

Responding to the human side of crises in the workplace



Employee assistance programmes (EAPs) can help employers prepare for crises and help employees remain healthy and productive as they recover from stressful situations.

Recent events remind us that scary, dangerous and stressful situations can happen anywhere: on the street, at a local shop and — far too frequently — in the workplace. Crises may occur in our own locale, or in neighbourhoods and work sites around the world.

Business leaders are challenged to help employees deal with trauma and also restore their workplaces to normal as quickly as possible. And while a crisis is often chaotic and unexpected, there are proven steps you can take to mentally respond better and return to productive work, whether you're an employee or manager.

Fortunately, employers don't have to address crisis-related challenges alone. In addition to providing support for managing stress and other behavioural health issues, employee assistance programmes (EAPs) offer critical incident response services, providing guidance and support for employees and managers following a critical incident. It's important to understand how this resource works and when to call on it.

Traumatic events are sources of workplace disruption

Employees and managers alike often experience emotional and even physical reactions to events in the workplace, as well as in their communities. The unexpected death of a co-worker, a natural disaster or a violent attack — all of these are traumatic events that employees may find themselves facing.

While some incidents — workforce reductions, for example — leave room for planning, most critical incidents occur suddenly and without warning. Employers need to be prepared to respond at any time.

"Employers around the world are increasingly concerned with issues that affect performance and the work environment," says David Levine, senior vice president, Optum™ International. Identifying situations for early intervention can help prevent a tragedy, but it's not always a clear picture. The co-pilot who intentionally crashed in the French Alps, killing all 150 passengers and crew, apparently disguised his mental illness from his employer. "A tragedy like this heightens concerns about signs and symptoms of behavioural problems in the workplace," says Levine. "Increasing respect and awareness of emotional health issues is part of creating a culture of well-being that considers the whole person, not just their contributions on the job or physical health."

What is a "critical incident"?

A critical incident is defined by the impact it has on individuals. It is an event, often unexpected, that poses an actual or perceived threat to an employee's well-being or someone close to that employee. It may also be an event that produces a strong emotional response that temporarily overwhelms an employee's ability to cope.

The most common critical incidents with which employers request assistance are:

- Employee death or disability
 - Suicide attempt by employee or employee's family member
 - Violence in or near the workplace, such as robbery
 - Workplace accidents
 - Natural disaster like earthquake, hurricane or tornado
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Evaluating employee reaction

Fires, storms and other disruptive events obviously fall into the “critical incident” category. In many cases, though, the severity and consequences of events that affect employee well-being aren’t always clear. In fact for some employees, a crisis can trigger emotional memories of other losses and they find themselves reacting disproportionately to the present crisis and wondering why.

Critical incidents can include an employee injury or death, a shooting or assault in a nearby location, or a natural disaster. It may be difficult to judge whether, and to what extent, managers and employees have been affected. There are, however, some telltale signs that a situation needs to be addressed:

- Declining productivity and apparent difficulty concentrating
- Uncharacteristic isolation or limited interaction with the team
- Expressions of concern about personal safety
- Irritability, anger or tearfulness
- Complaints about loss of appetite, headaches, anxiety, co-workers or work conditions
- Increased staff leaves or turnover

If managers notice any of these, it’s important to acknowledge and address them in a non-threatening, non-judgmental way. The EAP critical incident team can help with a plan to support employees and return the workplace to its normal level of productivity.

800,000+ people die by suicide every year.*

That’s about one person every 40 seconds, each with loved ones and co-workers who struggle with their loss.

*World Health Organization. First WHO report on suicide prevention. who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2014/suicide-prevention-report/en/

Critical incident checklist



Here are a few questions for managers to consider when assessing a situation in the wake of a crisis:

- Did employees witness or experience a highly unusual and/or stressful event?
- Were employees in danger, or did they believe they were in danger?
- Did an employee die by suicide or accidentally?
- Did the police, fire department or other emergency workers respond?
- Has the event been called a “crisis,” “tragedy,” “catastrophe,” “disaster” or “terrorism”?
- Has there been media coverage of the event?

A critical incident occurs. Here's what to expect from the Optum EAP.

Upon contacting their Optum™ EAP, employers are connected to a professional with critical incident response experience. He or she asks questions to evaluate what's happened, what's needed immediately and how to respond over the days that follow. An option for some crises is on-site assistance for employees and managers.

Depending on the type and intensity of the event, the critical incident responder or response team may be needed on site within a few hours of the crisis. More commonly, though, scheduling an on-site visit within three to five days of an event is best. Workers may be in shock in the immediate aftermath of a critical event and may not benefit from interacting with a professional responder right away. And logistically, it may be difficult to gather employees together. Depending on circumstances, the responder may stay for several hours, an entire day or sometimes longer.

Responders are expert clinicians — psychologists, social workers and professional counsellors — who are trained in critical response. The purpose of on-site visits, though, is to comfort and educate, not to provide counselling or therapy.

The responders may conduct sessions with employees — sometimes jointly with managers — to review common reactions (emotional and physical responses felt by others who experienced similar events) and discuss coping strategies. Attendance is encouraged but not mandatory. The goal is to help employees realise that their reactions are understandable, reasonable and likely temporary.

A responder may meet with a smaller group of workers (typically two to 12), on a voluntary basis, to provide an opportunity for them to share their recollection of the event and related feelings. The responder may also meet one-on-one with individuals who prefer anonymity or are uncomfortable in group settings.

Responders will always remind employees of the various services provided by EAP, including the availability of referrals for individual counselling sessions. They will also encourage leadership to continue to communicate the availability of EAP telephonic or face-to-face counselling afterward, too.



In the aftermath of natural disasters, acts of terrorism and other crises, Optum has capabilities to support companies and their employees on a global scale, based on local and cultural needs.

CRITICAL INCIDENT

Earthquake in Nepal

On April 25, 2015, a 7.8-magnitude shook Nepal, with massive tremors felt in northern India. More than 8,800 people died¹ and more than 22,000 were injured.² In northern India near Nepal and New Delhi in particular, many worried about extended family members who were unaccounted for, or who had lost everything and were now living in a disaster area.

Optum reached out to 166 multinational clients, covering more than 200,000 people, to offer round-the-clock professional assistance to employees based in Nepal or who have relatives and loved ones located in the regions afflicted by the quake. About 20 companies responded with requests for consultations and services. In the days and weeks that followed with additional tremors and quakes occurring, electronic briefs were sent that provided updates on the tragedy while reminding employees of the EAP help line, and the availability of group sessions and individual counselling to support employees and their families cope with this traumatic event.

CRITICAL INCIDENT

Tsunami in Japan

In March 2011, the largest earthquake in Japanese history killed 16,000 with thousands more missing. The tsunami wiped out towns and villages, leaving hundreds of thousands of people homeless.³ Optum reached out to employer-clients in Japan to offer culturally sensitive support. At several workplaces, Optum held what are usually called "critical incident stress debriefings," small-group sessions with employees to talk about common reactions to traumatic events and to offer emotional support for recovery. In Japan, however, says David Levine, "We couldn't call them stress debriefings, because in Japan talking about individual stress runs counter to the persevering characteristic and could be perceived as weakness. There's a strong ethic of being part of a team, and hierarchical respect for management. So we cast the sessions more as personal development trainings, which helped employees feel they were doing what was right for the team. And then we asked managers to either step out of the session or to encourage employees to speak up and participate directly. Because customarily, employees are respectful and comfortable deferring to their managers' take on the situation, and we wanted employees to express their own reactions to the event."

CRITICAL INCIDENT

Charlie Hebdo attack in France

In January 2015, after two gunmen killed 12 people at the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, Optum reached out to multinational clients in France to remind them that the EAP was available to employees who may be struggling to come to terms with the terrorist attack. "In France, there is generally a wider gap between work and home life, and we have to take even more care in employer-related communications," says David Levine. "While few were directly impacted by this terrorist attack, we recognised that many employees struggled with the idea that something like this could happen at any company on French soil. Led by our local staff and partners in France, we reached out to companies to let them know that help was available through their EAP."

Avoid these common mistakes

In today's world, mishandling a crisis will not only upset employees, but it could also lead to damaging publicity and reputational harm. News organisations regularly scan and check social media to gather information and find sources. A post from an employee on Facebook, Google+, Twitter, or elsewhere can have very negative repercussions. "Toughing it out" is an understandable response, but time and time again, we hear how acknowledging the human side of a crisis and offering help generate employee appreciation and loyalty.

Common mistakes employers make:

MISTAKE 1

Ignoring the situation

"We're OK overall. I don't think we need any special help." That's the assessment managers frequently make of their workers in the wake of a crisis. It's probably inaccurate. Just because employees seem fine, don't assume they don't have questions or concerns. Few managers know how to assess the impact of a traumatic event. It's better to leave that to the EAP mental health professionals.

MISTAKE 2

Delaying response

Waiting several days or weeks to call EAP in the hope that "things will work themselves out" is a risky strategy. Contacting EAP is not a sign of managerial weakness, a suggestion of error or an acknowledgment of blame. Rather, it takes true leadership to understand the value of acknowledging the range of emotional reactions to a crisis and offer expert resources to help.

MISTAKE 3

Stifling communication

It's far better to cultivate a workplace culture that encourages employees to report or discuss bad news or negative feelings that may affect day-to-day functioning and job performance. Employees need to talk about these significant events, and they will, with or without employer support. Bringing in an EAP professional to guide those discussions can help employees focus on resilience and positive coping mechanisms.

MISTAKE 4

Misunderstanding the purpose of a response team

The goal of on-site critical incident response is to support multiple workers affected by a traumatic event. Issues such as conflicts between two employees, poor job performance and sexual harassment claims should all be taken seriously and can be addressed by EAP services. Those are not, however, considered "critical incidents" necessitating an on-site visit.

Critical incident response gets results

According to several research studies, when properly delivered, critical incident response services help decrease symptoms such as severe stress experienced by individuals following a workplace trauma. And while more research is needed, studies suggest that when integrated with other behavioural health programmes, these services help reduce absences and disability and workers' compensation claims after a critical event.⁴

Make communication part of emergency response planning

Most plans address loss of, or disruption to, facilities, technology and the supply chain due to power outages, floods or other events. Alternate work sites for continuing business operations are typically included, along with plans for mission-critical tasks necessary to meeting customer obligations. But a key piece of the puzzle — the human element — is often missing.

If employees are unwilling to work in the aftermath of a crisis, it doesn't matter where the alternate location is. Operations will screech to a halt. So plans ideally include how companies will communicate with and support their workforce after a crisis. That's where the EAP comes in.

A few planning tips:

Start with a written plan.

Preparation starts here, but it certainly doesn't end here. Whether it is called an emergency response plan or business continuity plan, it should spell out roles and responsibilities for dealing with a crisis. The plan should designate the safety officer, property manager or other leader as a point person who will coordinate the response and be the EAP contact. And importantly, it should periodically — at least twice a year — be reviewed and updated.

Not sure where to start?

The EAP can help develop plans for managing employee communications following a critical incident. Companies may find it useful to consult country-specific government agency websites, which may have planning templates, educational tools or other resources available online.

Train and test.

In order for the plan to make a real difference, managers should be trained to recognise the telltale signs of a critical incident listed above. Employers may also conduct annual emergency drills — such as practicing evacuating in case of a fire or natural disaster, or locking down in the event of an active gunman on the premises — coordinated by the point person.

Connecting with EAP immediately after critical events can make a huge difference in helping employees get back on their feet and minimising workplace disruption. It also marks the employer as one who understands that investment in “human capital” is not only essential to success — it's the right thing to do.

Critical incident response bridges the path to stability.

Feedback from Optum customers reflects their gratitude to critical incident responders and confirms that the interventions provided solace to employees.

“The initial day of services went very well. The responders were busy the entire time. It was so successful and the employees were so pleased that we scheduled follow-up services. We were very grateful for both counsellors who came to our site. They really helped us through a difficult situation.”

“We were very satisfied with the responders who were on site. They arrived quickly, even though we requested help on short notice on both days. Both responders were very professional. Our colleagues were very appreciative of the services.... Colleagues felt cared for. This has been a hard hit to our team, and the critical response services helped us make our colleagues more at ease.”

To find out more about our EAP, wellness and critical incident response services, please email us at global@optum.co.uk.

Sources:

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2. National Emergency Operation Center (Nepal government) on Twitter, twitter.com/NEoCOfficial
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4. Attridge M, VandePol B. The business case for workplace critical incident response: A literature review and some employer examples. *Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health*, 25(2);2010.



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