

Supporting People in the Aftermath of a Critical Incident

Hints for Managers

If your employees have been affected by an exposure to a traumatic event, particularly one that has involved a threat to their life or wellbeing, managers' actions are vital for their recovery. As part of our duty of care we need to be aware of our employees' psychological health and act appropriately to reduce risk in the workplace.

Distressing events and our responses to them demand significant emotional and mental energy. The adrenalin helps the body deal with the immediate threat and the initial reaction may be that of shock which will disguise the real emotions hiding under the surface. Following such events, typically people may display a lot of emotion and feel exhausted.

However, it is also important to keep in mind that people have natural resilience and coping mechanisms in the face of trauma and what research tells us is that our actions immediately after such exposure should enhance such resilience.

So what do the managers need to do to fulfil their responsibility for their staff's overall health at work, following such events? The following key components of psychological first aid are useful as a checklist for an organisational response that is aimed at reducing risk and improving the health of your 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 worrying about their job performance or even about losing their job.

This important step involves reassuring them and, to the extent that this is practical, to reduce their workload or their expectations for a defined period of time. Support 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 the 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 their leave entitlements, relevant policies and processes, who will be in touch with them 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 it could be done 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.



Converge International is your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provider. To make an appointment or speak to a consultant:

1300 our eap
1300 687 327

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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.

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4. Monitoring their reactions

During the next 7-14 days it is important for Managers to monitor the employee for warning signals 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

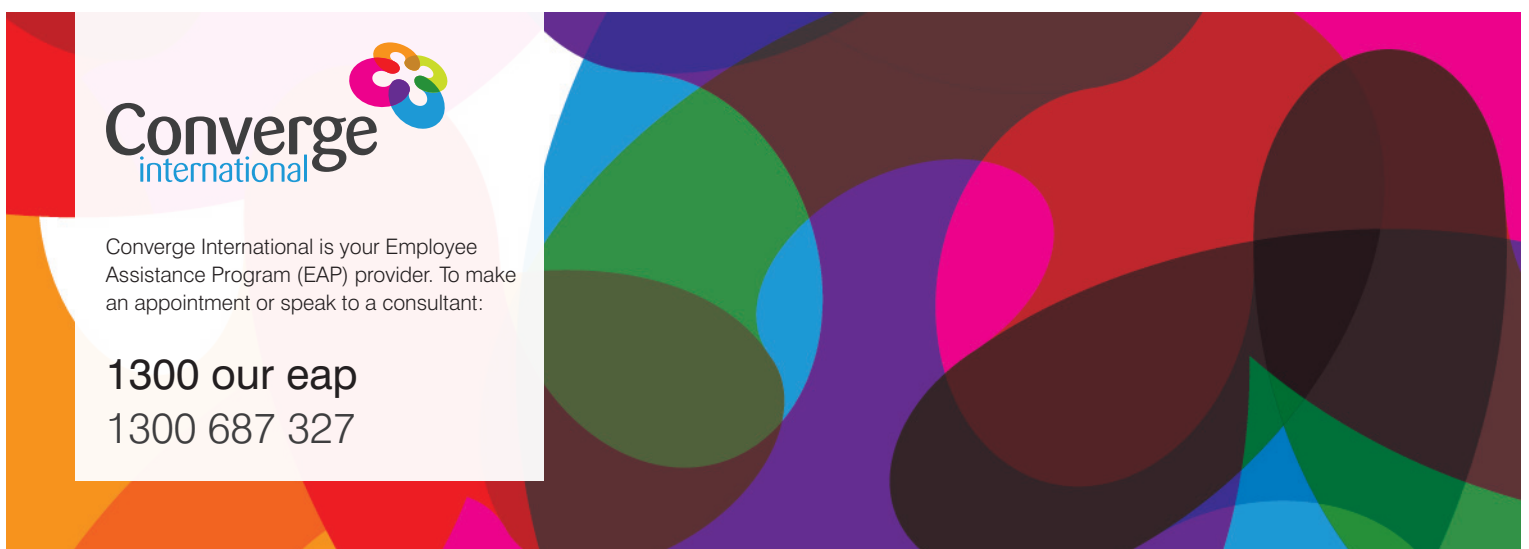
If in doubt or if any of the above behaviours are observed, Managers can either call the EAP themselves or refer the employee. If your concerns are growing, it is possible to escalate this referral by firstly suggesting the appointment will be made for them or even further, by arranging an assessment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

All employees are likely to wish to express their collective support for the victims of bushfires 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 shown at times through 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 the employee's reactions or if the levels of distress do not diminish in time, seek professional advice.

For further information contact Converge International on (03) 8681 2444



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