



What You Need to Know About Supporting Your Staff After a Critical Incident: Guidance Note for Managers and Leaders

Building foundations

- Many organizations will already require operational '*debriefing*' of some sort after an incident occurs. This may be done by managers or HR professionals, and often involves clarifying and recording the details of the incident. This is not the same as psychosocial debriefing, where the primary purpose is to offer psychological or emotional support to the staff involved.
 - It is important that your staff are aware of any operational or other debriefing procedures that are in place, so that they know what to expect if they are involved in a difficult incident.
- Emotional support can only be effective if there is an existing level of trust between management and employees. Building trusting relationships and open channels of communication should be considered as part of your organization's emergency planning.
- COVID-19 has meant that almost every care organization has tested in their ability to respond to challenging incidents in the workplace. As we emerge from the pandemic, this presents an opportunity to consult with staff on how supported they felt, and to review policies which are in place to improve the response to future events. Managers may want to consider having these conversations with staff, as well as OHS committees.

Myth-busting

MYTH: As a leader, I have to be strong and should not show vulnerability in challenging circumstances

It is important that you let staff know it is possible—and okay—for anyone to have an emotional response to difficult incidents at work. In some cases sharing your own feelings about a challenge may help build trust between you and your staff. It is also important for you to take care of your own psychological health and safety, and seek external support if needed. See the 'Resources' section of the Safety Huddle for more detail on this.

MYTH: Supporting staff involves significant, time-intensive action

Providing support is simply about letting staff know you are there for them. This can be small actions, such as bringing in treats after a particularly hard week, or asking people how they are doing and listening to understand, rather than respond. Lots of small actions add up.

MYTH: I should be trained in counselling or therapy to support staff's mental wellbeing

It is not your role to act as a mental health professional. There are other resources staff can access for this. You should be aware of the professional support available and able to direct employees to this when needed.



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How to have supportive conversations following difficult incidents

This guidance note is to help managers and leaders support their staff after a distressing, traumatic, or difficult incident has taken place in the workplace. This could be a number of things, for example:

- A one-off incident affecting a small number of staff, such as a violent incident involving a resident.
- A period of stress and anxiety such as an outbreak of infectious disease.
- Something which has recently happened outside of the workplace but which affects staff, such as the death of a resident or client.

Everyone responds to these types of incident differently. Common responses may include feelings of anxiety or lack of control, distressing memories, insomnia, difficulty relaxing, or loss of appetite

Having supportive conversations

This conversation should take place within one or two days of the incident. Depending on what happened, it can be one-on-one or in a group.

Discussions of difficult incidents should not be made mandatory for anyone. Some people may not want to discuss these issues in front of colleagues, or with their manager. You can let individuals know that you are available to listen if they do decide they wish to talk, but they do not have to.

1. In advance, find out what support is offered by your workplace's Employee Assistance Program.
2. Find a private space for these discussions, if needed. You might consider providing necessities such as water and tissues.
3. Acknowledge what happened, and let staff know you are there to listen and to make sure they can get the support they need. Do not make assumptions about how they are feeling, or what they might want to talk about. *May be an opportunity to provide facts and dispel rumors.*
4. Listen to how they are feeling—as much as they want to tell you—without interrupting or offering solutions. It's best to avoid statements such as "I know how you feel" or "it'll be okay" which may make them feel they are not being heard. Let them know that how they feel is normal.
5. Answer any questions as best you can, but do not be afraid to say you don't know the answer.
6. Ask what they think might help them, for example speaking to a family member or a professional. If appropriate, you can direct them to what is offered by your Employee Assistance Program, or other support options (see Resources page).



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After the conversation, staff should:

- Understand that this is a sensitive issue and that all conversations about traumatic incidents should be approached with civility, respect, and confidentiality.
- Feel supported and empowered to discuss critical incidents with their manager and colleagues.
- Feel that they have been given space to process the event in a way that feels right for them. Keep in mind, this could be via a group or one on one setting as a group setting is not for everyone.
- Know where they can go to find further resources and/or professional support.

Notes for Managers

- The intention of this resource is not for you to provide professional counselling or advice. It is to make sure staff feel supported and listened to, and that they can access professional or other help if they need it.
- If staff reveal sensitive information about their mental health or other struggles in response to trauma, sensitively encourage them to seek help from a qualified professional. You can support them to find these services if you are able to.
- If you also experienced the critical incident being discussed, it is important that you also look after yourself. You may wish to consider speaking to colleagues or other managers about peer support, or talking to your employer about other support options.