#) to find a meeting near you, either in-person or online.

[Narcotics Anonymous](#)

[Overeaters Anonymous](#)

[Al-Anon](#) meetings are for family and friends of alcoholics and addicts supporting each other.

