Understanding trauma in the workplace

A trauma is an event that is sudden, unexpected and dangerous or violent for those who experience, witness or hear about it. Webster's dictionary defines "trauma" as "a disordered psychic or behavioural state resulting from mental or emotional stress or physical injury." In other words, even if we are not physically injured during a traumatic event, it can still have a powerful affect on us.

Traumatic incidents in the workplace

Even though a workplace trauma may last only seconds, its effect on those involved may be intensive and long lasting. That may be why the term "critical incident" is also used to describe these events. Examples of workplace traumas include:

- Violent behaviour
- The death of an employee, especially by suicide or homicide
- A tragedy such as a train or highway crash
- A workplace accident
- A robbery, physical or sexual assault at work
- A natural or man-made disaster, such as an ice-storm, tornado, or bombing

How our body responds

All who experience, witness or hear about a traumatic event will be affected in some way. By understanding the normal and natural reactions to traumatic events, you will be better prepared to cope in the aftermath. Some of the physical and emotional responses to expect after a trauma include:

Immediate physical shock. The most profound effect of a trauma is initial physical shock. When our bodies feel under attack, we release hormones and adrenaline into the bloodstream. This can affect the heart and lungs, skin, brain and digestive tract. A shock can make the whole body "shut down" or can cause the following:

- Chest pain
- Dizzy spells
- Headaches
- Heart palpitations
- Lack of energy
- Neck or back pain
- Shakiness
- Restlessness
- Insomnia and nightmares

Normal emotional reactions. After the physical shock subsides, employees experience emotions such as disbelief and denial, over which they have little or no control. Reactions can include:

- Fear or terror
- Frustration
- Confusion
- Guilt or self-blame
- Grief or sorrow
- Exhaustion and sleeplessness
- Irritability, feeling edgy or suspicious
- Difficulty concentrating
- Short-term memory lapses

The longer the event lasts, the greater the intensity of the crisis. Emotional reactions can take on many forms and can affect behaviour in the workplace and at home.

How emotional shock affects behaviour

For many trauma victims, their emotional reactions can cause:

- Daydreaming and distraction
- Forgetfulness and repetition of tasks already done
- Making small errors
- Reluctance to go back to work

Critical incidents can also trigger memories of prior trauma. This can provoke behaviour that seems out of character, especially in traumas that appear minor to others.

How organizations help employees cope with trauma

Qualified, experienced counsellors can help to normalize the reactions of all involved and prevent post-traumatic stress through group meetings at the worksite.

Taking care after a trauma

An individual's reactions to a trauma—both emotional and physical—will lessen and disappear over time. However, even after those involved in traumas think they've recovered and are coping well, their feelings of anger, fear, guilt, confusion, etc., may come back. While this can be disturbing, it is normal. But it is important that anyone involved in a traumatic incident take care of himself or herself to ensure their body and mind have the resources they need to fuel a full recovery. Try and get enough rest, a balanced diet and exercise.