

# WAEPA GUIDE

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## Handling Traumatic Events



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## 2021 Handling Traumatic Events Guide

Published by WAEPA, Worldwide Assurance for Employees of Public Agencies

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# The 2021 Handling Traumatic Events Guide is presented by:



The goal of WAEPA is to provide access to products and services that promote the health, welfare, and financial well-being of its members.

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# Introduction

Few of us are prepared for the issues in **WAEPA's 2021 Handling Traumatic Events Guide**, including natural disasters, suicides, assaults, threats, and long-term stress. None of these are easy to prepare for, so we created this guide as practical advice for when you need personal guidance.

You are fortunate to have numerous federal resources at your disposal, so please take the time to familiarize yourself with what your training office, organizational development specialist, Employee Assistance Program (EAP), and career counselor can provide.

We hope that you find **WAEPA's 2021 Handling Traumatic Events Guide** helpful.

– *The WAEPA Staff*

# Stopping Violence Before it Starts

**W**orkplace violence is rare. However, if it happens, you should be prepared. There are three levels to approaching workplace violence – prevention, early identification of threats, and appropriate response to threats. These basic skills require a willingness to use professional resources in a timely manner, and both supervisors and staff members play an important role.

## Prevention

According to experts, prevention of violence boils down to the “good leadership” of both supervisors and team members. Keeping in touch with fellow employees, making sure they have the necessary skills and tools, helping them with obstacles, and showing concern and fairness all help to create a healthy, productive workplace.

Performance counseling, discipline, and effective management tools will set clear standards to help you notice your employee’s problems immediately. Intervention can also help prevent difficult situations from becoming major problems. Experts believe that effective communication in the workplace helps employees resolve stress in all aspects of their lives, so consider bringing in a facilitator to coach employees on resolving tensions. Taking the time to do so may pay off in the long run.

## Early Identification of Threats

Even a strong work environment may not prevent threats, as employees can be driven to the point of violence by outside factors including family members, romantic partners, or other associates. Good communication with staff members may help supervisors observe and identify potential threats early on.

Leaders do not need to be experts on violence, but recognizing problematic behavior and seeking advice from consultants who understand the warning signs can help get ahead of the issue.

## What are the warning signs?

- When someone says or hints that they might harm someone. People contemplating violence often tell others, directly or indirectly, about their plans.
- When someone expresses fear of another person. An employee may report being stalked by an ex-spouse, or be afraid of someone who repeatedly talks about weapons in a strange way.
- When someone is difficult to deal with in the workplace and management or coworkers avoid dealing with them.

Supervisors need to pay attention to all of these warning signs, and at this stage it is appropriate to listen to “gut level” reactions. No final decisions are made, but the situation should be explored.

## Appropriate Responses to Threats

Once a threat is identified, don’t be afraid to ask for help. Securing necessary resources is the start of an effective response. Bringing in a neutral party to provide an impartial point of view is also important.

If there seems to be imminent danger, drop everything and immediately notify the authorities. Safety is the top concern. If there is no imminent danger, these situations can develop more slowly, so there may be time to respond before emergency measures are necessary.

An appropriate response protects the safety of all parties involved and respects everyone’s legal rights. This is a delicate balance, and situations can vary.

Navigate this balance by creating a strategy. Start by notifying the management chain, the law enforcement function responsible for office security, the agency’s Human Resources department, and an EAP professional. Other specialists, such as union officials, can be important contributors depending on the situation.

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## Stopping Violence Before it Starts

### *Continued*

The next steps include evaluating the problem more extensively, developing and executing a response plan, and addressing security concerns along the way. Sometimes, an objective evaluation may show that no serious problem exists. If this is the case, it is important not to criticize anyone for “over-reacting.”

However, if the evaluation shows that a response is necessary, take steps to guard against the possible threat while addressing the root cause of the problem to help prevent reoccurring situations.

Support for those affected is an important concern. Fear is a real source of stress, and

responsibility for the safety of others is a heavy burden. An atmosphere of acceptance and open communication should be established. The agency’s EAP can help by offering seminars, debriefings, or other group activities, and by welcoming individual employees to take advantage of its services.

## When Tragedy Strikes

Imagine that you are busy with your daily responsibilities when tragedy strikes:

- You discover that an employee has swallowed a lethal dose of drugs in the presence of coworkers.
- An irate individual shoots an employee while you look on, shocked and helpless.
- A dazed-looking employee walks into the work area bruised and disheveled, collapses at her desk, and reports that she was attacked.

A supervisor should immediately call the authorities to ensure the safety of the other employees, but once the situation is secured by police and paramedics, important questions remain.

How do employees recover from this event, so that their personal well-being and professional effectiveness will not suffer long-term effects of trauma? How do employees get back to business after suffering from injury, bereavement, or emotional trauma?

There is no easy answer, and each situation presents different challenges. However, there are some general guidelines:

- Each person needs to stay firmly in charge of themselves. It is not necessary to say anything profound; just be there, authentic in the moment, and let your employees know that management is concerned for them. Be visible and take time to ask them how they are doing, avoiding any assumptions

that normally “strong characters” are unaffected.

- Ask for support from higher management. Relief from deadlines and practical help, such as a temporary employee to lighten the burden of administrative work, can help everyone focus on returning to normal.
- Don’t attempt to hide your feelings or advise anybody else to do so. Show your employees you care about them, and let them know that fear, grief, shock, and anger are perfectly natural reactions. Help show them that if managers and staff can function rationally in spite of their feelings, then so can they.
- Share information with fellow employees as soon

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## When Tragedy Strikes

### *Continued*

as it is available. Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know." Information will be scarce, and in much demand, in the first few hours after a tragedy.

- Ask for support from the Agency's Employee Assistance Program (EAP). The EAP offers professional counseling to those who want it and can provide debriefings to groups affected by trauma. Encourage fellow employees that taking advantage of the EAP is a way of preserving health and not a sign of sickness.
- Encourage employees to talk about their painful experiences. This is hard to do, but expressing painful thoughts and feelings in a safe environment, and realizing that these reactions are normal and shared by others, can ease the healing process. A mental

health professional may be available to facilitate a special meeting for this purpose. It's also possible that employees may prefer to discuss the situation amongst themselves, but don't be afraid to participate. Set a positive example by openly discussing your own feelings.

- Build on the strengths of the group. Encourage other employees to take care of one another through simple measures like listening to those in distress, offering practical help, visiting the hospitalized, or joining an employee on their first visit to a feared site. By building a cohesive work group and fostering self-confidence, the staff can better help each other in a crisis.
- Build on your work group's prior planning. If you have talked about how to handle

a hypothetical crisis as a group, it will help mentally and practically prepare your employees to deal with a real one. Knowing employees' strengths and experiences, establishing a plan for emergency communications, and being familiar with EAP procedures can help employees "hit the ground running" if a crisis strikes.

- Be aware of the healing value of work. Getting back to the daily routine can be a comforting experience, and most people can work productively while dealing with grief and trauma. However, the process of getting back to work must be approached with great care and sensitivity. If anyone has died or been seriously injured, the process must be handled in a way that shows appropriate respect for them.

## When Domestic Violence Strikes

Violence in an employee's personal life can produce stress in the workplace. An employee may confide in a supervisor about being victimized, or a manager may suspect that an employee who hasn't spoken about it is being victimized.

When assaultive behavior enters the workplace, the first

thing to do is to define the situation correctly.

### **If Someone is Threatening, Harassing, or Injuring an Employee**

This is a criminal act and should not be ignored.

Regardless of their relationship, never underestimate the

possible danger of someone who batters, stalks, or otherwise mistreats another person. The danger extends beyond the targeted employee to others in the workplace. Not all situations are equally dangerous, but no one should try to evaluate the risk unless they are trained in threat assessment.



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## When Domestic Violence Strikes

### *Continued*

If there appears to be an immediate threat, notify a law enforcement resource that can quickly provide security, such as a local police officer, Inspector, Special Agent, or Federal Protective Service Officer. Everyone in the office should know who this is and how to find them.

If the threat is not immediate, identify the appropriate law enforcement support. For example, Federal Officers cannot investigate a situation that is outside their jurisdiction, and jurisdiction can be a complicated issue. Employees are sometimes disappointed if someone they know and trust, like the security officer in the next office, cannot investigate their case. These pointers may help understanding issues with jurisdiction:

- If threats, abuse, stalking, or other harassment are happening at or around the employee's home, the law enforcement agency responsible for the employee's place of residence has jurisdiction.
- If threats or violence occur within the Federal workplace, or in direct connection with the employee's duties, there may be a role for Federal Officers. However, even if Federal Officers assist with security in the workplace, local police still have jurisdiction over non-workplace aspects.

- Even if a situation is not an emergency, report it without delay to law enforcement officials for initial advice on the situation. Assessing threats is part of their profession, and they may see signs of danger that aren't obvious to others.
- If there seems to be a danger in the workplace, the law enforcement agency responsible for office security will help assess the threat and adjust security measures, such as changing the locks. Advise the security guard for your area to be on the lookout for a particular individual, and if possible, assign the targeted person to a different office.

In addition to law enforcement, the employee may need other professional services like counseling, legal advice, and temporary housing. Most communities now have comprehensive victim assistance programs with a wide array of coordinated services, and the employee may appreciate if managers make the initial call to locate the appropriate resources. The agency's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is available to provide guidance to the employee and to their department's staff.

Counseling should be left to mental health professionals, but fellow employees can do a lot to make the workplace more harmonious and productive for everyone. This can be especially meaningful to

employees whose personal lives are in turmoil. Being a productive part of a team can do wonders for the low self-esteem and sense of isolation that often goes along with being a victim.

### **If there is Suspicion, but not Certainty, that an Employee is Being Victimized**

The situation is often unclear. An employee may seem tense and upset, their work may be suffering, or their co-workers find tension getting in the way of teamwork. Although they haven't talked about abuse, they may behave in a way that causes concern. They may come in on a Monday morning with fresh bruises, or seem frightened whenever their significant other phones them at work. Co-workers may have concerns about victimization but hesitate to bring up these concerns.

How to handle this complex situation depends on your own judgment and working relationship. Here are some helpful suggestions:

- **Don't assume it can't happen to this particular employee.** Even when an employee's behavior causes concern, it is common to think, "They wouldn't be involved with anything like that." The fact is that anyone can become a victim, and those who don't fit the stereotype may find it especially hard to let anyone know what is going on.

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## When Domestic Violence Strikes

*Continued*

- **Don't ignore the situation.**

Work may be the only resource an employee has left, especially if the abuser has succeeded in cutting off other sources of support. The earlier you learn about the situation, the quicker you can bring in professional resources. You will have a better chance of

aiding your co-worker and preventing a violent incident that could seriously affect both the workplace and your colleague's future.

**Put aside your thoughts about what may be happening at home and focus on the employee's behavior at work**

It is always appropriate to show concern for a seemingly distressed employee and support them in getting professional help. Of course, only a trained professional should try to diagnose the employee's problem.

Susan, I have to tell you that I'm concerned about you. You're doing the same good work you always have, but you seem tense all the time, and this is the second time this week I've seen you crying at your desk. You don't need to tell me what's going on in your life, but if there's anything our EAP could help with, please go talk with them. Can you adjust your schedule so no one else in the office knows where you are? And if I can be of help with anything, I hope you'll let me know.

**If the employee's performance or conduct is deteriorating.**

You have more latitude about how to approach the situation if the person is a friend. If you decide to confront the problem, you may ask whether the person "feels safe at home" rather than asking directly about "abuse." This wording can make it easier for the person to open up about the problem.

If your friend denies that there is a problem, or gets angry at you for suggesting as much, do not give up or take it as a personal rejection. They may be so beaten down emotionally that they cannot face reality. They might be terrified that any action, even admitting the problem, may lead to greater danger for themselves or their children. Even if they seem to reject your concern, you can still be a friend, let them

know you are there for them, and remind them that they deserve to be safe and happy.

It is always helpful to get confidential professional advice before you intervene. You might want to talk with an EAP, Employee Relations counselor, or community organization specializing in domestic violence.

# Helping Someone Recover from an Assault on the Job

Being assaulted on the job can lead to physical injury and emotional distress. Recovering and returning to job effectiveness requires the assistance of professional experts, such as physicians and psychotherapists, as well as the enlightened support of supervisors and co-workers.

**Visit, send cards, or convey similar expressions of concern if the employee is hospitalized.**

It is important that the employee not feel abandoned, and the nursing staff can advise you on the appropriate length and type of interaction. If the person is quite ill, a brief visit and a few words of concern may be enough. As recovery continues, sharing news from the office will help the person continue to feel like a part of the organization.

**Encourage co-workers to show support, but be careful to stop short of appearing to suggest a mandatory task.**

The injured employee will need to tell the story of the assault at some point, probably more than once. They may find it easier to discuss this with co-workers who are familiar with the work setting or have had similar experiences to share, but recognize that it is easy for experience sharing to become comparative. This will lessen the value of the visit. Co-workers can help

significantly by listening in a caring way, showing support, and avoiding second-guessing of the situation. Being assaulted is not only physically painful, but it can make the world feel like a cold, frightening place. Simple expressions of kindness from friends and co-workers – a visit, a card game, a funny book, a favorite magazine – can help the person regain their previous sense of safety.

**Help the employee's family.**

If the employee has a family, they may need support as well. If the situation has received media attention, the family may need assistance screening phone calls and mail. Other kinds of help, such as babysitting children while a spouse visits the hospital, can go a long way in showing that the work group cares for its members.

**Plan the employee's return to work.**

The supervisor, employee, employee/labor relations specialist, and health care providers need to work together to plan the employee's return to work. Here are some important points to consider:

- There is truth in the old saying about “getting back on the horse that just threw you,” and it can be helpful to get back to the crucial place or activity in a timely manner.

The sooner the employee returns, the easier it will be to rejoin the group, and they will have missed out on less of the information needed for effective job performance. However, do not expose them to too much stress at once. A flexible approach, including part-time work and assigning a co-worker for support, can often help the employee overcome anxiety, recover self-confidence, and return to work sooner than would otherwise be possible.

- The employee's physical needs must be clarified with health care providers, and everyone should understand precisely what is meant by phrases such as “light work.” If the employee looks different, from wearing a cast or having visible scars, it is helpful to prepare staff in advance. New environmental needs the employee may require, such as wheelchair access or a place to lie down during the day, must be given prior thought.
- Working out a flexible plan for a recovering employee may take time and energy in the short run, but that effort will be repaid in the long run. Retaining an experienced employee as an integral part of the work group, and demonstrating compassion, will encourage retention.

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## Helping Someone Recover from an Assault on the Job

*Continued*

### **Counseling.**

Counseling services should be offered through the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) with a sincere attitude that it is perfectly natural to use professional resources in the aftermath of a traumatic experience. Supervisors and EAP personnel should work together to make the experience as convenient and non-bureaucratic as possible. However, individual preferences and differences should be respected. Some employees find

that they can recover from the effects of the experience with the help of their friends, family, and co-workers. Others may not feel the need for counseling until weeks have passed and they realize that they are not recovering as well as they would like.

### **Career counseling and other forms of assistance should be made available if the employee decides to change jobs.**

Even with excellent support, employees who have been

assaulted sometimes feel, “It just isn’t worth it,” and decide to transfer to a safer occupation. The employee should be encouraged not to make such an important decision in haste, but career counseling and other forms of assistance should be made available. Co-workers who have tried to help the employee should understand that their efforts contributed to the individual’s recovery, and that the decision is not a rejection of them.

## Recovering from the Death of a Team Member

The death of a co-worker is a painful experience under any circumstance, and all the more difficult if it is unexpected. Recovery at both the individual and the group level greatly depends on the effectiveness of the grief leadership. Effective grief leadership will guide the group as they mourn and memorialize the dead, help their families, and return to effective performance of their duties.

### **Set-up a private area where co-workers can mourn without public scrutiny.**

Initially, close friends and associates will feel shocked and grieve intensely. If the loss is to be resolved, it is essential for all affected employees to spend

time talking about the deceased person, sharing memories, and discussing the loss. This “grief work,” which is essential for recovery, is intensely painful when done alone, but much less so when it can be shared with friends. Providing a private area where co-workers can talk together and shed tears without public scrutiny will ease this process.

### **Share information.**

Employees will feel a particularly strong need for information at this time. Managers, supervisors, and other employees can show their concern by making a concerted effort to get that information and share it in a timely manner. Until the information is available,

honestly admitting that “we don’t know” is more comforting to other employees than not being told anything.

### **Contact employees who are temporarily away from the office.**

Ordinarily, people in a small work group are aware of friendships and will take steps to ensure that those in need of comfort are given support. However, problems may occur if co-workers are on leave or travel. Group members may need to reach out to those temporarily away from the office to make sure they don’t get left out of the grieving process.

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# Helping Someone Recover from an Assault on the Job

*Continued*

## **Serve as a role model.**

Co-workers can serve as role models for appropriate grieving. If leaders show that they are actively grieving, but still functioning effectively, other employees will realize they can be sad while still performing their duties.

## **Consider offering a “debriefing.”**

Often, a cohesive work group can go through the grief process without help. However, if members do not know each other well, or have difficulty talking, a professional may need to come in and facilitate a “debriefing,” or meeting in which grief is discussed. The agency’s Employee Relations Office will often be able to identify and provide an experienced facilitator under the circumstances.

## **Consider holding a memorial service, especially if co-workers cannot attend the funeral.**

A memorial service can be very helpful and is often a turning point in restoring a work group to normal productivity. This is not to imply that the deceased is forgotten, but co-workers find a point where they can continue to work while grieving. Consider the following points in planning a memorial service:

- The memorial service should honor the deceased and provide an opportunity to say goodbye. Unlike a funeral, a memorial is not a religious service and should be suitable for employees of all faiths.
- Friends may speak about the qualities they admired in the

deceased or their contributions to group morale. Poetry or music reminiscent of the deceased might be considered.

- A common mistake in planning memorials is to plan them at too high a level. Senior officials often want to take charge, show that they care, and assure a polished product. This approach can be effective but risks the perception that the Senior Manager is insincere.
- Memorial services are most effective when the closest associates of the deceased are given key roles in planning and carrying them out. Including the “right” people, i.e, close friends of the deceased, makes the service more comforting for everyone. If they are too upset to speak, they ought not be coerced or pressured.

## **Reach out to family members.**

Reaching out to the family of the deceased can be comforting for both the employees and the family members. Attending the funeral service, sending cards, visiting the bereaved family, and offering various forms of help are all positive healing activities.

## **Support informal rituals.**

Informal rituals in the office can ease healing. A group of friends might join together to clean out the deceased person’s desk or organize a campaign for contributions to an appropriate charity. Sometimes, employees may want to leave a particular workstation or piece of equipment unused for a time in memory of

the deceased. If possible, this wish should be honored.

## **Get back to the work routine in a way that shows respect for the deceased.**

Returning to the work routine can facilitate healing if the group makes an effort to uphold values held by the deceased and strive toward goals that they valued. For example, “I want to show the customers that I care, because Sam was such a caring person.”

## **Don’t treat a new employee like a “replacement” for the employee who died.**

It is important that new employees not feel like “replacements” for employees who have died. Reorganizing responsibilities and moving furniture can help spare both the new employee and others the painful experience of having somebody new at “Sam’s desk” doing “Sam’s job.”

## **Remind co-workers about the services of the Employee Assistance Program.**

Group members should be reminded that normal grieving can produce upsetting responses such as sleeplessness, diminished appetite, and intrusive thoughts of the deceased. Ordinarily, these will subside with time, particularly if the team member receives strong group support. However, individuals who find these reactions especially troubling or long lasting may need to turn to the Employee Assistance (EAP) Program for professional help in processing this experience.



# Suicidal Concerns

Suicide is an alarmingly prevalent cause of death among Americans of all ages and backgrounds, and government employees are not exempt from this reality. Though suicide rates differ based on age, gender, and ethnicity, a person from any background can commit or seriously contemplate suicide.

People considering suicide have often been “worn down” by stresses and problems. Actual or expected loss, especially the loss of a committed relationship or long-term partnership, is often a contributing factor. The suicidal person is frequently lonely and without a solid support system. Sometimes this is a long-term characteristic of the person. In other cases a geographic move, death, or divorce may deprive an individual of personal ties that were formerly supportive.

Listen carefully to your co-workers. People considering suicide often give hints about their intentions. Talking about not being present in the future, giving away prized possessions, and making personal funeral plans are potential signs of suicidal intent. If a team member hears such talk, question it kindly but firmly. Clarifying the situation will not make it worse, and open conversation may be the person’s first step toward getting well.

Be alert to changes in behavior. Deterioration in

job performance, personal appearance, punctuality, or other habits can be a sign of many problems, including suicidal intent.

## **If an employee admits thinking about suicide.**

Make every effort to get them professional help. The way to do this is very important, as an effective approach can have an impact on the employee’s willingness to receive professional help. Our respect and concern for the employee can contribute to the healing process.

- **First, offer your own personal concern and support.** Let the person know you care. They are both a unique human being and a valued member of your team.
- **Show understanding of the employee’s pain and despair.** Offer hope that, with appropriate help, solutions for their problems can be found.
- **Ask whether any of the employee’s problems are work related, and, if so, take initiative in attacking those problems.** For example, they may not tell anyone that they feel improperly trained for key responsibilities, have difficulties with leave, or face other issues. If a team member can act as an

advocate in remedying some of these problems, it will help by removing one source of pain, concretely showing that someone cares, and offering hope that other problems can also be solved.

- **Do not question the employee about personal problems.** They may wish to keep these problems out of the workplace, but listen with empathy if they choose to share them.
- **Do not offer advice.** However, you can acknowledge that the problems are real and painful.
- **Protect the employee’s privacy with regard to other employees.** Questions are sure to arise, so this will require thought and planning. When dealing with upper management, think clearly about what they actually need to know. Tell them if an employee is temporarily working a reduced schedule on medical advice, but refrain from discussing intimate personal information that the employee may have confided in you as the immediate supervisor.
- **Without hovering over the employee, show your continued support and interest.** Make it clear that the individual is an important part of the team and plays a key role in mission accomplishment.

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## Suicidal Concerns

*Continued*

### Get Help.

As a general rule, anyone feeling enough pain to consider suicide should at the very least be referred to a mental health professional for evaluation. Make it clear that this is an effort to secure the best possible help, and that some types of assistance are outside your own area of competence.

- Usually, the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is the referral source for mental

health assistance. If the employee consents, call the EAP yourself, emphasizing that the situation is serious and needs timely attention.

- If for some reason the EAP is not immediately available, turn to your community's Crisis Intervention or Suicide Prevention resource. These are normally listed with other emergency numbers online and available on a 24-hour basis.

- If the team member is a Veteran, refer them to the VA Suicide Hot Line. Found at [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov), this is a profoundly effective service offering all levels of treatment and a 100% commitment to provide all levels of care needed.

## How to Listen to Someone Who is Hurting

People facing bereavement, injury, or trauma need to talk about it to heal; to talk, they need willing listeners.

Unfortunately, many of us avoid listening to people in pain. We may have enough troubles of our own, be afraid of making matters worse by saying the wrong thing, or excuse ourselves by assuming this is strictly a matter for professionals like psychotherapists or members of the clergy. While it's true that professionals can provide insights most of us are unable to offer, their valuable assistance is no substitute for the caring interest of co-workers, supervisors, and friends from the person's daily life.

It is natural to feel reluctance or fear when facing another's painful feelings, but we cannot let this fear prevent us from doing what we can to help someone who is suffering.

Though each situation is unique, some guidelines can help make the process easier:

- The most important thing to do is simply to be there, listen, and show you care.
- Find a private setting where you will not be overheard or interrupted and arrange it so that there are no large objects, such as a desk, between you and the person.
- Keep your comments brief

and simple so that you do not get the person off-track.

- Ask questions to show your interest and encourage the person to keep talking, for example:

*What happened next?  
What was that like?*

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# How to Listen to Someone Who is Hurting

*Continued*

- Give verbal and non-verbal messages of caring and support. Facial expressions and body posture go a long way toward showing interest. Do not hesitate to interject your own feelings as appropriate, for example:

*How terrible.  
I'm so sorry.*

- Let the team member know that it's okay to cry. Some people are embarrassed to cry in front of others. Handing over a box of tissues in a matter-of-fact way can help show that crying is normal and

appropriate. It is also okay if we get emotional as well.

- Don't be distressed by the way different people respond. One person may react calmly, express strong feelings, have an immediate emotional response, or be "numb" at first and emotionally respond later. Emotions are rarely simple, and people suffering loss often feel anger along with grief. Unless there are signs of actual danger, simply accept the feelings as that person's natural response. If they are usually rational and sensible, those qualities will return once their painful feelings are expressed.
- Don't offer unsolicited advice. People who need advice will

usually ask for it later on, but it just gets in the way of talking things out initially.

- Don't turn the conversation into a forum for your own experiences. If we have had a similar experience, we are often tempted to mention that briefly when the moment seems right. Do not say, "I know exactly how you feel," because everybody is different and you both know that the statement is untrue.
- It's natural to worry about saying the "wrong thing." The following is a brief but helpful list of three things not to say to someone who is suffering:

## DO NOT SAY:

### Anything critical of the person.

"You shouldn't take it so hard."

"You're overreacting."

### Anything which tries to minimize the person's pain.

"It could be a lot worse."

"You're young; you'll get over it."

### Anything which asks the person to disguise or reject his/her feelings.

"You have to pull yourself together."

"You need to be strong for your children's sake."

These are helpful guidelines, but being there and listening in a caring way are the most important thing. People will understand if you say something awkward in a difficult situation.

Once you have finished talking, it may be appropriate to offer simple forms of help. Check

on basic things like eating and sleeping. Sharing a meal may help the person find an appetite. Giving a ride to someone too upset to drive and promising to have that person's car delivered to them as soon as possible may mean a lot. Ask what else you can do to be of assistance.

After you have talked to someone who is hurting, you may feel as if you have absorbed some of that person's pain. Take care of yourself by talking to a friend, taking a walk, or doing whatever helps restore your own spirits.



# After a Disaster

When disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes, virulent storms, and rising oceans strike, extraordinary challenges are created for everyone.

Emotional stress, physical injury, bereavement, loss of property, and disruption of normal routines may limit the availability and energy of your work group. At the same time, the group may face new responsibilities like caring for its own members and facilitating community recovery. In addition to meeting customers' special needs for assistance following a disaster, employees are often called on to support other Federal agencies by providing a wide range of community services.

## Plan ahead.

Team members should be familiar with any disaster plans that affect their office, and managers should have their own plans, however informal, for how the office will function in a disaster. During these times, everyone's experience and skills are brought into play.

Despite the magnitude of the challenges, Federal agencies have a proud history of effectively responding to disasters. The following suggestions can help structure an effective disaster response plan, but these suggestions are not a substitute for a comprehensive disaster plan:

## Take care of the office team first.

This may require relocating your fellow staff members and assuring their families have necessary medical care, housing, food, and necessities.

- **Consider setting up a relief center.** If traditional disaster relief agencies are slow to mobilize, you may need to help set up a relief center for your co-workers and help provide food and other essential items to those in need. If necessary, a group of employees, preferably volunteers, can look to internal disaster relief. Tasks might include staffing the relief center, taking inventory of unmet needs of affected employees, and locating resources to fit those needs.
- **Consider compiling resource information.** Those most affected by the disaster are least likely to have functioning phones to locate a new apartment, childcare provider, rental truck, place to board the dog, or goods and services needed to normalize their lives. Compiling information in a notebook can be very helpful to both employees and the public.

## Rules and procedures that are counterproductive after a disaster may have to be modified quickly.

Dress codes, rules about children in the office, and restrictions on using phones for personal business may need to be temporarily adjusted in the post-disaster period. Agencies have the authority to grant administrative leave to employees who need time off to attend to their home and family situations.

## Work cooperatively with employee unions.

Disasters encourage labor-management cooperation, regardless of the past labor relations climate. Labor and management share a deep concern for employees' well-being and recovery, and working together in an informal way leads to more effective, flexible responses.

## Take steps to prevent accidents and illness.

Much disaster-related suffering happens after the event. This can be prevented. It is particularly important to prevent the overwork and exhaustion that occurs when people throw themselves into disaster recovery operations. Post-disaster environments are often less safe and sanitary than normal, so people living and working in them need to exercise special care. Exhaustion can lower resistance to disease, decrease alertness, impair judgment, and make people both less careful about health precautions and more vulnerable to accidents.

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## After a Disaster

### *Continued*

There are several strategies for assuring that people do not exhaust themselves:

- After an initial crisis period, when overwork may be necessary, procedures should be put in place to make sure that employees do not work too many hours without rest.
- Adequate staffing should be developed for all new responsibilities created after the disaster, such as internal relief operations.
- Work hours should be limited, if necessary, and managers should monitor subordinates for signs of exhaustion.
- Leaders are especially prone to overwork and should take care to set a positive example for subordinates.
- Make sure that no employee has an essential task that no one else knows how to do, or that person will surely be overworked.

#### **Communicate clear priorities for work.**

Normal operations may be suspended while new ones are

undertaken, and this must be done carefully and consistently. Understanding priorities will help prevent overwork and empower employees to make decisions about the appropriate use of their time.

#### **Provide opportunities for co-workers to talk about their stressful experiences.**

To recover from severe stress, people need to talk about what they have gone through, and to compare their reactions with those of others. Consider the following suggestions:

- A group meeting organized by an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counselor or other mental health professional.
- Remind employees of procedures for scheduling individual EAP appointments. Some employees may need more personal assistance in resolving problems arising from the disaster.
- Employees should be offered opportunities to share their experiences informally during coffee breaks or other similar activities.

#### **Special considerations when employees are detailed out to other agencies.**

It is important that detailed employees remain in contact with their own organization. They should, whenever possible, be deployed in small groups, so each employee will have a few familiar people to turn to for support.

Visits by agency managers can be helpful in conveying information and boosting morale. Informal newsletters, quick emails, or text messages can be valuable sources of information. This information can reduce the detailed employees' stress from worrying about coworkers while reassuring them that they are still a valued part of their own organization.

# When the Stress Doesn't Go Away

Earlier sections of this guide focused mainly on traumatic events that overwhelm us with their suddenness. When an employee is assaulted or a tornado rips through an office, we are shocked and shaken by the enormity and unexpected nature of the event.

However, long-term stress can also assume traumatic proportions.

In recent years, Civilian Federal Employees throughout the country had to cope with rebuilding their homes and lives after disasters while taking on new roles and responsibilities to help recovery efforts. However, disasters aren't the only source of long-term stress facing co-workers. Threats of violence, whether from outside the agency or fellow employees, can lead to severe stress that goes on for weeks. Harassment campaigns directed against employees can be nerve-racking even when there is no apparent physical danger. The prospect of losing a group member to a slowly debilitating illness can produce an extended period of stress for everyone involved. Organizational change can produce severe stress when employees feel uncertain and worried for long periods.

Getting the job done and taking care of fellow employees under conditions of severe, long lasting stress can be one of the most difficult challenges facing employees. It is not easy, but there are approaches that have proven helpful in these situations.

## **Take concrete steps to lessen the sources of stress.**

When in danger, immediately contact the proper law enforcement function to get advice and concrete support. If co-workers are overwhelmed by competing demands in the aftermath of a large-scale emergency, clear priorities should be set and consistently followed. It is rarely possible to "fix" the entire situation, but the manager can improve it, and everyone feels better if they know others are helping.

## **Keep open lines of communication with co-workers.**

This is always important, but even more so when everyone is under long-term stress. In most stressful situations, one source of anxiety is a sense of losing control. Co-workers will feel better if they have up-to-date information. New communication strategies can be adopted, such as frequent meetings, publishing informal newsletters, and keeping an updated notice board in a central place. Also, do not forget the employee unions. Union leaders are concerned with getting information to employees, and this may be an excellent opportunity for labor-management cooperation. Consider that:

- Employees will have a greater sense of control if they are listened to with an open mind before supervisors make decisions that affect them. Employee's ideas and

preferences should be given serious consideration.

- During stressful times, people tend to withdraw from others and become less flexible than normal. Good communication between co-workers and supervisors is key.

## **Encourage teamwork and cooperation.**

Under long-term stress, there is no substitute for a supportive, caring work group. Employees will find any situation less painful if they are surrounded by co-workers who care about them and listen to them. A group accustomed to teamwork rather than internal competition will usually be able to cover for members who are temporarily unable to function at 100% effectiveness. Ideally, the group has always been strong and cohesive, but if not, the group leader should make an effort to help it pull together under stress. Encourage, validate, and reward teamwork and cooperation.

## **Maintain work standards.**

Doing good work is always essential, but even more so in times of high stress. Success can bolster self-esteem and group morale. Keep standards high but understand that flexibility will be needed to get the work done. Employees should get some freedom in meeting objectives while developing approaches that fit the contingencies of the stress situation. Check on how

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## When the Stress Doesn't Go Away

*Continued*

much flexibility is possible with conditions like work hours, administrative leave, alternate work sites, etc. It is natural to assume that the old way is the only way, but workers may have options yet to be considered.

**This is a difficult period, and it is useful to share feelings of anxiety, fatigue, or frustration.**

The supervisor can set a positive example by letting everyone know that they can do a good job even when not

feeling their best. This defines the situation in a way that both emphasizes the strength of the group and acknowledges challenges. The tone shouldn't be, "Poor us," but rather, "This is hard, but we're going to hang together and get through it."

**Acknowledge the value of professional counseling and encourage co-workers to get whatever help they need.**

Long-term stress can wear down the coping mechanisms of the strongest person, and it makes sense to get extra

support to preserve mental and physical health. One strategy is to bring in an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counselor to talk to the group about stress management. In addition to learning from the presentation, co-workers can develop a personal contact which makes it easier to turn to the EAP when needed.

## Tips for Coping with Extreme Stress

**Never underestimate the impact of stress on you as an individual.**

We must take care of ourselves before we can help others. Consider the following tips:

- Concentrate on caring for yourself as an equal priority to caring for the group.
- Talk about stress with other people in the same situation. Compare reactions and reassure yourself that you are not alone in your feelings.
- Talk about stress with friends and relatives who care about you. It is normal to feel the need to tell your story over and over.

- Keep your schedule as routine as possible, and do not overdo it.
- Allow time for hobbies, relaxing activities, and being with friends, even when you do not feel like it.
- Participate in whatever physical fitness activities you normally enjoy.
- Utilize whatever spiritual resources are part of your normal lifestyle.
- Beware of any temptation to turn to alcohol, tobacco, caffeine, and sweet foods. They may make you feel better momentarily but can cause problems in the long run. Concentrate instead on a healthy diet.

- If you can, postpone major life decisions until you feel like yourself again.
- Do not hesitate to accept help from friends, co-workers, and others. If possible, offer help to others affected by the event.
- Good self-care and talking with friends are not always enough. Do not hesitate to seek professional counseling through the agency's Employee Assistance Program (EAP). This does not mean that you are "sick," but a counselor may be able to help get your recovery process on track.