



**UNITED STATES OFFICE OF
PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT**

**A MANAGER'S HANDBOOK
HANDLING TRAUMATIC EVENTS
FEBRUARY 2003**

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A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

I am pleased to provide an update to our much heralded publication, *Handling Traumatic Events: A Manager's Handbook*. It has been modified and improved to be even more useful to managers and supervisors.

Many of us are ill-prepared to handle the traumatic events discussed in this handbook—suicides, assaults, threats, natural disasters, etc. Yet, these events can and do occur in our workplaces. They are events for which preparation helps, and this handbook tells us how to prepare.

Unfortunately, the tragic events of September 11, 2001, brought home to all of us the need to understand the difficulties and complexities of managing in a crisis. Those events dramatically reshaped our world, refocused our priorities and created a new sense of urgency for ensuring that we are getting results from government. Those results, as outlined in the President's Management Agenda, require a government that is citizen-centered, results-oriented, and market-based.

One can rarely foresee what traumatic event might occur or how individuals might respond. But being prepared and understanding the dynamics of a situation and how best to react can help immensely in times of trouble. Having a plan and providing leadership may be our best defense when tragedy strikes.

In addition to using this handbook for preparation purposes, it is an invaluable guide to follow should a traumatic event occur at your workplace. It is a good idea to keep it handy just in case. It will give you practical ideas on what to say to your employees and approaches to take to facilitate recovery.

In large scale emergencies, please check the Office of Personnel Management's website, <http://www.opm.gov> for current, situation-specific guidance and links to relevant resources.

Kay Coles James
Director

Chapter 1

WHEN TRAGEDY STRIKES AT WORK

Imagine that you, as a manager, are busy with your many daily responsibilities, when tragedy strikes:

- You hear a commotion down the hall, respond, and discover that an employee has swallowed a lethal dose of drugs in the presence of his coworkers.
- An irate individual storms into your section's work area and shoots an employee while you and other employees look on, shocked and helpless to intervene.
- A dazed-looking employee walks into the work area, bruised and disheveled, collapses at her desk, and reports that she was attacked while conducting a routine business call.

Initially, your responses will probably be almost automatic. You will notify the proper authorities and take whatever steps are necessary to preserve life and safety. After the paramedics and the investigators leave, the hard questions begin for you as a manager:

- How do you help your employees recover from this event, so their personal well being and professional effectiveness will not suffer long-term effects as a result of trauma?
- How do you get your staff moving again after employees have suffered from injury, bereavement, or emotional trauma?

As you would expect, there are no easy answers, and each situation presents its own set of challenges. However, there are some general guidelines to help you in most situations:

Stay firmly in charge. Let all employees know that you are concerned and doing all you can to help them. You represent the organization to your employees, and your caring presence can mean a great deal in helping them feel supported. You do not have to say anything profound; just be there, do your best to manage, and let your employees know you are concerned about them. Be visible to your subordinates, and take time to ask them how they are doing. Try to keep investigations and other official business from pulling you out of your work area for long periods of time.

Ask for support from higher management. Relief from deadlines and practical help such as a temporary employee to lighten your burden of administrative work can make it easier for you to focus on helping your employees and your organization return to normal functioning.

Don't "keep a stiff upper lip" or advise anybody else to do so. Let people know, in whatever way is natural for you, that you are feeling fear, grief, shock, anger, or whatever your natural reaction to the situation may be. This shows your employees you care about them. Since you also can function rationally in spite of your strong feelings, they know that they can do likewise.

Share information with your employees as soon as you have it available. Do not be afraid to say, "*I don't know.*" Particularly in the first few hours after a tragedy, information will be scarce and much in demand. If you can be an advocate in obtaining it, you will show your employees you care and help lessen anxiety.

Ask for support from your Employee Assistance Program (EAP). The EAP is available to offer professional assistance to groups and individuals affected by trauma. Encourage your employees to take advantage of the EAP as a way of preserving health, not as a sign of sickness.

Encourage employees to talk about their painful experiences. This is hard to do, but eases healing as people express their painful thoughts and feelings in a safe environment and come to realize that their reactions are normal and shared by others. You may want to have a mental health professional come in to facilitate a special meeting for this purpose. Or your group may prefer to discuss the situation among themselves. Don't be afraid to participate and to set a positive example by discussing your own feelings openly. Your example says more than your words.

Build on the strengths of the group. Encourage employees to take care of one another through such simple measures as listening to those in distress, offering practical help, visiting the hospitalized, or going with an employee on the first visit to a feared site. The more you have done to build a cohesive work group, and to foster self-confidence in your employees, the better your staff can help one another in a crisis.

Build on your work group's prior planning. If you have talked together about how you, as a group, would handle a hypothetical crisis, it will help prepare all employees, mentally and practically, to deal with a real one. Knowing employees' strengths and experience, having an established plan for communication in emergencies, and being familiar with EAP procedures can help you "hit the ground running" when a crisis actually 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 still dealing with grief and trauma. However, the process of getting a staff back to work is one which must be approached with great care and sensitivity. In particular, if anyone has died or been seriously injured, the process must be handled in a way that shows appropriate respect for them.

These guidelines give you a general model for management in a traumatic situation. Later chapters will deal more specifically with different types of traumas and the specific managerial challenges they present.

Chapter 2

HOW TO LISTEN TO SOMEONE WHO IS HURTING

Whenever people face bereavement, injury, or other kinds of trauma, they need to talk about it in order to heal. To talk, they need willing listeners. Unfortunately, many of us shrink from listening to people in pain. We may feel like we have enough troubles of our own or be afraid of making matters worse by saying the wrong thing.

Sometimes we excuse ourselves by assuming that listening to people who are hurting is strictly a matter for professionals such as psychotherapists or members of the clergy. It is true that professional people can help in special ways and provide the suffering individual with insights that most of us are not able to offer. However, their assistance, although valuable, is no substitute for the caring interest of supervisors, co-workers, friends, and others from the person's normal daily life.

It is natural to feel reluctant or even afraid of facing another person's painful feelings. But it is important not to 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 and listen and show you care.
- Find a private setting where you will not be overheard or interrupted. Arrange things 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 which show your interest and encourage the person to keep talking, for example:

"What happened next?"

"What was that like?"

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

"How terrible."

"I'm so sorry."

- Let people know that it's OK to cry. Some people are embarrassed if they cry in front of others. Handing over a box of tissues in a matter-of-fact way can help show that tears are normal and appropriate. It's also OK if you get a bit teary yourself.
- Don't be distressed by differences in the way people respond. One person may react very calmly, while another expresses strong feelings. One person may have an immediate emotional response; another may be "numb" at first and respond emotionally later. Emotions are rarely simple; people who are suffering loss often feel anger along with grief. Unless you see signs of actual danger, simply accept the feelings as that person's natural response at the moment. If a person is usually rational and sensible, those qualities will return once their painful feelings are expressed.

- Don't offer unsolicited advice. People usually will ask for advice later if they need it; initially it just gets in the way of talking things out.
- Don't turn the conversation into a forum for your own experiences. If you have had a similar experience, you may want to mention that briefly when the moment seems right. But do not say, "I know exactly how you feel," because everybody is different.
- It's natural to worry about saying the "wrong thing." The following is a brief but helpful list of three other things not to say to someone who is suffering:

DO NOT SAY:

*"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."

These are helpful guidelines, but the most important thing is to be there and listen in a caring way. 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 about 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 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. Congratulate yourself on having had the courage to help someone in need when it was not easy.

Chapter 3

RECOVERING FROM THE DEATH OF A CO-WORKER

The death of a co-worker is a painful experience under any circumstances, and all the more difficult if it is unexpected. Recovery of individuals and of your work group itself depends to a great extent on the effectiveness of the grief leadership provided by you – the group's manager. Effective grief leadership guides members of the work group as they mourn and memorialize the dead, help their families, and return to effective performance of their duties. The following guidelines have proved helpful:

Provide a private area where co-workers can mourn without public scrutiny. Initially, close friends and associates will feel shock and intense grief. 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 can show their concern by making a concerned effort to get that information, and share it in a timely manner. *Until you get the information, simply admitting honestly that you do not know is more comforting to 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 friendship patterns, and will take steps to ensure that those in particular need of comfort are given support. However, problems may occur if co-workers are on leave or travel. The manager and group members may need to reach out to those temporarily away from the office to make sure they do not get left out of the grieving process.

Serve as a role model. Managers need to serve as role models for appropriate grieving. If you show that you are actively grieving, but still able to function effectively, other employees will realize that they can also be sad without losing their ability to perform their duties rationally. You should avoid hiding your own feelings, as this often leads employees to misperceive you as not caring.

Consider offering EAP support. Often, a cohesive work group can go through the grief process without help. However, if members do not know each other well, or for whatever reason have difficulty talking, an EAP professional can support them in their discussion and offer suggestions for coping with grief.

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; rather people find after a point that 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, the person's contributions to the work and the morale of the group. Poetry or music reminiscent of the deceased might be shared.
- The most common mistake in planning memorials is to plan them at too high a level. Senior officials may want to take charge, to show that they care and to assure a polished product. This

approach usually "backfires," for example, *"The managers don't care about Sam; they just want to put on a show for the executives."*

- 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., the best friends of the deceased, makes the service more comforting for everyone. If the best friends are too upset to speak, they can take non-verbal roles such as handing out programs.

Reach out to family members. Reaching out to the family of the deceased can be comforting for both employees and 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 make a scrapbook for the bereaved family. Sometimes employees may want to leave a particular work station 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 work group makes an effort to uphold values held by the deceased and strive toward goals that he/she particularly valued, for example, *"I want to show the customers 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 be made to feel like "replacements" for employees who have died. Reorganizing responsibilities and moving furniture can help spare the new employee and others the painful experience of having somebody new at "Sam's desk" doing "Sam's job."

Remind employees 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 individual receives strong group support. However, some individuals may find these reactions especially troubling or long lasting, and may need to turn to the Employee Assistance Program for professional help in getting over the experience.

Chapter 4

SUPERVISING AN EMPLOYEE WITH SUICIDAL CONCERNS

Suicide is a significant cause of death among Americans, and government personnel are not exempt from the problem. Though there are differences in suicide rates based on such factors as age, gender, and ethnicity, a person from any background can commit suicide, or go through a period of seriously contemplating it.

People considering suicide often have been "worn down" by many stresses and problems. Actual or expected loss, especially a love relationship, 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 a divorce may deprive an individual of personal ties that were formerly supportive.

Listen carefully to what your employees say – people thinking about suicide often give hints about their intentions. Talking about not being present in the future, giving away prized possessions, and making funeral plans are examples of possible hints of suicidal intent. If you hear such talk, question it, kindly but firmly. You will not make the situation worse by clarifying it, and an open conversation with you may be the person's first step toward getting well.

Be alert to changes in behavior. A deterioration in job performance, personal appearance, punctuality, or other habits can be a sign of many problems, including suicidal concerns.

If an employee admits thinking about suicide:

You'll want to get your employee to professional help, and the way you do this is very important. The way you approach the issue can have an impact on the employee's willingness to receive professional help. Your 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 – the employee is both a unique human being and a valued member of your team.
- Show understanding of the employee's pain and despair, but offer hope that, with appropriate help, solutions can be found for the problems that are leading the person to feel so desperate.
- Ask whether any of the employee's problems are work related, and, if so, take initiative in solving those problems. For example, the employee may feel improperly trained for key responsibilities, or may be having difficulties with leave or some similar issue without having made you aware of it. If you can act as an advocate in remedying some of these problems, you will help in three ways-- removing one source of pain, showing concretely that someone cares, and offering hope that other problems can also be solved.
- Do not question the employee about personal problems, as the individual may wish to keep them out of the workplace, but listen with empathy if the employee chooses to share them.
- Do not offer advice, but acknowledge that the problems are real and painful.
- Protect the employee's privacy with regard to other employees. This will require thought and planning, as questions are sure to arise. When dealing with higher management, you need to think clearly about what they actually need to know, e.g., that the employee is temporarily working a reduced schedule on medical advice – as opposed to what they do not need to know,

e.g., 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.

Get Help:

As a general rule, anyone feeling enough pain to be considering suicide should be referred to a mental health professional, at least for evaluation. Make it clear that you want the employee to get 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 in the telephone book, and available on a 24 hour basis.
- Should there appear to be immediate danger, do not hesitate to call 911 or your agency's security officials.

Follow Up

Once your employee is involved in a treatment program, try to stay in touch with the program. This does **not** mean that you should involve yourself with specific personal problems that the employee is discussing with a therapist. What you do need to know, however, is how you can work with the treatment program and not at cross purposes to it.

Does the employee need to adjust work hours to participate in therapy?

Has the employee been prescribed medications whose side effects could affect job performance?

Should you challenge the employee as you normally do, or temporarily reassign the person to less demanding duties?

Mental health professionals will not, for ethical reasons, release information without the employee's consent. If you make it clear to the employee and treatment team what your goals are--to support them, not to delve into the employee's private concerns--you will probably have no difficulty getting cooperation. With the employee's consent, the EAP counselor can often play a coordinating role between the employees' health care provider and you as the supervisor. A meeting involving you, the employee, and the EAP counselor can be particularly helpful in clarifying relevant issues and assuring that your supervisory approach is consistent with the employee's treatment.

Take Care of Yourself

Working with a suicidal person is highly stressful, and you should take positive steps to preserve your own mental health while you help your employee. You should not hesitate to get support for yourself, either from your own supervisor or from the EAP.

Chapter 5

HELPING AN EMPLOYEE RECOVER FROM AN ASSAULT

Being assaulted on the job can lead not only to physical injury, but also to emotional distress. Recovery with return to job effectiveness requires not only the assistance of professional experts such as physicians and psychotherapists, but also the enlightened support of supervisors and co-workers.

The role of the immediate supervisor is especially important, because that person most powerfully represents the organization to the employee. The supervisor needs to convey personal concern for the employee as well as the concern of the organization and a sense of the employee's unique importance to the work group and its mission. The following guidelines have proved helpful in these situations:

If the employee is hospitalized, visit, send cards, and convey other expressions of concern. It is important that the employee not feel abandoned. The nursing staff can advise you of the length and type of interaction most appropriate. If the person is quite ill, a very 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 a part of the organization.

Encourage co-workers to show support. At some point the employee will need to tell the story of the assault, probably more than once, and may find it easier to discuss this with co-workers who are familiar with the work setting and may have had similar experiences. Co-workers can help significantly by listening in a caring way, showing support and avoiding any second guessing of the situation. Being assaulted is not only physically painful; 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 a 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 in screening phone calls and mail. Other kinds of help, such as caring for 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 can return, the easier it will be to rejoin the group, and the employee will have missed out on less of the current information needed for effective job performance. However, it is important not to expose the employee to too much stress at once. A flexible approach, for example, part-time work, a different assignment at first, or assignment of a co-worker for support, can often help the employee overcome anxiety and recover self-confidence and may allow the employee to return to work sooner than would otherwise be possible.
- The employee's physical needs must be clarified with health care providers, e.g., the supervisor and employee 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 other employees for this in advance. Advance thought needs to be given to any new

environmental needs the employee may have, such as wheelchair access or a place to lie down during the day.

- 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 by retaining an experienced employee as an integral part of the work group.

Offer counseling. Counseling services should be offered through the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), and with the attitude that it is perfectly natural to use such 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.

Make career counseling and other forms of assistance 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. Supervisors and co-workers who have tried to help the employee may need reassurance that their efforts contributed to the individual’s recovery, and that the decision is not a rejection of them.

Chapter 6

MANAGING AFTER A DISASTER

Any disaster, natural or man-made, creates unusual challenges for management. Whether it is a hurricane, an earthquake or terrorist attack or even the threat of an attack, you and your staff may yourselves be suffering from its effects. 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—caring for its own members, and facilitating community recovery. Besides meeting customers' special needs for assistance following a disaster, agency personnel are often called on to support other Federal agencies in providing a wide range of community services.

Plan ahead. You and your work group should be familiar with any disaster plans that affect you, and should have your own plans, however informal, for how you might function in a disaster. Involving employees in planning helps give them a sense of empowerment, and can improve the quality of your plan by assuring that everyone's experience and skills are brought into play.

Despite the magnitude of the challenges, Federal Government agencies have a proud history of responding effectively to disasters. The following suggestions are general principles that can help you structure your disaster response (they are no substitute for a comprehensive disaster plan):

Take care of your own people first. You need to locate your staff and assure that they and their families have necessary medical care, housing, food, and other necessities before they can be effective in serving the public. This task will be easier if you have planned for it in advance.

Modify office rules and procedures that are counterproductive after a disaster. Dress codes, rules about children in the office, and restrictions on using telephones for personal business for example, may need to be temporarily adjusted in the post-disaster period. Agencies have the authority to grant excused absence to employees who need time off to normalize their home and family situations.

Consider expanding telecommuting. If transportation is disrupted, employees who ordinarily choose not to telework may find telework an excellent interim solution. As part of your disaster planning, you may want to establish emergency telework plans for key employees who do not normally telework.

Work cooperatively with employee unions. Disaster situations encourage labor-management cooperation, regardless of what the labor relations climate has been in the past. Labor and management share a deep concern for employees' well being and recovery; working together in an informal way can lead to more effective, flexible responses to employee needs.

Take steps to prevent accidents and illness. Much of the human suffering associated with a disaster happens after the event itself, and can be prevented through good management. It is particularly important to prevent the overwork and exhaustion that tend to occur as people throw themselves into disaster recovery operations, because exhaustion raises the risk of accidents and illness.

- Post-disaster environments are often less safe and sanitary than normal ones, so that people living and working in them need to exercise special care.
- Exhaustion and lack of sleep can decrease alertness, impair judgment, and make people more vulnerable to accidents.

- People who are exhausted are at increased risk for disease and often forget to take preventive steps such as drinking enough safe water, avoiding contaminated water, and using whatever other precautions are appropriate in the environment.

Prevent overwork and exhaustion. After an initial crisis period during which overwork may be necessary, develop procedures to assure that employees do not work too many hours without rest. There are several strategies for assuring that people do not exhaust themselves and encouraging them to adopt safe, health promoting behavior:

- Be sure to provide adequate staffing for all new responsibilities created after the disaster, and for traditional responsibilities that become more demanding as a result of it. Prior planning and cross-training can make a big difference.
- Set clear priorities, including identifying work that simply will not be done in the short term.
- Train managers to monitor their subordinates and check for signs of exhaustion.
- Since leaders are especially prone to overwork, monitor fellow leaders and set a positive example for subordinates.
- Take care to assure that no employee has an essential task that no one else knows how to do, or that person will surely be overworked.

Encourage and facilitate healthy, safe behavior. Do not stop at telling people what to do; make it easy for them to do it.

- Educate employees. Remind them of the importance of getting adequate sleep and rest, drinking enough water, and using whatever precautions are necessary to the environment.
- Be sure there is a convenient supply of safe drinking water, keep it cold if possible, and remind employees to drink water regularly. It's not uncommon to become dehydrated under stress.
- If your building's water supply is unsafe, don't just tell people not to drink it. Physically block water fountains with tape, cardboard, etc., and post prominent signs above washbasins.
- If traffic is heavily congested after a disaster, avoid unnecessary travel. When travel is necessary, try to organize carpools with a well rested driver who knows the area rather than sending each employee off alone.

Provide opportunities for employees 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:

- Provide 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, since some employees may need more personal assistance in resolving problems arising from the disaster.
- Help your EAP to be more accessible to employees who do not want to make a formal appointment but would just like to ask a question. Bring the EAP counselor to the areas where employees are actually working.
- Offer opportunities for employees to share their experiences informally, for example, by providing a break area with coffee or other refreshments.

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 very helpful in conveying information and boosting morale.
- Informal newsletters can be a valuable source of information.
- Information can reduce the detailed employees' stress from worrying about co-workers, while reassuring them that they are still a valued part of their own organization.

Chapter 7

MANAGING WHEN THE STRESS DOESN'T GO AWAY

Previously chapters have focused mainly on traumatic events that overwhelm us with their suddenness. An employee is assaulted, or a tornado rips through an office. We are shocked and shaken by the enormity of the event and its unexpected nature.

In recent years, Federal Government employees in several parts of the country have had to cope with rebuilding their homes and lives after a disaster while taking on new roles and responsibilities to help the community's recovery. Disasters are not the only source of long term stress that our employees may face. Threats of violence, whether from terrorism or street crime, can lead to severe stress situations which go on for weeks, and affect many people. Harassment campaigns directed against employees can be nerve wracking even when there is no apparent physical danger. The prospect of losing a group member to a slowly debilitating illness can produce a long period of stress for everyone involved. Organizational change can produce severe stress if employees feel uncertain and worried for long periods.

Getting the job done and taking care of employees under conditions of severe, long lasting stress can be one of the most difficult challenges a manager may face. It's not easy to take charge, develop innovative approaches, and be sensitive to the needs of others when you're at least as uncomfortable as your subordinates. There are, however, some management approaches that have proved helpful in these situations:

Take steps to reduce the sources of stress. If danger is a problem, call the right law enforcement authorities immediately, and get all the advice and concrete support you can for them. If employees are overwhelmed by competing demands in the aftermath of a large scale emergency, set clear priorities and make sure they are consistently followed. You probably cannot "fix" the entire situation, but you can improve it. Your employees will feel better if they know you are working on their behalf.

Communicate with your employees. 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 being out of control. Your employees will feel better if they have up-to-date information and permission to approach you with their questions. Depending on circumstances, you may want to adopt new communications strategies, such as having frequent meetings, publishing an informal newsletter, and keeping an updated notice board in a central place.

- Employees will have a greater sense of control if you are careful to listen to them with an open mind before making decisions that affect them. Even if your decision turns out not to be the one they would have wished for, they will feel less powerless if they believe that their ideas and preferences were given serious consideration.
- Communicating with employees may be difficult for you if your own tendency, when under stress, is to withdraw from other people or to become less flexible than you normally are. Both are common stress reactions, and can interfere with your leadership if you do not monitor yourself.

Encourage teamwork and cooperation. Under long term stress, there is no substitute for a supportive, caring work group. Employees will find the situation, whatever it is, less painful if they are surrounded by co-workers who care about them, and will listen if they need to talk or lend a hand if they need help. 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 percent effectiveness.

Ideally, your group has always been strong and cohesive. If not, do what you can to help it pull together under stress. Encourage and validate teamwork and cooperation. Avoid any appearance of favoritism and make it clear that there is opportunity for everyone to achieve and receive recognition.

Set clear work standards. Doing good work is always essential, but even more so in times of high stress, since success can bolster self esteem and group morale. Keep your standards high, but allow as much flexibility as possible in how the work gets done. If you set clear standards, but give employees some freedom in working out ways to meet them, they will probably be able to develop approaches that fit the contingencies of the stress situation. Check on how much flexibility you have with regard to such conditions as work hours, teleworking, etc. It's natural to assume that the way we have always done things is the only way, but you and your employees may have options that you have not considered.

Make it clear that this is a difficult period, and it's OK to share feelings of anxiety, fatigue, or frustration. If you set the example by letting people know you can do a good job even though you are not feeling your best, you can set a positive example. Define the situation in a way that emphasizes the strength of the group while acknowledging the challenges it faces. The tone should not 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 your employees to get whatever help they need. Long term stress can wear down the coping resources of the strongest person, and it makes sense to get extra support in order 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. Besides learning from the presentation, your employees will develop a personal contact which can make it easier to turn to the EAP if they need it.

Don't underestimate the impact of stress on you as an individual. Attend to your own stress management program, and use your resources for professional consultation and counseling. You will find it easier to take care of your work group if you also take care of yourself.

Chapter 8

Workplace Violence: Stopping It Before It Starts

As a manager, you play an important role in preventing workplace violence and ensuring that threatening or violent behavior receives an appropriate response when it does occur. Most Federal agencies have workplace violence policies and procedures, as well as interdisciplinary workplace violence teams to assist you. However, it is up to you to ensure that your own work area is safe and that your employees know what to do in an emergency.

Within the same agency, different worksites and missions produce different risks and safety factors. Some employees work in highly secure headquarters buildings while others work in storefront offices open to the public. Regardless of how carefully the agency has developed its policies and procedures, it is still important to apply them in a way that makes sense in each individual site. That's where you play a key role with your detailed knowledge of what your employees actually do and under what circumstances they do it.

Risk Factors

Assessing possible risks is an important early step in violence prevention. One way of assessing risks in your workplace is to look at possible sources of violence: strangers, customers, and employees or their associates.

- Violence from strangers is the most deadly form of workplace violence. It usually accompanies robbery, and makes night retail work especially dangerous. People planning robberies usually select their targets carefully and bring their weapons with them. While night retail work is not a common Federal occupation, employees who work into the evening can face some of the same risks on their way home. Preventive strategies include good lighting and various types of perimeter security such as badging, visitor screening, and controlled access to buildings. Employee training is also important, so that everyone can support the security staff by following procedures and being alert for suspicious people or behaviors. Terrorists, like common criminals, also plan their crimes carefully and are also likely to commit deadly crimes. The same common sense security measures are also helpful against terrorism.
- Violence from "customers," such as clients or patients, is usually spontaneous and therefore less likely to be lethal. A hospitalized patient suffering from delirium may strike a nurse, or a frustrated traveler may lash out at the Federal employee who has to confiscate his vacation souvenirs at the airport. Preventive strategies include workplace design and carefully developed procedures, as well as employee training.
- Violence from employees or their close associates is the most varied form of workplace violence. It can be mild or severe. It can grow out of workplace disputes or out of personal, emotional issues such as the end of a romantic relationship. Preventive measures include basic good leadership principles such as fairness, open communication, and respect for employees. Your employees must feel safe to approach you if they feel afraid for any reason. Because these situations are likely to be complex, you need to have ready access to resources such as your agency's workplace violence team. If there isn't a team, you can seek assistance from the organizations usually represented on agency teams, for example the employee assistance program (EAP), security office, and human resources office.

Preventative Measures

As a manager, you should involve your staff in assessing risk factors and needs for additional training, lighting, or whatever is necessary. They may have observed problems you have not noticed. Being part of the assessment and planning process can help them understand that every employee has a role in violence prevention. It is also important to keep employees well informed about helping resources such as the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), your agency's alternative dispute resolution program, and any other resources that can help them solve problems before violence becomes an issue.

Everyone should know exactly what to do in an emergency. Stickers on telephones can help reinforce the message. Do not leave your employees wondering whether they should call 911, the guard desk in the lobby, or their friend down the hall in the Inspector General's office.

The way you interact with your employees can be a preventive factor. If you earn your employees' trust through fairness and good judgment, they will call your attention to potential problems before they explode. If you are courteous and respectful in your own behavior, you will set a positive example for their behavior.

It is also important to intervene promptly if someone is behaving rudely toward fellow employees, bullying co-workers, or being inappropriate in ways that raise the level of tension in the office. It may just require a conversation; the employee may simply be unaware of the impact of the behavior on others. Still, it is a good idea to check with your employee relations specialist before you talk with the employee.

Warning Signs

Unfortunately, the best prevention strategies cannot always prevent violence, so you need to be aware of warning signs. You do not need to become an expert on violent behavior; instead you need to know when it's time to look into the situation and seek advice. Warning signs tend to fall into two categories:

- Someone says or hints that they might harm someone. People contemplating violence sometimes broadcast their intentions. Even if statements seem to be made in jest, employees need to understand that such jokes are not appropriate.
- Someone appears to be frightened of someone else. That person feeling fear could be you. You could find yourself anxious about counseling an employee, even though you know that the counseling is appropriate. Or an employee might seem afraid after talking with an irate ex-spouse over the phone. An employee might frighten another employee with inappropriate talk about weapons. A normally dependable employee may make excuses to avoid seeing a particular customer.

These situations should make alarm bells go off in your mind. Even if your own response seems somewhat "gut level" and hard to explain, you should listen to your own feelings. You're not making decisions yet; you are just identifying a situation that needs to be explored. You can follow up on your initial response by observing the situation more closely, gathering additional information, and seeking professional advice.

If your agency has a workplace violence team, that is the natural place to go for help. If not, you may need to assemble your own team, including the offices typically represented on agency teams, such as your EAP, employee relations specialist, and security office. Your own supervisor's experience and knowledge of agency resources can be an important resource for you as well.

Of course, if the situation seems to be immediately dangerous, you need to call the appropriate authorities and take

whatever steps are necessary to protect safety. Fortunately, most situations are not immediately explosive, and there is usually time to plan a thorough and thoughtful response.

Response

The response will vary to fit the situation. Essentially there are three major tasks:

- Evaluate the situation more extensively
- Develop and execute a plan for responding to it
- Address safety issues at every stage in the process

As soon as possible, you and your advisors need to stabilize the situation in a way that preserves safety. This might involve barring a customer or employee from the building temporarily, or moving a threatened employee temporarily to a safer place.

Once the immediate danger has passed, you need to move on to investigate the situation, collect statements and other documentation, and develop a long term plan. The long term plan may involve personnel actions, legal measures, or involvement of law enforcement organizations.

You need to be concerned about employees affected by whatever has happened. Even those not directly involved can find it upsetting to learn there has been an incident in their own workplace. Do they need information, a chance to compare their responses with those of co-workers, or a meeting with the EAP? Earlier chapters of this manual can give you ideas about how to support these employees and help them regain their morale and effectiveness.

A Final Note

If you would like more detailed information about workplace violence and about setting up an agency program, *Dealing with Workplace Violence: A Guide for Agency Planner* is at <http://www.opm.gov/workplac/index.htm>. Information for purchasing the guide from the Government Printing Office is at <http://www.opm.gov/workplac/html/ordervh.htm>.

Chapter 9

When Domestic Violence Comes to Work

While it may be called "domestic," violence between spouses or partners can be a very dangerous type of violence, and it can easily spill over into any workplace, including yours. Besides bringing danger to the workplace, it can also bring increased absenteeism and decreased productivity. Women are most frequently the victims, but men can also be abused.

Powerful forces such as embarrassment and realistic fear often make it difficult for victims to seek help. Before a specific incident surfaces, it is important to let employees know that competent, confidential help is available, and that victims will be treated with respect and concern. Work with your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to ensure that educational materials about domestic violence are readily available, and that employees all know how to access the EAP itself.

Possible signs of domestic violence include:

- Changes in behavior or work performance
- Preoccupation/lack of concentration
- Increasing or unexplained absences
- Harassing phone calls to the workplace
- Bruises or other injuries that are unexplained or come with explanations that just don't add up

If you, as a manager, observe these or other possible signs, you should not try to diagnose the problem, but you should talk with the employee about what you have observed and offer your support and concern. In a private setting, tell the employee what you have observed: "I noticed the bruises you had last week and you look upset and worried today." Express your concern that the employee might be abused: "I thought it was possible that you are being hurt by someone and I am concerned about you." Express your support: "No one deserves to be hit by someone else." If the employee does not disclose violence or other problems, do not make further questions or speculations. But do point out the EAP is available for confidential assistance and that your door is open as well.

If the employee discloses a problem with domestic violence, resist any temptation to take charge of the employee's safety planning. There are risks on the path to a safe resolution, and well meaning advice can actually increase the employee's danger. It is essential that the employee receive advice from people with solid experience in the field. Refer the employee to the EAP, which can help in ways that you cannot and should not.

Most often, the EAP will provide the employee with support at work and also refer the employee to an advocacy organization that specializes in helping victims of violence. If the employee prefers not to talk with the EAP, an alternate resource is the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233. The hotline staff can provide advice and referral to local resources. Explain that the employee's disclosure to you is confidential, but in the case of a clear threat to the workplace, you and anybody else who knows would be obliged to seek help.

Once the employee begins working on a safety plan with qualified advice, offer your cooperation in working out the workplace components of the plan. This might involve temporary changes such as moving the employee to a more

secure location or instituting a variable work schedule to make the employee less vulnerable to ambush. Your security office can help with this kind of planning, and in other ways as well, such as keeping copies of restraining orders and photos of the abuser at the guard station.

Be approachable, and let the employee know you are available to discuss work related issues such as needing leave for court appointments. If you think of potentially helpful options, present them, but do not pressure the employee to accept them. Show respect for the employee's decisions.

Remember the healing value of work. Victimization often separates people from their friends and family, and robs them of their self confidence. Having a chance to succeed, contribute, and be part of a team can be a real lifeline for the employee.

The Office of Personnel Management's handbook, *Responding to Domestic Violence: Where Federal Employees Can Find Help*, is online at <http://www.opm.gov/ehs/workplac/html/domestic.html>. Information for ordering this document can be found at <http://www.opm.gov/ehs/DMORDER.HTM>.

Final Note

TIPS FOR COPING WITH EXTREME STRESS

- Concentrate on caring for yourself.
- Talk about it with other people in the same situation. Compare reactions, reassure yourself that you are not alone in the way you are feeling.
- Talk about it with friends and relatives who care about you. It's normal to 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, being with friends, even if you do not quite 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 more problems in the long run. Concentrate instead on a healthy diet.
- If you can, postpone major life decisions until you have had a chance to get yourself back onto a more even keel.
- Do not hesitate to accept help from friends, co-workers, and others. If you can, offer help to others affected by the event.
- Sometimes good self-care and talking with friends are not enough. You may want to seek professional counseling through your Employee Assistance Program. This does not mean you are "sick," but rather that a counselor may be able to help you get your recovery process on track.

EMERGENCY PHONE NUMBERS

POLICE: _____

FIRE/RESCUE: _____

SECURITY GUARDS: _____

FEDERAL PROTECTION SERVICE: _____

HEALTH UNIT: _____

EMPLOYEE RELATIONS: _____

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM: _____