Manager's Guide to Workplace Trauma

Possible Employee Behavior After a Trauma or Loss

These may be present for some time

- Watchfulness and jumpiness
- Concentration problems
- Phobia for "dreaded areas" (could be parking lot, car, office, etc.)
- Fatigue, lowered productivity
- Attempts to re-establish control, structure
- Irritability, people being short with each other
- Grief/crying

- Difficulty sleeping, fatigue
- Increase or decrease in appetite
- Physical problems, e.g., headaches, stomachaches, etc.
- Difficulty making decisions
- Re-evaluation of life – what's important, what isn't
- Increased talking – recounting experiences

How to Respond

- Provide information to your employee(s), as much and as quickly as possible. Establish a point of contact to answer employee questions. Notify employees regularly even if you have no additional information. This reduces rumors and increases a sense of security.

- Be visible and available to employees.

- Be tolerant of a wide range of individual responses among employees and each other. Encourage acceptance and sensitivity among individual members of work groups regarding these different responses.

- Allow for continuing need to talk, share and compare events. Encourage employees to communicate about their feelings and what's been helpful for them. Accept a temporary decrease in productivity.

- Tolerate non-harmful shows of emotion: crying, anger, expressions of guilt.

- Create/support activities that re-establish a sense of control. Hold structured meetings. Allow people to set goals and determine priorities. Let people decide what, if any, physical rearranging of the environment would help. Allow people flexibility to pace themselves returning to work.

- Seek consultation on worrisome employees, including those who are disruptive.

Avoiding Secondary Injury

Secondary injury is the re-injury of the traumatized person due to other people's reaction, such as the sense of being blamed for not feeling better sooner. Trauma victims are particularly vulnerable to secondary injury, which occurs when there is a perceived lack of expected support and/or rejection by co-workers, management, friends, family, and community agencies. Managers can play a critical role in reducing the numbers and intensity of secondary injury. This is extremely important both in supporting the recovery of the victim and in reducing the possibility of liability being incurred by the organization.