



# Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

The Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS) is part of the Department of Psychiatry, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences

## MANAGING A WORKPLACE OR AN ORGANIZATION AFTER A CRISIS

Disasters that impact the workplace, whether natural or human-made, create unusual challenges for management. You and your staff may be impacted by its effects. Emotional stress, physical injury, grief, and disruption of normal routines may limit the availability and energy of your work group. At the same time, the group may face new responsibilities — caring for its own members and facilitating community recovery. Besides meeting customers' special needs for assistance following a crisis, personnel may have other unique requirements and stressors. Much of the human suffering associated with a disaster happens after the event itself, and can be mitigated by effective management. The following can help you structure your response.

**Take care of your people first.** First, locate your staff and assure that they and their families have medical care and other necessities so they can be effective in the workplace. This task will be easier if you have planned for it in advance. Modify office rules and procedures that are counterproductive after a crisis. Dress codes, rules about children in the office, and restrictions on using telephones for personal business, for example, may need to be adjusted in the post-crisis period.

**Take steps to prevent accidents and illness.** Reinstate training for emergency response and communications for help. People who are exhausted often forget to take necessary steps to prevent injury and illness. Reminders and retraining can be valuable. Review the workplace for physical risks recognizing that attention and energy will be less than usual.

**Prevent overwork and exhaustion.** After an initial crisis period during which overwork may be necessary, develop procedures to assure that employees do not work too many hours without rest. It is particularly important to prevent the overwork and exhaustion that can occur as people throw themselves into new tasks and responsibilities.

Exhaustion and lack of sleep can decrease alertness, impair judgment, and make people more vulnerable to accidents. Establish work and rest times. Rest is best when it is away from work unless safety at work is greater.

**Attempt to provide adequate staffing** for any new responsibilities created after the crisis and for usual responsibilities that become more demanding as a result of the crisis. Prior planning and cross-training can make a big difference. Set clear priorities, including identifying work that

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simply will not be done in the short term. Be sure that no employee has an essential task that no one else knows how to do, or that person will surely be overworked.

**Train managers to monitor their subordinates.** Ensure that personnel are not working excessive hours, and check for signs of exhaustion.

In stressful times, leaders and highly dedicated employees are more likely to overwork than other personnel. It may seem ironic but, after a crisis, senior leaders need to pay more attention to the conscientious individuals who normally need the least supervisory attention. Point out to subordinate leaders that they need to model healthy behaviors; this will help them monitor their own tendencies to overwork.

**Encourage and facilitate healthy, safe behavior.** Remind employees of the importance of getting adequate sleep and rest, drinking enough water, and taking whatever precautions are necessary in the environment.

Most people are resilient and will recover from their traumatic experiences. To facilitate the recovery process, individuals often need to talk about what they have gone through, compare their reactions with those of others, exchange information, and provide one another with support and consolation.

The most effective way is usually to make it easy for people to do it when they feel ready, not to pressure them to talk about the traumatic situation at a time when they feel the need to be silent.

Provide an informal break area where employees can gather for snacks or lunch and spend a little time talking with their co-workers. Whenever possible, try to keep established work groups together to build on the strength of existing ties among co-workers. If an employee must work alone or with strangers, find a way for them to communicate with the larger organization, get information about how their co-workers are faring, and be assured they are still part of the group.

If you have a mental health caregiver such as an employee assistance professional (EAP), make that person available in an informal way to talk with employees where they work. Most people will not need extensive personal counseling, but will appreciate information and advice about issues such as how to deal with their children's reactions to the crisis. A few people may need more extensive mental health assistance. EAPs are traditionally well informed and resourceful about locating professional care for those who need it.

