

Coping With Crisis: Managing Employee Fear and Low Morale

Resource Type: Articles

Topic: Crisis Management, Crisis Communications

In the weeks and months following a major disaster or traumatic event, employers in government entities and nonprofit organizations discover unprecedented levels of fear and concern on the part of staff. The evidence manifests itself in many ways. People with perfect attendance records call in sick at record levels, seriously impairing the organization's ability to deliver services and meet client needs. In other instances, productivity levels hit rock bottom due to a general sense of disquiet and a need to talk about what happened. The world as these people know it has been shaken and they don't feel safe or secure.

If the disaster adversely affects the economy (cash flow, sales, donations, tax revenues, emergency spending), employees may be cut back or laid off, expansion or improvement plans may be shelved, and the entity or nonprofit organization may be fighting for its life. Any of these measures will exacerbate staff morale and fear, which is already heightened by the traumatic event.

The following paragraphs offer suggestions for how an entity or nonprofit organization might try to cope with these risks. Each of you will need to consider and tailor your response according to your unique circumstances: mission, nature of services or products, magnitude of the problem facing your organization, and the resources available to address the issue.

Q: What can supervisors and employers do to address high levels of fear and unprecedented, low morale among employees following a disaster or other traumatic experience?

A: Understand that employees need time to heal. The time it takes each person to return to normalcy depends on the degree of intensity and loss, that person's ability to cope with emotionally difficult situations, and how many other stressful events preceded the traumatic experience. As a supervisor or employer, you can:

- Cut them some slack. Within reason, consider working with, around, or through missed deadlines, lapses in productivity, and errors.
- Lighten up any restrictive office rules to facilitate healing. You might look at your dress code; policies concerning children in the office and personal phone calls; and grant time-off to deal with family matters.
- Be truthful about job security. If their jobs are secure, tell them. If they could be laid off, give them as much information as you are able, provide them with on-the-job time to seek new employment, refer them to outplacement resources in the community, and find out if "sister" organizations are hiring.
- Encourage employees to acknowledge and talk about their fears as part of the healing process. Keep an open door, provide information about employee assistance programs, and put together a list of community resources where you can refer employees or they can seek help on their own.
- Help employees feel safe at work. Start by re-educating them about security and emergency procedures. Provide short and simple, bullet-pointed lists of procedures for opening mail, answering the door, recording phoned-in threats, parking in well-lit areas, working alone, and driving on the entity's or nonprofit organization's business.
- Create situations where people can naturally bond and provide each other support. Hold regular staff meetings, develop project teams, and develop special committees to address specific challenges facing the organization.

- Be aware of signs that indicate employees need professional help. Some of these signs are isolation; irritability; dramatic mood swings; prolonged lethargy, tearfulness, or depression; and references to or talk of suicide or ending it all.
- Encourage employees to take positive action to help them heal. Provide suggestions about how individuals can contribute in the aftermath of a disaster or adverse events, such as by organizing or participating in a blood drive or fund-raiser for victim relief or helping victims rebuild their homes and lives.

Q: How do people who experience or witness a traumatic situation react?

A: Normal reactions to abnormal situations include:

- anxiety
- loss of control
- flashbacks
- nightmares
- shattered sense of security
- emotional numbness

Q: When should individuals who have witnessed or been involved in a disaster or other traumatic experience seek professional help?

A: If individuals feel that they are unable to regain control of their lives or experience any of the following symptoms for more than one month, they should consider seeking outside professional mental health assistance. According to the American Psychological Association, these symptoms include:

- Recurring thoughts or nightmares about the incident.
- Sleeplessness or change of appetite.
- Having memory lapses, especially with aspects of the trauma.
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions; feeling scattered.
- Feeling anxious or fearful, especially when sounds or smells recall the incident.
- Feeling on-edge, easily startled, or overly alert.
- Feeling depressed or sad, or having low or no energy.
- Feeling irritable, easily agitated, or angry and resentful.
- Feeling emotionally numb, withdrawn, disconnected, or different from others.
- Feeling a sense of emptiness, despair, or hopelessness about the future.
- Feeling guilty about having survived — or not having done enough to prevent — the incident.
- Isolating themselves from others.
- Being overly protective of their own and their families' safety.
- Experiencing increased conflict with family members.
- Being tearful or crying for no apparent reason.

Q: What steps can an entity or nonprofit take to help restore a sense of normalcy and security following a disaster or other traumatic experience?

A: Both shock and denial are normal responses to disaster and other kinds of trauma. These protective reactions may leave people feeling stunned and temporarily numb. They may feel disconnected from life. There isn't one standard timeframe for reaction and recovery, but there are some standard constructive steps individuals can take to help them return to a sense of normalcy. Encourage your staff to:

- Give themselves time to heal — be their own best friends; let them acknowledge their emotions.
- Avoid using alcohol and drugs to block the pain.
- Focus on the things in their lives that they can control — how they treat other people; not being riled by the unimportant; setting limits; taking time out; choosing to play; and finding small ways to help others.
- Limit their exposure to media coverage of the event(s).
- Maintain connections with their communities, friends, relatives, neighbors, and co-workers,
- Ask for support from people who care about them, will listen to them and empathize with them, or inquire about local support groups that are led by trained and experienced professionals.
- Eat well-balanced meals, and get plenty of rest and exercise to strengthen their ability to handle stress.
- Establish or re-establish routines: mealtimes, bedtimes, exercise regimen.
- Avoid major life decisions, which are highly stressful.
- Learn what to expect as the result of trauma; go to the library, or surf the Internet under “coping +

disaster” or “disaster + mental + health.”

- Think about things that give them hope.

More Information

Read our book on crisis management: [*Vital Signs: Anticipating, Preventing and Surviving Crisis in a Nonprofit*](#).