

RECOVERY IN THE AFTERMATH OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE: GUIDANCE FOR SUPERVISORS

Supervisors face particular challenges following any violent incident in the work setting. Even after the work area is secured, and victims or perpetrators are no longer present, emotional reactions and distress behaviors may compromise performance. Leaders may take steps to reduce untoward consequences for employees and for the workplace.

The first requirement for the office staff recovery is assuring safety. Leaders should be aware that victims, intended victims, colleagues, and bystanders may experience significant emotional distress whether or not physically injured—but those closest to the event, or with close relationships to the victim(s) or perpetrator(s) will likely be most affected. For most employees, the cornerstone of emotional recovery is communication and leaders can best assess their employees by talking with them. Leaders should demonstrate their willingness to discuss the event and their own emotions. As some people will not want to participate in group discussions, it is essential that supervisors speak with these individuals one-on-one to gauge their feelings and mental state. An “open door policy” and management presence or informal “checking in” may be helpful.

The second most important action leaders can take in recovery is promoting a sense of normalcy and a return to work schedules and routines. A sense of normalcy is achieved gradually. The more traumatic and dramatic the event, the more likely that people will be emotionally affected and these memories will only gradually fade.

Most people move on to integrate a tragedy or otherwise significant event into their consciousness without continuing mental distress or disability.

The actions below will help workplace leaders foster a sense of safety and of return to normalcy.

Immediately after the event, make sure that:

- All employees or others at the workplace are accounted for.

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- Everyone who needed medical attention received or is receiving it.
- Employees are encouraged to, and have a way to contact family and friends.
- Those who are distressed have someone to look out for them.

As soon as possible after the event, clarify what actually occurred and provide accurate information to the staff:

- What is known about the event?
- Who was/were the victim(s)?
- Who was/were the perpetrator(s)?
- How did the incident happen?
- Why did the incident happen?

Before staff departs on the day of the incident, gather facts and solicit staff input. Try to provide as much information as you can about what occurred, and provide the following guidance to employees:

- Limit consumption of alcohol, tobacco products, and caffeine, and “junk food” beyond usual levels. Drink water.
- Limit unnecessary driving.
- Talk to family and friends about what happened.
- Sleep and rest. Exercise can also help reduce distress.

Days following the event: If staff have been killed or injured in the event, a personal call (or hospital visit if possible) from a senior leader to close family members often reduces anger. If the office/facility is closed due to damage or ongoing investigation determine alternative meeting places at which to discuss events and keep the work flowing. Returning to work is important to people, and work routines contribute to the sense of normalcy.

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When the office staff meets again, review what was known at the time and update the staff on new developments. Solicit input from others, including persons who were not present during the incident. Security procedure reviews are practical safety measures, communicate leadership concern, and encourage staff input. Answer questions truthfully and do not be afraid to say “I don’t know.” If there are forensic/legal or ethical (privacy) issues, make people aware of them and what should not be said because of these constraints. Limit meetings to approximately an hour. When more discussion is necessary, divide meetings into morning and afternoon sessions. Limit discussions when workers are distraught, tired, sick, or otherwise less likely to benefit. If deaths have occurred, supervisor attendance at funerals and initiation of memorials demonstrates “grief leadership” and promotes expression of emotion among workers.

Advice for leaders who must continue to function following an incident:

- Promote a sense of calmness and control. Consider courses of action (i.e., avoid snap decisions that may have to be changed).
- If distressed, take breaks and relax in ways that helped in the past. Exercise helps.
- Rest and relax when possible.
- Identify a trusted colleague to bounce ideas off and serve as a buddy (i.e., someone to look after you).
- Follow the same guidance you have given your employees about alcohol/tobacco use, excessive “junk” food, and unnecessary driving.
- Do not overwork. Trust others to help and get the job done.
- Reward/compliment others for their work, particularly in a crisis situation.

