

Reference document

Post-traumatic intervention



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Introduction

The life of an organization as well as the one of an individual is marked by a series of successes, failures, obstacles, doubts, etc. These steps lead to their load of questions, stress, joys and challenges. All of these elements being part of the normal course of life for each organization or individual.

On the other hand, because less common and more delicate to manage, events that are known to be “traumatic” need to be considered and handled with the utmost care. Without a specific intervention strategy, the balance of an organization or an individual can be greatly affected.

Definition

According to Douglas Mental Health University Institute, a traumatic event occurs when “a person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others. The person’s response must have also involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror” .

Even if traumatic events are not very current within an organization, it is critically important to recognize their psychological and organizational impacts and to be informed on the range of services offered by the assistance program in order to prevent major consequences.

There are many events that can directly affect an organization’s health, here are some examples:

Death of a colleague outside the organization

- Due to health issues (heart attack, aneurysm, etc.)
- Accident (motor vehicle, sports or leisure activities, etc.)
- Suicide
- Etc.

Death of a colleague occurring within the organization

- Accident (motor vehicle, fall, explosion, etc.)
- Suicide
- Etc.

Workplace accident with severe injury

- Leading to amputation of one or more limbs
- Leading to irreversible injury (paralysis, scars, disfiguration, etc.)
- Leading to death
- Etc.

Emotionally charged events

- Death of a colleague’s child
- Severe disease of a colleague
- Physical assault
- Armed robbery
- Etc.

Natural events that may cause severe injury and even death

- Earthquake
- Fire
- Flood
- Tornado
- Etc.

Psychological and organizational impacts

It is common to notice quite similar reactions in most people facing trauma. Even if these reactions are normal and are not a sign of weakness in any way, they tend to throw any organization off balance. The following is a list of the most commonly noticed reactions:

- Overwhelming emotional tension
- Crying spells
- Anxiety
- Agitation
- Emotional numbness
- Acute fear of dying
- Hopelessness
- Images of being dead
- Confusion
- Flashbacks

Having to face the negative impacts of an event, the organization must also manage and contain, as much as possible, the intense state of collective stress such event can cause. That is why it is not unusual for a business to restructure very quickly after the loss of a person holding a key position within the organization or following a temporary absence of one or more individuals.

Sometimes it is the overall operations of the organization that are affected and sometimes only parts of it. In all cases they are challenged with having to face the crisis by supporting the employees and clients while having to maintain efficient operations in severe crisis conditions.

Post-traumatic intervention and deployment of specialists

Employees going through traumatic experience generally need to:

- Compulsively describe the event over and over again
- Share their feelings about the event
- Review events with excessive attention to how they unfolded
- Replay or analyze thoughts, emotions and actions verbally or in thought

To effectively help these people, the assistance service provides a crisis management team available 24/7. Through their intervention, this team, consisting of post-traumatic event management specialists, will help with the following:

- Mitigate or avoid post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms
- Work through emotions, verbalize and address the event
- Eliminate devastating thoughts
- Learn to cope and carry on with everyday life free of disturbing fears and thoughts

Post-traumatic intervention is most effective when carried out within 72 hours of an event. The manager, the human resource team or a union representative must communicate with the assistance service as soon as possible in order to get help with the assessment of the situation and deployment of a team of specialists as needed.

As required, one or several counsellors will meet with the managers and employees most affected by the event and will schedule group debriefings that last about 45 to 60 minutes. One-on-one sessions may also be required.

They will also convey specific recommendations to the management team with respect to subsequent days, for example related to the workplace environment of a deceased employee, etc.

Consequences with and without intervention

Situation with intervention

REACTIONS		
Event	Debriefing	Back to normal
Anxiety Agitation Emotional numbness Acute fear of dying Hopelessness Flashbacks	Verbalize Address the event Work through emotions Norming phase of symptoms Mitigate PTSD symptoms	Anxiety relief Return of normal sleep Mitigate phobias Fading of traumatising images
0-24 hrs	24-72 hrs	Over 72 hrs

Situation without intervention

REACTIONS		
Event	Lack of debriefing	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
Anxiety Agitation Emotional numbness Acute fear of dying Hopelessness Flashbacks	Isolating from others Continuous thoughts on the event Anxiety Panic Withdrawal Sleep disorder	Depression Regular anxiety Disturbed sleep Excessive guilt Dissociative reaction Feelings of rebellion Feelings of reliving the event Work stoppage
0-24 hrs	24-72 hrs	Over 72 hrs

However, at any time, if a manager is ever in doubt as to whether or not the event might have a negative impact on the organization, he can seek help from the assistance service. The service will support him in assessing situations and guide him through all available options. He will then be able to support his employees and provide them with the resources they need to go through the crisis and therefore avoid worst symptoms.

Conclusion

Traumatic events tend to throw an organization off balance by affecting its structure and its activities through the loss or the absence of an employee or through the repercussions on the overall human resources.

With the assistance service being available at all times and the deployment of an intervention team within 24 to 72 hours of the event, the organization has everything in hand to manage a crisis and therefore avoid dramatic consequences that could affect its operations in the long run.

“Our actions only seem short-lived. What happens today builds tomorrow.”

Gustave Le Bon

The following resources can also be helpful in situation of post-traumatic intervention:

- Browse the FAQ
- Take advantage of Tandem
- Turn to your company's EAP
- Confide in a qualified professional in case of emergency