In the aftermath: strategies for coping with trauma

Traumatic events that occur in the workplace—such as assaults, accidents, deaths or robberies—can have a tremendous impact on everyone involved. Although there may be no visible signs of injury, trauma or grief, these incidents can take a serious emotional toll. They may affect those who experience the trauma first-hand, those who witness the incident, and even co-workers who hear about it.

By understanding typical responses to these abnormal events and learning some self-care strategies, you can learn to better cope with the thoughts, emotions and behaviours that follow a trauma.

Normal reactions to traumatic events

Everyone reacts differently to trauma, depending on their involvement and their coping abilities. Since traumatic events can be unexpected, sudden and intense, they may threaten your sense of safety. As a protective reaction, your body will respond with shock and denial. The initial shock can prompt feelings of numbness, heart palpitations, dizziness and exhaustion. It is also normal to feel vulnerable, scared or helpless after a traumatic incident.

Once the initial shock response fades, people who have experienced trauma often feel various types of emotional "aftershocks"—sudden and strong feelings, such as anger, fear, frustration, confusion, guilt, grief or sorrow. You may also experience physical reactions such as exhaustion, sleeplessness, stomach upset or headaches; or cognitive reactions, such as being edgy or suspicious, having difficulty concentrating or making decisions, or having a short attention span or lapses in memory.

How long do trauma reactions last?

Emotional, physical and cognitive reactions to trauma may appear immediately after the event and may last a few days, weeks or even months, depending on the nature and severity of the trauma. In some cases, the signs and symptoms of trauma do not appear until weeks or months after the event.

Generally, people report feeling more “like themselves” again in a couple of weeks. However, sometimes a response can recur, triggered by a reminder of the traumatic incident; for instance, the anniversary of the event. It is not uncommon to have a resurgence of trauma reactions even after recovery seems complete.

Coping strategies to help speed recovery

The days, weeks and months following a traumatic incident will present a difficult time for those involved. Here are some tips to help you deal with this aftermath:

Emotional strategies. Let yourself feel what you feel, and:

- Acknowledge that you've been through a highly stressful experience. Accept your feelings, which may be intense and unpredictable.
- Be patient and allow yourself time to recover.
- Seek emotional support from family, friends, and outside professionals.

Physical strategies. A healthy body fuels a healthy mind and can help enhance your restorative powers. Be sure to:

- Eat well-balanced meals.
- Avoid alcohol, drugs and caffeine.
- Get plenty of rest. If you experience difficulty sleeping, try relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation or yoga.
- Exercise regularly—get back to your normal exercise routine or try to include walking, swimming, hiking or bicycling into your schedule.

Behavioural strategies. Resuming pre-trauma activities can help you get back to normal faster. And keep these tips in mind:

Above all, remember that your feelings, thoughts and physical symptoms are a normal reaction to an abnormal situation—a traumatic event. Trust in the techniques described above, and let time heal your wounds; you will return to normal functioning in time.

- Don't isolate yourself. Friends and family can be supportive or provide an ear or a shoulder to lean on.
- Communicating about your experience will help the healing—talk with family or friends or keep a diary or journal (of thoughts, feelings, etc.).
- Re-establish routines such as regular mealtimes.
- Keep your mind occupied with activities that you enjoyed before the trauma—gardening, crossword puzzles, cooking, knitting, walking the dog, etc.
- Find activities that help you to feel calmer, stronger and more grounded—volunteer, take part in activities in cultural or religious organizations of your choice, meditate, or find a quiet corner to read a book or magazine.
- Avoid making any major decisions in the immediate aftermath of the trauma, and avoid situations that may cause more stress.