Supporting employees in coping with community violence

As a manager or supervisor, you play an important role in providing support to employees following a traumatic event or critical incident. Community violence often occurs without warning and it can also trigger strong adverse reactions in individuals far removed from the actual event. The repeated viewing and exposure of graphic portrayals of acts of violence and aggression through the news and social media outlets can increase distress symptoms. In community violence related to racism, while all may be affected, individuals from racial minority groups may be more likely to experience increased symptoms of distress due to a communal sense of identity and experiences of historical and/or racial trauma.

During this time, your staff may experience a variety of changes in productivity and behavior. Friends, family members, and colleagues may also experience emotional distress, display depressive symptoms and this can also affect the employee. The emotional stress can affect employees’ collaboration, relationships and productivity. Employees will need emotional support and understanding while you focus on maintaining a stable work environment. How you respond in these situations is vital. It is important for leadership to regularly communicate with and comfort their workforce after a crisis. The goal is to help employees realize that their reactions are understandable, reasonable, and the intensity of reactions is likely temporary. As a leader, you may also be affected. It is important for you to also use coping resources for yourself and reach out for additional support as needed.

Recovery in the workplace.

Understanding these reactions and the roles leaders play in employee recovery is critical. In the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event, employees want and need to hear guidance from their leadership. They are looking for some sense of safety, acknowledgement, and validation. Leaders are positioned to be important role models by acknowledging their feelings or reactions, communicating hope, identifying facts, managing rumors and providing support to others as needs change over time. During this acute phase, leaders should communicate effectively, provide reassurance, be transparent, and model effective emotional regulation.

In the midst of an incident, there may be an internal pressure to step in and immediately action plan for hands-on support, or rush to get a counselor onsite. This can stem from one’s own anxiety about the incident and uncertainty about how to respond. Research shows this may actually be unhelpful. Instead, immediate support on behalf of the employer/leadership should take care of basic needs first to allow individuals the space and freedom to begin processing events. At this immediate phase, many employees may not be ready for debriefing or processing of events. Some other immediate responses may include as appropriate:

- Address safety and physical needs first.
- Be visible — make regular announcements and communications, allow your employees to physically see you (use your video if working remotely). By providing useful and accurate information, leaders can re-establish a sense of safety and enhance the workplace’s trust in leadership and can reduce anxiousness.
- Provide accurate, timely information on what is known, what is not known, and when more information will be communicated.
- Be trauma informed. Be aware of common stress and trauma reactions. Remember that everyone responds to stress differently and that employees may be experiencing many different feelings at the same time. Confirm your support.
• Understand that people process information differently in high stress situations - keep messages as simple as possible, repeat frequently, and emphasize positive messages (people tend to focus on negative information when stressed).
• Monitor your own emotional regulation. Speak calmly and encourage working together - leaders promote calmness, empathy, optimism, hope, and collective healing and recovery. This will help in creating a safe and supportive environment for employees.
• Be careful about jumping to solutions. Listening and providing validation is the best response. As a leader, do not feel like you need to have the answer or the perfect response at all times. It’s okay if you don’t know the “right words” to say. There is often no satisfying explanation for what has happened. Don’t try to explain or make sense out of a critical incident.
• Practice humility, genuineness and a willingness to understand your employees with a sense of openness. Sometimes listening and just being present is the most supportive thing you can do. Take your role as a listener seriously and be present in the moment. Demonstrate empathy, not judgment. Suspend offering advice unless you are specifically asked. Make eye contact and be aware of your non-verbal communication.
• Educate yourself regarding the act of community violence and research the issues and historical implications to better understand your employees.
• Professionals, such as EASE counselors, can help and provide specialized support when needed. However, their assistance, although valuable, is no substitute for the caring support network of supervisors, colleagues, and friends. It is natural to feel reluctant or even afraid of facing another person’s painful feelings. It is important not to let this fear prevent us from doing what we can to be present and help someone who is suffering.
• Ensure practical resources are available for employees. Be understanding and allow flexibility as needed. Encourage employees to rest and take time for personal activities. Be familiar with EASE services and provide resources as needed on related topics, such as coping with stress or dealing with grief. Provide the EASE hotline number to any employee who may need one-on-one assistance. Provide the EASE hotline number and/or flyer as frequently as possible in communications. Making sure that employees know where to find help and making that help easily accessible can significantly improve the recovery process after a critical incident.
• Find time to take care of yourself. Be aware of your own emotions and needs. It’s difficult to support others when you’ve neglected to take care of yourself.

Common stress reactions & trauma.

Individuals may experience a range of stress reactions in response to current events. For some, the emotions that may be coming up for individuals may be related to trauma. The triggering of trauma can be complex and may include experiences of historical and/or racial trauma that are rooted in very real injustices, inequities, and community violence. Understanding that traumatic stress is multi-faceted and can have deeply rooted origins is critical to understanding individual reactions and emotions. Frequently, emotions can come on so strongly and create a sense of overwhelm and the individual may largely lack the awareness that their reactions may be related to a deeper rooted multi-generational trauma.

Traumatic stress may cause an individual experience negative reactions such as:

• Shock, confusion, trouble concentrating, disorientation, or denial
• Anxiety, fear, grief, guilt, panic
• Frustration, irritability, bursts of anger, tearfulness or crying spells
Helplessness, hopelessness
Excessive smoking, drinking, or drug use
Withdrawal or isolation from family and friends
Trouble eating, trouble sleeping
Loss of interest in normal activities
Physical symptoms like shaking, dizziness, chest pain, other physical complaints

These reactions can present within hours or days following an incident or may take as long as weeks to months after the initial act of violence occurred. These symptoms can be exacerbated if the incident is of an on-going nature. Emotional recovery may be quick for some, but it may take longer for others and require additional help and support.

Strategies for coping.

- **Limit news consumption and use of social media.** Whether you watch, listen to, or read the news, being overexposed can cause negative emotions to resurface and increase stress and anxiety.
- **Talk to others.** Reach out to your support system. Talk about the event and your reaction to it if you want to, though the most important thing is to spend time with friends and family and stay connected to other people. The compassion and support you receive from those who care about you helps to maintain a sense of well-being.
- **Get some sleep.** Lack of sleep can have an adverse effect on your physical and mental well-being even when life is going well. Aim to keep a sleep schedule that will provide you with an adequate amount of sleep every night. Limit screen time and create a soothing environment. Keep electronics away from your bedroom and create a cool, dark, and clean atmosphere. If you experience sleeplessness, try applying some relaxation techniques.
- **Practice relaxation.** Taking deep breaths, listening to soothing music, or meditating can reduce your stress and anxiety, and promote relaxation. You can even try active relaxation techniques, such as taking a walk, stretching, or practicing yoga.
- **Engage in physical activity.** Make exercise part of your lifestyle. A regular fitness routine not only builds your physical resilience and strength, but it can also burn away stress hormones and promote the release of endorphins that make you feel good.
- **Get informed.** Gaining knowledge, skills, and understanding will reduce your anxiety and improve response.
- **Balance your perspective.** Distressing events can leave you with a negative outlook towards the world around you. Take some time to think about the positive moments, events, and people in your life. Doing so can help counteract negative thinking and balance your perspective.
- **Do something positive and meaningful.** Try to schedule an activity that you look forward to each day or find ways that you can help in your community. Volunteering and helping those in need is an excellent way of making a positive difference and will help you feel better too.
- **Seek assistance if needed.** Individuals who feel an overwhelming worry or anxiety can seek additional professional mental health support.

_EASE is available for free confidential counseling with a professional._
_Call the EASE Hotline for 24/7 support._

EASE Hotline 1-800-882-1341