

SUPPORTING PEOPLE IN COMMUNITIES AFFECTED BY FLOODS & NATURAL DISASTERS

Hints for Managers

At times of extreme weather and other natural disasters, your employees may be affected by these events in many ways: some will be feeling the impact directly, through evacuations and the damage or loss to homes and property; others may also be affected indirectly, through impacts on colleagues, friends and family, or by constant news coverage on the subject.

Managers have a duty of care to maintain an awareness of, and to provide some level of support for, their employees' psychological health. By acting as a support, managers can reduce risk in their workplace.

Distressing events such as floods demand significant emotional and mental energy. At a time of immediate physical threat, adrenalin helps the body to act. An initial emotional reaction to a natural disaster may be one of shock; this will mask the real emotions hiding under the surface. Following these events, people may display a lot of emotion and feel emotionally and physically exhausted.

During a natural disaster how can a manager act to fulfil their responsibility for an individual's overall health at work?

The following tips outline key components of psychological first aid; this information acts as a useful checklist for an organisational response that is aimed at reducing risk and improving the health of employees.

1. PROVIDE PRACTICAL AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Managers or Team Leaders need to personally check with the person regarding their concerns and their need for support. It is useful to ask them what form this support would take from their perspective. As they are emotionally stretched, they may be worried about a range of factors from their job security after the disaster, to their health, to impacts on fellow workers, to concerns about damage to property or to their livelihood.

Support for concerned employees is best shown by personal contact, not just a card or a formal letter; by listening and giving them permission to express their feelings and experiences; and by respecting their own individual way of dealing with the emotions.

There are many ways that practical support can be expressed and provided to those suffering from direct effects of traumatic events, which often galvanise the teams and affected communities into action.

2. PROVIDE INFORMATION

There are two forms of information that need to be provided at this stage:

- Organisational
- Health related

Firstly, the employee needs to know all the practical information that is related to their employment such as direct impacts of a natural disaster on their day to day work; any impact on their leave entitlements; information about relevant policies and processes; etc.

Secondly, it is important to provide them with the information relating to the normal reactions to experiencing traumatic events. This could be done via a handout.

Alternatively, this support could be provided by an appropriately qualified person, either by phone or in a face-face meeting. It is important to remember that each person will have their individual way of responding to trauma.

MORE
INFORMATION

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3. ACCESS TO PROFESSIONAL COUNSELLING

- The employees need to be aware of how to contact a professional if they would like to talk through their experiences and check their reactions. The easiest way to achieve this is to provide them an EAP wallet card or at least a phone number.
- Your EAP provider is Converge International. To make an appointment or speak to a member of our intake or consulting team, call 1300 our eap (1300 687 327).

4. MONITORING THEIR REACTIONS

During the next 7-14 days it is important for Managers to monitor employee behaviours for warning signs such as:

- Expressions of extreme feelings of guilt or shame
- Irritability or outbursts of anger
- Sleep difficulties
- Unusual worry or anxiety
- Lack of concentration or unusual memory lapses
- Abuse of alcohol/ drugs
- Recurrent and intrusive recollections of the event
- Unusual detachment from others
- Unplanned absences

It may be useful to discuss their behaviour with the team leader and check the extent to which it is different from their normal pattern.

5. IF CONCERNED - REFER FOR PROFESSIONAL HELP

If in doubt or if any of the above behaviours are observed, Managers can either call the EAP themselves or refer the employee. If your concerns are growing, it is possible to escalate this referral by firstly suggesting the appointment will be made for the affected staff member or even further, by arranging an assessment for them to attend.

All employees are likely to wish to express their collective support for the victims of natural disaster and deal with their sense of bewilderment and grief through donating goods together or organising a financial appeal. This provides a great opportunity for teams to practice collaborative values and social responsibility.

IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER

- Emotional reactions such as tears or withdrawal are a normal response to distressing events
- Demonstrating organisational support through managers personally talking to people affected and practically helping is the most important step towards restoring psychological health
- Each person has a different way of responding to distressing events, depending on their personality, life experiences, their level of involvement, and the support received afterwards
- Whenever you are concerned about an employee's reactions, or if their level of distress do not diminish in time, seek professional advice

The following websites are a valuable tool for managers and individuals alike:

Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health Psychosocial Support in Disasters portal
<http://www.psid.org.au/public>

Australian Psychological Society | Psychological Preparation for Natural Disasters:
http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/tip_sheets/disasters

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