Traumatic Incidents in the Workplace

A Guide for Employees

After experiencing an acutely distressing event, which is outside the range of usual experience, it is not unusual to have a stress reaction to that distressing occurrence. This is especially true if it has involved death, injury or a threat to one’s safety. These post-trauma reactions, as they are called, are your psychological attempts to cope with overwhelming events. Just as the body may go into shock after a physical injury, it is natural for people to experience a type of emotional or psychological shock to a traumatic emotional injury.

The types of reactions people have are listed below. People seldom have all of them, but you may experience some of them. If you do, your coping is entirely natural.

- Preoccupation with the traumatic event
- Anger and irritability
- Anxiety
- Unavoidable depression or grief
- Increased emotionality, feelings seem to be of a greater intensity than is usual for you; or, conversely, a numbing which prevents awareness of feeling
- Over-talkativeness or, its opposite, isolating from others
- Sleep disturbance, with or without nightmares
- Survivor guilt
- Recalling of past traumatic events or grieving
- Difficulty with concentration and/or memory
- Confused thinking and difficulty making decisions

Do not be surprised if you have different reactions at different times. Having reactions in this manner allows you to avoid an emotional overload.

It is not unusual to be self-blaming or to assume greater responsibility for events than is logically appropriate. This may be even as extreme as feeling guilty over surviving or avoiding any personal injury while others were not so fortunate. Again, you are having reactions which are common and which can be resolved.
WHAT CAN YOU DO
While post-trauma reactions are natural, how we deal with them does make a significant difference in how much these reactions will disrupt our lives. Some ways of "reacting to the reactions" are more helpful than others. In fact, not dealing effectively with these stress responses can greatly delay recovery from them.

The following suggestions are often useful ways of coping effectively with post-traumatic stress reactions:

1. **DO NOT ISOLATE.** While getting away from everyone may immediately feel less threatening or less distressing, it very often impedes healing.

2. **TALK** out what happened and most importantly, **HOW YOU FEEL** about what happened. Telling what happened while avoiding your feelings leaves you with just telling "war stories". Telling your story to identify and express the feelings you experienced helps make any unpleasant feelings more bearable.

3. **ACCEPT** the concern and care of others.

4. **REACH OUT** to your family and close friends - to those you trust and know care about you.

5. **EAT** healthy food and beverages. Using alcohol or drugs to "self-medicate" will delay your recovery from the stress that you have experienced.

6. **ACKNOWLEDGE** support among those you work with, including the things you have done for one another that was helpful or comforting.

7. **STAY IN TOUCH** with one another at work to see how each other are doing including how your reactions may be affecting you at work.

8. **AVOID** self-criticism. This is a time for healing, not blaming.

9. **TAKE** some positive action in your own life.

10. **EXERCISE**, it can re-energize you and help to clear your mind.

11. **REMEMBER**, your reactions are natural and are likely to be shared by others.

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