

**A
Manager's
Handbook**

***Handling
Traumatic
Events***



**United States
Office of
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Management**

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Foreword

Many of us are ill-prepared to handle the traumatic events discussed in this handbook--suicides, assaults, threats, natural disasters, etc. And yet these events can and do occur in our workplaces. They are events for which preparation helps, and this handbook tells us how to prepare.

In addition to using this handbook for preparation purposes, it is an invaluable guide to follow should a traumatic event occur at your workplace. It is a good idea to keep it handy just in case. It will give you practical ideas on what to say to your employees and approaches to take to facilitate recovery .

The handbook was written by Mary Tyler, Ph.D., of OPM's Employee Health Services Policy Center, who is a preeminent expert in the field of workplace violence and trauma. She is well recognized in the United States and Europe for her research on trauma in the workplace, and has provided technical assistance to many organizations.

The information in this manual reflects Dr. Tyler's extensive experience in helping Federal managers cope with traumatic situations. In addition, Chapters 1, 3, and 5 rely on research studies conducted by Dr. Tyler with Colonel Robert K. Gifford, Ph.D., U.S. Army, for the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. The findings were published in the *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, *Disaster Management*, *Military Chaplains' Review*, and *Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der Bundeswehr Forum*.

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Chapter 1

When Tragedy Strikes at Work

Imagine that you, as a manager, are busy with your many daily responsibilities, when tragedy strikes:

- You hear a commotion down the hall, respond, and discover that an employee has swallowed a lethal dose of drugs in the presence of his coworkers.
- An irate individual storms into your section's work area and shoots an employee while you and other employees look on, shocked and helpless to intervene.
- A dazed-looking employee walks into the work area, bruised and disheveled, collapses at her desk, and reports that she was attacked while conducting a routine business call.

Initially, your responses will probably be almost automatic. You will notify the proper authorities and take whatever steps are necessary to preserve life and safety.

After the paramedics and the investigators leave, the hard questions begin for you as a manager:

- How do you help your employees recover from this event, so their personal well being and professional effectiveness will not suffer long-term effects as a result of trauma?
- How do you get your staff moving again after employees have suffered from injury, bereavement, or emotional trauma?

As you would expect, there are no easy answers, and each situation presents its own set of challenges. However, there are some general guidelines to help you in most situations:

Stay firmly in charge. Let all employees know that you are concerned and doing all you can to help them. You represent the organization to your employees, and your caring presence can mean a great deal in helping them feel supported. You don't have to say anything profound; just be there, do your best to manage, and let your employees know you are concerned about them. Be visible to your subordinates, and take time to ask them

how they are doing. Try to keep investigations and other official business from pulling you out of your work area for long periods of time.

Ask for support from higher management. Relief from deadlines, and practical help such as a temporary employee to lighten your burden of administrative work can make it easier for you to focus on helping your employees and your organization return to normal functioning.

Don't "keep a stiff upper lip" or advise anybody else to do so. Let people know, in whatever way is natural for you, that you are feeling fear, grief, shock, anger, or whatever your natural reaction to the situation may be. This shows your employees you care about them. Since you also can function rationally in spite of your strong feelings, they know that they can do likewise.

Share information with your employees as soon as you have it available. Don't be afraid to say, "*I don't know.*" Particularly in the first few hours after a tragedy, information will be scarce and much in demand. If you can be an advocate in obtaining it, you will show your employees you care and help lessen anxiety.

Ask for support from your Employee Assistance Program (EAP). The EAP is available to offer professional counseling to those who wish it, and to provide debriefings to groups affected by trauma. Encourage your employees to take advantage of the EAP as a way of preserving health, not as a sign of sickness.

Encourage employees to talk about their painful experiences. This is hard to do, but eases healing as people express their painful thoughts and feelings in a safe environment, and come to realize that their reactions are normal and shared by others. You may want to have a mental health professional come in to facilitate a special meeting for this purpose. Or your group may prefer to discuss the situation among themselves. Don't be afraid to participate, and to set a positive example by discussing your own feelings openly. Your example says more than your words.

Build on the strengths of the group. Encourage employees to take care of one another through such simple measures as listening to those in distress, offering practical help, visiting the hospitalized, or going with an employee on the first visit to a feared site. The more you have done to build a cohesive work group, and to foster self-confidence in your employees, the better your staff can help one another in a crisis.

Build on your work group's prior planning. If you have talked together about how you, as a group, would handle a hypothetical crisis, it will help prepare all employees,

mentally and practically, to deal with a real one. Knowing employees' strengths and experience, having an established plan for communication in emergencies, and being familiar with EAP procedures can help you "hit the ground running" when a crisis actually strikes.

Be aware of the healing value of work. Getting back to the daily routine can be a comforting experience, and most people can work productively while still dealing with grief and trauma. However, the process of getting a staff back to work is one which must be approached with great care and sensitivity. In particular, if anyone has died or been seriously injured, the process must be handled in a way that shows appropriate respect for them.

This gives you a general model for management in a traumatic situation. Later chapters will deal more specifically with different types of traumas and the specific managerial challenges they present.

How to Listen to Someone Who Is Hurting

Whenever people face bereavement, injury, or other kinds of trauma, they need to talk about it in order to heal. To talk, they need willing listeners. Unfortunately, many of us shrink from listening to people in pain. We may feel like we have enough troubles of our own, or be afraid of making matters worse by saying the wrong thing.

Sometimes we excuse ourselves by assuming that listening to people who are hurting is strictly a matter for professionals such as psychotherapists or members of the clergy. It is true that professional people can help in special ways, and provide the suffering individual with insights that most of us aren't able to offer. However, their assistance, although valuable, is no substitute for the caring interest of supervisors, co-workers, friends, and others from the person's normal daily life.

It is natural to feel reluctant or even afraid of facing another person's painful feelings. But it is important not to let this fear prevent us from doing what we can to help someone who is suffering.

Though each situation is unique, some guidelines can help make the process easier:

- The most important thing to do is simply to be there and listen and show you care.
- Find a private setting where you won't be overheard or interrupted. Arrange things so that there are no large objects, such as a desk, between you and the person.
- Keep your comments brief and simple so that you don't get the person off track.
- Ask questions which show your interest and encourage the person to keep talking, for example:

"What happened next?"

"What was that like?"

- Give verbal and non-verbal messages of caring and support. Facial expressions and body posture go a long way toward showing your interest. Don't hesitate to interject your own feelings as appropriate, for example:

"How terrible."

"I'm so sorry."

- Let people know that it's OK to cry. Some people are embarrassed if they cry in front of others. Handing over a box of tissues in a matter-of-fact way can help show that tears are normal and appropriate. It's also OK if you get a bit teary yourself.
- Don't be distressed by differences in the way people respond. One person may react very calmly, while another expresses strong feelings. One person may have an immediate emotional response; another may be "numb" at first and respond emotionally later. Emotions are rarely simple; people who are suffering loss often feel anger along with grief. Unless you see signs of actual danger, simply accept the feelings as that person's natural response at the moment. If a person is usually rational and sensible, those qualities will return once their painful feelings are expressed.
- Don't offer unsolicited advice. People usually will ask for advice later if they need it; initially it just gets in the way of talking things out.
- Don't turn the conversation into a forum for your own experiences. If you have had a similar experience, you may want to mention that briefly when the moment seems right. But do not say, *"I know exactly how you feel,"* because everybody is different.
- It's natural to worry about saying the "wrong thing." The following is a brief but helpful list of three other things **not** to say to someone who is suffering:

DO NOT SAY:

Anything critical of the person.

"You shouldn't take it so hard."

"You're overreacting."

Anything which tries to minimize the person's pain.

"It could be a lot worse."

"You're young; you'll get over it."

Anything which asks the person to disguise or reject his/her feelings.

"You have to pull yourself together."

"You need to be strong for your children's sake."

These are helpful guidelines, but the most important thing is to be there and listen in a caring way. People will understand if you say something awkward in a difficult situation.

Once you have finished talking, it may be appropriate to offer simple forms of help. Check about basic things like eating and sleeping. Sharing a meal may help the person find an appetite. Giving a ride to someone too upset to drive may mean a lot. Ask what else you can do to be of assistance.

After you have talked to someone who is hurting, you may feel as if you have absorbed some of that person's pain. Take care of yourself by talking to a friend, taking a walk, or doing whatever helps restore your own spirits. Congratulate yourself on having had the courage to help someone in need when it wasn't easy.

Recovering From the Death of a Co-worker

The death of a co-worker is a painful experience under any circumstances, and all the more difficult if it is unexpected. Recovery of individuals and of your work group itself depends to a great extent on the effectiveness of the grief leadership provided by you--the group's manager. Effective grief leadership guides members of the work group as they mourn and memorialize the dead, help their families, and return to effective performance of their duties. The following guidelines have proved helpful:

Provide a private area where co-workers can mourn without public scrutiny. Initially, close friends and associates will feel shock and intense grief. If the loss is to be resolved, it is essential for all affected employees to spend time talking about the deceased person, sharing memories, and discussing the loss. This "grief work," which is essential for recovery, is intensely painful when done alone, but much less so when it can be shared with friends. Providing a private area where co-workers can talk together and shed tears without public scrutiny will ease this process.

Share information. Employees will feel a particularly strong need for information at this time. Managers can show their concern by making a concerned effort to get that information, and share it in a timely manner. *Until you get the information, simply admitting honestly that you don't know is more comforting to employees than not being told anything.*

Contact employees who are temporarily away from the office. Ordinarily, people in a small work group are aware of friendship patterns, and will take steps to ensure that those in particular need of comfort are given support. However, problems may occur if co-workers are on leave or travel. The manager and group members may need to reach out to those temporarily away from the office to make sure they don't get left out of the grieving process.

Serve as a role model. Managers need to serve as role models for appropriate grieving. If you show that you are actively grieving, but still able to function effectively, other employees will realize that they can also be sad without losing their ability to

perform their duties rationally. You should avoid hiding your own feelings, as this often leads employees to misperceive you as not caring.

Consider offering a "debriefing." Often, a cohesive work group can go through the grief process without help. However, if members do not know each other well, or for whatever reason have difficulty talking, a professional person may need to come in and facilitate a "debriefing," or meeting in which grief is discussed.

Consider holding a memorial service, especially if co-workers cannot attend the funeral. A memorial service can be very helpful and is often a turning point in restoring a work group to normal productivity. This is not to imply that the deceased is forgotten; rather people find after a point that they can continue to work while grieving. Consider the following points in planning a memorial service:

- The memorial service should honor the deceased and provide an opportunity to say goodbye. Unlike a funeral, a memorial is not a religious service, and should be suitable for employees of all faiths. Friends may speak about the qualities they admired in the deceased, the person's contributions to the work and the morale of the group. Poetry or music reminiscent of the deceased might be shared.
- The most common mistake in planning memorials is to plan them at too high a level. Senior officials may want to take charge, to show that they care, and to assure a polished product. This approach usually "backfires," for example, *"The managers don't care about Sam; they just want to put on a show for the executives."*
- Memorial services are most effective when the closest associates of the deceased are given key roles in planning and carrying them out. Including the "right" people, i.e., the best friends of the deceased, makes the service more comforting for everyone. If the best friends are too upset to speak, they can take non-verbal roles such as handing out programs.

Reach out to family members. Reaching out to the family of the deceased can be comforting for both employees and family members. Attending the funeral service, sending cards, visiting the bereaved family and offering various forms of help are all positive healing activities.

Support informal rituals. Informal rituals in the office can ease healing. A group of friends might join together to clean out the deceased person's desk, or organize a campaign for contributions to an appropriate charity. Sometimes employees may want to leave a particular work station or piece of equipment unused for a time in memory of the deceased. If possible, this wish should be honored.

Get back to the work routine in a way that shows respect for the deceased. Returning to the work routine can facilitate healing if the work group makes an effort to uphold values held by the deceased and strive toward goals that he/she particularly valued, for example, *"I want to show the customers I care, because Sam was such a caring person."*

Don't treat a new employee like a "replacement" for the employee who died. It is important that new employees not be made to feel like "replacements" for employees who have died. Reorganizing responsibilities and moving furniture can help spare the new employee and others the painful experience of having somebody new at "Sam's desk" doing "Sam's job."

Remind employees about the services of the Employee Assistance Program. Group members should be reminded that normal grieving can produce upsetting responses such as sleeplessness, diminished appetite, and intrusive thoughts of the deceased. Ordinarily, these will subside with time, particularly if the individual receives strong group support. However, some individuals may find these reactions especially troubling or long lasting, and may need to turn to the Employee Assistance Program for professional help in getting over the experience.

Supervising an Employee with Suicidal Concerns

Suicide is a significant cause of death among Americans, and government personnel are not exempt from the problem. Though there are differences in suicide rates based on such factors as age, gender, and ethnicity, a person from any background can commit suicide, or go through a period of seriously contemplating it.

People considering suicide often have been "worn down" by many stresses and problems. Actual or expected loss, especially a love relationship, is often a contributing factor. The suicidal person is frequently lonely and without a solid support system. Sometimes this is a long-term characteristic of the person; in other cases a geographic move, death, or a divorce may deprive an individual of personal ties that were formerly supportive.

Listen carefully to what your employees say--people thinking about suicide often give hints about their intentions. Talking about not being present in the future, giving away prized possessions, and making funeral plans are examples of possible hints of suicidal intent. If you hear such talk, question it, kindly but firmly. You won't make the situation worse by clarifying it, and an open conversation with you may be the person's first step toward getting well.

Be alert to changes in behavior. A deterioration in job performance, personal appearance, punctuality, or other habits can be a sign of many problems, including suicidal concerns.

If an employee admits thinking about suicide:

You'll want to get your employee to professional help, and the way you do this is very important. The way you approach the issue can have an impact on the employee's willingness to receive professional help. Your respect and concern for the employee can contribute to the healing process.

- First offer your own personal concern and support. Let the person know you care--the employee is both a unique human being and a valued member of your team.

- Show understanding of the employee's pain and despair, but offer hope that, with appropriate help, solutions can be found for the problems that are leading the person to feel so desperate.
- Ask whether any of the employee's problems are work related, and, if so, take initiative in attacking those problems. For example, the employee may feel improperly trained for key responsibilities, or may be having difficulties with leave or some similar issue without having made you aware of it. If you can act as an advocate in remedying some of these problems, you will help in three ways-- removing one source of pain, showing concretely that someone cares, and offering hope that other problems can also be solved.
- Do not question the employee about personal problems, as the individual may wish to keep them out of the workplace, but listen with empathy if the employee chooses to share them.
- Do not offer advice, but acknowledge that the problems are real and painful.
- Protect the employee's privacy with regard to other employees. This will require thought and planning, as questions are sure to arise. When dealing with higher management, you need to think clearly about what they actually need to know, e.g., that the employee is temporarily working a reduced schedule on medical advice--as opposed to what they don't need to know, e.g., intimate personal information that the employee may have confided in you as the immediate supervisor.
- Without hovering over the employee, show your continued support and interest. Make it clear that the individual is an important part of the team, and plays a key role in mission accomplishment.

Get Help

As a general rule, anyone feeling enough pain to be considering suicide should be referred to a mental health professional, at least for evaluation. Make it clear that you want the employee to get the best possible help, and that some types of assistance are outside your own area of competence.

- Usually, the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is the referral source for mental health assistance. If the employee consents, call the EAP yourself, emphasizing

that the situation is serious and needs timely attention.

- If for some reason the EAP is not immediately available, turn to your community's Crisis Intervention or Suicide Prevention resource. These are normally listed with other emergency numbers in the telephone book, and available on a 24 hour basis.

Follow Up

Once your employee is involved in a treatment program, try to stay in touch with the program. This does **not** mean that you should involve yourself with specific personal problems that the employee is discussing with a therapist. What you do need to know, however, is how you can work with the treatment program and not at cross purposes to it.

Does the employee need to adjust work hours to participate in therapy?

Has the employee been prescribed medications whose side effects could affect job performance?

Should you challenge the employee as you normally do, or temporarily reassign the person to less demanding duties?

This kind of communication will occur only if the employee permits it, since mental health professionals will not, for ethical reasons, release information without the employee's consent. If you make it clear to the employee and treatment team what your goals are--to support them, not to delve into the employee's private concerns--you will probably have no difficulty getting cooperation. A meeting involving you, the employee, and the counselor can be particularly helpful in clarifying relevant issues and assuring that your supervisory approach is consistent with the employee's treatment.

Take Care of Yourself

Working with a suicidal person is highly stressful, and you should take positive steps to preserve your own mental health while you help your employee. You should not hesitate to get support for yourself, either from your own supervisor or from the EAP.

Helping an Employee Recover from an Assault

Being assaulted on the job can lead not only to physical injury, but also to emotional distress. Recovery with return to job effectiveness requires not only the assistance of professional experts such as physicians and psychotherapists, but also the enlightened support of supervisors and co-workers.

The role of the immediate supervisor is especially important, because that person most powerfully represents the organization to the employee. The supervisor needs to convey personal concern for the employee as well as the concern of the organization, and a sense of the employee's unique importance to the work group and its mission. The following guidelines have proved helpful in these situations:

If the employee is hospitalized, visit, send cards, and convey other expressions of concern. It is important that the employee not feel abandoned. The nursing staff can advise you of the length and type of interaction most appropriate. If the person is quite ill, a very brief visit and a few words of concern may be enough. As recovery continues, sharing news from the office will help the person continue to feel a part of the organization.

Encourage co-workers to show support. At some point the employee will need to tell the story of the assault, probably more than once, and may find it easier to discuss this with co-workers who are familiar with the work setting and may have had similar experiences. Co-workers can help significantly by listening in a caring way, showing support and avoiding any second guessing of the situation. Being assaulted is not only physically painful; it can make the world feel like a cold, frightening place. Simple expressions of kindness from friends and co-workers--a visit, a card game, a funny book, a favorite magazine--can help the person regain a sense of safety.

Help the employee's family. If the employee has a family, they may need support as well. If the situation has received media attention, the family may need assistance in screening phone calls and mail. Other kinds of help, such as caring for children while a

spouse visits the hospital, can go a long way in showing that the work group cares for its members.

Plan the employee's return to work. The supervisor, employee, employee/labor relations specialist, and health care providers need to work together to plan the employee's return to work. Here are some important points to consider:

- There is truth in the old saying about "getting back on the horse that just threw you," and it can be helpful to get back to the crucial place or activity in a timely manner. The sooner the employee can return, the easier it will be to rejoin the group, and the employee will have missed out on less of the current information needed for effective job performance. However, it is important not to expose the employee to too much stress at once. A flexible approach, for example, part-time work, a different assignment at first, or assignment of a co-worker for support, can often help the employee overcome anxiety and recover self-confidence and may allow the employee to return to work sooner than would otherwise be possible.
- The employee's physical needs must be clarified with health care providers, e.g., the supervisor and employee should understand precisely what is meant by phrases such as "light work." If the employee looks different, from wearing a cast or having visible scars, it is helpful to prepare other employees for this in advance. Advance thought needs to be given to any new environmental needs the employee may have, such as wheelchair access or a place to lie down during the day.
- Working out a flexible plan for a recovering employee may take time and energy in the short run, but that effort will be repaid in the long run by retaining an experienced employee as an integral part of the work group.

Offer counseling. Counseling services should be offered through the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), and with the attitude that it is perfectly natural to use such professional resources in the aftermath of a traumatic experience. Supervisors and EAP personnel should work together to make the experience as convenient and non-bureaucratic as possible. However, individual preferences and differences should be respected. Some employees find that they can recover from the effects of the experience with the help of their friends, family, and co-workers. Others may not feel the need for counseling until weeks have passed and they realize that they are not recovering as well as they would like.

Make career counseling and other forms of assistance available if the employee decides to change jobs. Even with excellent support, employees who have been assaulted sometimes feel, "It just isn't worth it," and decide to transfer to a safer occupation. The employee should be encouraged not to make such an important decision in haste, but career counseling and other forms of assistance should be made available. Supervisors and co-workers who have tried to help the employee may need reassurance that their efforts contributed to the individual's recovery, and that the decision is not a rejection of them.

Managing After a Disaster

A disaster such as an earthquake or hurricane creates unusual challenges for management. You and your staff may yourselves be suffering from its effects. Emotional stress, physical injury, bereavement, loss of property, and disruption of normal routines may limit the availability and energy of your work group. At the same time, the group may face new responsibilities - caring for its own members, and facilitating community recovery. Besides meeting customers' special needs for assistance following a disaster, agency personnel are often called on to support other Federal agencies in providing a wide range of community services.

Plan ahead. You and your work group should be familiar with any disaster plans that affect you, and should have your own plans, however informal, for how you might function in a disaster. Involving employees in planning helps give them a sense of empowerment, and can improve the quality of your plan by assuring that everyone's experience and skills are brought into play.

Despite the magnitude of the challenges, Federal Government agencies have a proud history of responding effectively to disasters. The following suggestions are general principles that can help you structure your disaster response (they are no substitute for a comprehensive disaster plan):

Take care of your own people first. You need to locate your staff and assure that they and their families have necessary medical care, housing, food, and other necessities before they can be effective in serving the public.

- Consider setting up a relief center. Particularly if traditional disaster relief agencies are slow to mobilize, you may need to set up a relief center for your own employees, and provide food and other essential items to those in need. If necessary, assign a group of employees, preferably volunteers, to internal disaster relief, and relieve them temporarily of other duties. Their tasks might include staffing the relief center, taking inventory of unmet needs of affected employees, and locating resources to fit the needs.
- Consider compiling resource information. Those most affected by the disaster are least likely to have functioning telephones, and may not be able to call around to

locate a new apartment, a child care provider, a rental truck, a place to board the dog, or any of the many goods and services they need to begin normalizing their lives. Compiling information in a booklet or card file can be very helpful, and can result in a document that is helpful to the public as well as employees.

Modify office rules and procedures that are counterproductive after a disaster.

Dress codes, rules about children in the office, and restrictions on using telephones for personal business, for example, may need to be temporarily adjusted in the post-disaster period. Agencies have the authority to grant administrative leave to employees who need time off to normalize their home and family situations.

Work cooperatively with employee unions. Disaster situations encourage labor-management cooperation, regardless of what the labor relations climate has been in the past. Labor and management share a deep concern for employees' well being and recovery; working together in an informal way can lead to more effective, flexible responses to employee needs.

Take steps to prevent accidents and illness. Much of the human suffering associated with a disaster happens after the event itself, and can be prevented through good management. It is particularly important to prevent the overwork and exhaustion that tend to occur as people throw themselves into disaster recovery operations. Post-disaster environments are often less safe and sanitary than normal ones, so that people living and working in them need to exercise special care. Exhaustion can lower resistance to disease, decrease alertness, impair judgment, and make people less careful about health precautions and more vulnerable to accidents. There are several strategies for assuring that people do not exhaust themselves:

- After an initial crisis period, during which overwork may be necessary, develop procedures to assure that employees do not work too many hours without rest.
- Be sure to provide adequate staffing for all new responsibilities created after the disaster, such as internal relief operations.
- Set limits on work hours, if necessary, and train managers to monitor their subordinates and check for signs of exhaustion.

- Since leaders are especially prone to overwork, monitor each other and set a positive example for subordinates.
- Take care to assure that no employee has an essential task that no one else knows how to do, or that person will surely be overworked.

Communicate clear priorities for work. Since some normal operations may be suspended and new ones undertaken, this must be done carefully and consistently.

Understanding priorities will not only help prevent overwork, but will also empower employees to make decisions about how to use their time most appropriately.

Provide opportunities for employees to talk about their stressful experiences. To recover from severe stress, people need to talk about what they have gone through, and to compare their reactions with those of others. Consider the following suggestions:

- Provide a group meeting organized by an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counselor or other mental health professional.
- Remind employees of procedures for scheduling individual EAP appointments, since some employees may need more personal assistance in resolving problems arising from the disaster.
- Offer opportunities for employees to share their experiences informally, for example, by providing a break area with coffee or other refreshments.

Special considerations when employees are detailed out to other agencies

- It is important that detailed employees remain in contact with their own organization.
- They should, whenever possible, be deployed in small groups, so each employee will have a few familiar people to turn to for support.
- Visits by agency managers can be very helpful in conveying information and boosting morale.

- Informal newsletters can be a valuable source of information.
- Information can reduce the detailed employees' stress from worrying about co-workers, while reassuring them that they are still a valued part of their own organization.

Chapter 7

Managing When the Stress Doesn't Go Away

Previously chapters have focused mainly on traumatic events that overwhelm us with their suddenness. An employee is assaulted, or a tornado rips through an office. We are shocked and shaken by the enormity of the event and its unexpected nature.

Sometimes, though, long term stress can assume traumatic proportions. Carl Dudley and Melvin Schoonover, researchers who interviewed clergy members in South Florida about six months after Hurricane Andrew, report, "They all agreed that surviving the storm was easy compared with surviving afterward." According to one pastor, "Stress-related deaths continue to haunt our congregation long after the storm....some people simply cannot get their lives together in this constant uncertainty."

In recent years, Federal Government employees in several parts of the country have had to cope with rebuilding their homes and lives after a disaster while taking on new roles and responsibilities to help the community's recovery. Disasters are not the only source of long term stress that our employees may face. Threats of violence, whether from individuals outside the agency or from fellow employees, can lead to severe stress situations which go on for weeks, and affect many people. Harassment campaigns directed against employees can be nerve-wracking even when there is no apparent physical danger. The prospect of losing a group member to a slowly debilitating illness can produce a long period of stress for everyone involved. Organizational change can produce severe stress if employees feel uncertain and worried for long periods.

Getting the job done and taking care of employees under conditions of severe, long lasting stress can be one of the most difficult challenges a manager may face. It's not easy to take charge, develop innovative approaches, and be sensitive to the needs of others when you're at least as uncomfortable as your subordinates. There are, however, some management approaches that have proved helpful in these situations:

Take concrete steps to see that everything possible is being done to lessen the sources of stress. If danger is a problem, call the right law enforcement function immediately, and get all the advice and concrete support you can for them. If employees are overwhelmed by competing demands in the aftermath of a large scale emergency, set

clear priorities and make sure they are consistently followed. You probably can't "fix" the entire situation, but you can improve it. Your employees will feel better if they know you are working on their behalf.

Keep open lines of communication with your employees. This is always important, but even more so when everyone is under long term stress. In most stressful situations, one source of anxiety is a sense of being out of control. Your employees will feel better if they have up-to-date information and permission to approach you with their questions. Depending on circumstances, you may want to adopt new communications strategies, such as having frequent meetings, publishing an informal newsletter, and keeping an updated notice board in a central place. As you consider your communication strategy, don't forget your employee unions. Like you, union leaders are concerned with getting information to employees, and this may be an excellent opportunity for labor-management cooperation. Consider that--

- Employees will have a greater sense of control if you are careful to listen to them with an open mind before making decisions that affect them. Even if your decision turns out not to be the one they would have wished for, they will feel less powerless if they believe that their ideas and preferences were given serious consideration.
- Communicating with employees may be difficult for you if your own tendency, when under stress, is to withdraw from other people, or to become less flexible than you normally are. Both are common stress reactions, and can interfere with your leadership if you don't monitor yourself.

Encourage teamwork and cooperation. Under long term stress, there is no substitute for a supportive, caring work group. Employees will find the situation, whatever it is, less painful if they are surrounded by co-workers who care about them, and will listen if they need to talk, or lend a hand if they need help. A group accustomed to teamwork rather than internal competition will usually be able to cover for members who are temporarily unable to function at 100% effectiveness.

Ideally, your group has always been strong and cohesive. If not, do what you can to help it pull together under stress. Encourage and validate teamwork and cooperation. Avoid any appearance of favoritism and make it clear that there is opportunity for everyone to achieve and receive recognition.

Set clear work standards. Doing good work is always essential, but even more so in times of high stress, since success can bolster self esteem and group morale. Keep your standards high, but allow as much flexibility as possible in how the work gets done. If you set clear standards, but give employees some freedom in working out ways to meet them, they will probably be able to develop approaches that fit the contingencies of the stress situation. Check on how much flexibility you have with regard to such conditions as work hours, administrative leave, alternate work sites, etc. It's natural to assume that the way we have always done things is the only way, but you and your employees may have options that you haven't considered.

Make it clear that this is a difficult period, and it's OK to share feelings of anxiety, fatigue, or frustration. If you set the example by letting people know you can do a good job even though you are not feeling your best, you can set a positive example. Define the situation in a way that emphasizes the strength of the group while acknowledging the challenges it faces. The tone should not be, "Poor us," but rather, "This is hard, but we're going to hang together and get through it."

Acknowledge the value of professional counseling, and encourage your employees to get whatever help they need. Long term stress can wear down the coping resources of the strongest person, and it makes sense to get extra support in order to preserve mental and physical health. One strategy is to bring in an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counselor to talk to the group about stress management. Besides learning from the presentation, your employees will develop a personal contact which can make it easier to turn to the EAP if they need it.

Don't underestimate the impact of stress on you as an individual. Attend to your own stress management program, and use your resources for professional consultation and counseling. You will find it easier to take care of your work group if you also take care of yourself.

agencies are fortunate in having a number of fine resources for work groups and individuals. If you aren't up to date on what your training office, organizational development specialist, employee assistance program (EAP), and career counselor can offer, take a little time to inform yourself.

With so many changes going on now, there's a tendency to think, "We don't have time for that." But if you bring in an expert facilitator to resolve tensions in the work group, or encourage an employee to seek counseling for personal stress, you will probably find that the investment pays off in productivity.

Early Identification of Threats

No matter how good a job is done, it may not be possible to prevent all potentially violent situations. An employee can be driven to the point of violence by factors outside the organization's control. Or an employee's family members, romantic partners, or other associates may bring their own violent impulses into the employee's workplace. So managers also need to be prepared for a second level of involvement: early recognition of possible threats.

Managers don't need to be experts on violent behavior. What is needed is a common-sense recognition that, "Something seems wrong here," plus a willingness to seek advice from those who are knowledgeable about different parts of the problem.

Your employees need to know that intimidation is totally unacceptable in the workplace, and that they should tell you if they feel threatened for any reason. And you must give them reason to believe that you will respond in a mature, constructive way if they do share their concerns.

What are the warning signs to look out for?

First, anybody who says or hints that they might harm someone. Like suicidal individuals, people contemplating violence often tell others, directly or indirectly, about their plans.

Second, anybody who expresses fear of somebody else. An employee may report being stalked by an ex-spouse. Employees may be afraid of someone who talks repeatedly about weapons in a way that seems strange to them.

You, as the supervisor, may find yourself shrinking from the task of counseling an employee because you feel afraid of the person.

All of these should make the alarm bells go off in your mind. At this stage it's appropriate to listen to "gut level" reactions. You're not making any decisions yet; you're just identifying a situation that needs to be explored.

Appropriate Responses to Threats

If you discover that someone does seem to have threatened violence or to have a genuine fear of it, you need to move on to the third level of involvement, an appropriate response. The key to an effective response is to get all the help you need. This is not the time to be self-reliant. You need the objectivity of an outside point of view, and the expertise of professionals from several fields.

One crucial point is sometimes overlooked. If at any time there seems to be immediate danger, drop whatever else you are doing, notify the authorities, and take whatever steps are necessary to protect safety. Usually, however, these situations develop more slowly, and there is time to respond before emergency measures are needed.

An appropriate response is one that protects the safety of all concerned, while respecting everyone's legitimate rights. This can be a delicate balance, and situations are so varied that it is difficult to draw up a set of procedures that will work for all of them.

What does work is a strategy rather than a procedure. Call in the experts, get them working as a team, and their combined expertise will help you come up with a solution. This strategy has worked in a variety of situations. They weren't all handled the same way, but they were handled in ways that made sense.

As you assemble your team, you will probably turn first to your own management chain, the law enforcement function responsible for security in your office, your personnel department, and an EAP professional. Other specialists, such as union officials, can be important contributors, depending on the specific situation.

Once you get your team together, you will have three major tasks: evaluate the problem more extensively, develop and execute a plan for responding to it, and address security concerns at every step of the way.

Sometimes, objective evaluation may show that there really isn't a serious problem. If this is the case, it's important that nobody be criticized for "over-reacting." If evaluation shows that a response is necessary, your planning will probably have short-term and long-term components. In the short term, you will be concerned with guarding against a possible immediate threat while a long-term solution can be developed. The long-term solution should address the root causes of the problem and prevent a recurrence of the threatening situation.

Communication should be given special attention. It is essential that all team members share a common understanding of the plan and of one another's roles in it. Stress can interfere with listening and memory, so it is important to express yourself clearly and check to make sure you have been understood.

Support for those affected, whether as potential victims or as problem solvers, is an important concern. Fear is a real source of stress, and responsibility for the safety of others is a heavy burden. You can help by establishing an atmosphere of acceptance and open communication. Your EAP can help by offering seminars, debriefings, or other group activities, and by welcoming individual employees to take advantage of its services.

Chapter 9

When Domestic Violence Comes to Work

The previous chapter focused on violence among co-workers. There's also another kind of violence that demands our concern--violence in an employee's personal life that follows the employee into the workplace. Sometimes it literally turns up on the doorstep of the building, with an irate spouse shouting threats, or a stalker lurking around the parking lot. Sometimes it's more insidious, infecting the workplace with stress without anybody's quite being able to pinpoint what's wrong.

This chapter covers scenarios that a manager might encounter. A spouse, lover, or other personal associate might threaten, harass, or assault an employee in the workplace. An employee might confide in a supervisor about being victimized. A manager may suspect that an employee or co-worker is being victimized, but the person hasn't spoken out about it.

A note on gender: This chapter refers to the abused person as "she" because that's the pattern in the majority of abuse situations. But remember that men can be abused, and if they are, also need the support of their managers and friends.

Regardless of whether you observe the assaultive behavior or are told about it, the first thing to do is to define the situation correctly.

If somebody is threatening, harassing, or injuring the employee--

If somebody is threatening, harassing, or injuring another person, it is a criminal act. Forget all the polite rules about ignoring lovers' quarrels, because this is another kind of situation altogether.

Never underestimate the possible dangerousness of someone who batters, stalks, or otherwise mistreats another person, whatever their relationship may be. The danger may extend beyond the one targeted employee to others in the workplace. Obviously, all situations aren't equally dangerous, but there's enough risk that you shouldn't try to evaluate dangerousness unless you're well trained in threat assessment.

If there appears to be an immediate threat, notify the law enforcement resource that can most readily provide security in the situation. For example, this might be a local police officer, an Inspector, a Special Agent, or a Federal Protective Service Officer. Everyone in the office should know who this is and how to find them. If it's really an emergency, any officer will provide assistance.

If it's not an immediate threat, you need to think about the appropriate place to turn for law enforcement support. Federal Officers can't investigate a situation that is outside their jurisdiction.

Jurisdiction is a complicated issue, but it's important to try and understand it. Otherwise, misunderstandings between law enforcement and other professionals can make things far more painful for everybody. Employees are sometimes disappointed if someone they know and trust, like the security officer in the next office, can't investigate their case. If you can help the employee understand why it isn't possible for the officer to do this, you may prevent unnecessary pain from feeling like, "They don't care."

With regard to understanding jurisdiction issues, these pointers may help you start out in the right direction:

- If the threats, abuse, stalking, or other harassment are happening at or around the employee's home, the law enforcement agency responsible for the employee's place of residence has jurisdiction. (If you are unable to find the appropriate law enforcement authority, your own security staff can be a resource for helping you get in touch with them.)
- If threats or violence occur within the Federal workplace, or in direct connection with employee's duties, there may be a role for Federal law enforcement officers. But even if Federal Officers assist you with security in the workplace, local police will still have jurisdiction over the non-workplace aspects.
- Even if the situation doesn't seem to be an emergency, you shouldn't delay reporting it to law enforcement officials and getting at least their initial take on the situation. Assessing threats is part of their profession, and they may see signs of danger that aren't obvious to an untrained person.
- If there seems to be danger in the workplace, the law enforcement agency responsible for your office's security can help you in assessing the threat and

adjusting security measures. Maybe you should change the locks, or the security guard should be advised to be on the lookout for a particular individual. Maybe the threatened person should be assigned to a different office.

In addition to law enforcement, your employee is likely to need a number of other professional services, ranging from psychological counseling to legal advice to a safe shelter to live in for a while. Many communities now have comprehensive victim assistance programs with a wide array of coordinated services. The employee may appreciate it if you make the initial phone call to locate the resources. If you don't know where to call, ask your Employee Assistance Program for guidance.

As a conscientious manager, you know to leave the counseling to professional counselors. But you need to remember that there's a lot you can do to help the employee without abandoning your own role. The normal things good managers do to make the workplace productive and harmonious for everyone can be especially meaningful to those employees whose personal lives are in turmoil. Having a chance to be productive and feel part of a team can do wonders for the battered self esteem and sense of isolation that often go along with being a victim.

If you suspect, but do not know for certain, that an employee is being victimized--

You may find yourself with a more complicated scenario. What if the situation isn't clear? The employee seems tense and upset. Maybe her work is suffering, or other employees are beginning to find her tension getting in the way of teamwork. Maybe the employee hasn't talked about abuse, but behaves in ways that lead you to worry about it. She might come in on Monday mornings with fresh bruises, or seem frightened whenever her husband/boyfriend phones her at work. Co-workers may be coming to you with concerns that she is being victimized, but nobody wants to bring up the subject with the employee.

As a manager struggling to do the right thing, you may be asking yourself, "Should I get involved at all? Is this a personal problem or a workplace problem? What will happen if I don't do anything?"

This is a complex situation, and the way you handle it will depend on your own judgment and your working relationship with your employees. Here are some suggestions that might be helpful:

- Don't assume it couldn't happen to your employee. Even when an employee's behavior causes concern, it's common to think something like, "It must be my imagination because Susan is a mature professional person who wouldn't be involved with anything like that." The fact is that anyone can become a victim. But those who don't fit the stereotype--older women, highly educated women, or men from any walk of life--may find it especially hard to let anyone know what is going on.
- Don't ignore the situation. Work may be the only resource an employee has left, particularly if the abuser has succeeded in cutting off other sources of support. The earlier you learn about the situation, the quicker you can bring in professional resources. Then you will have a better chance of aiding the individual employee and preventing an incident of violence that could devastate the entire workplace.
- Put aside your thoughts about what may be happening at home, and focus on the employee's behavior at work. It's always appropriate for a supervisor to show concern for an employee who seems seriously distressed, and to support the employee in getting professional help. As you probably know, you shouldn't try to diagnose the employee's problem, and should make it clear that the employee can choose whether or not to confide in you.

"Susan, I have to tell you that I'm concerned about you. You're doing the same good work you always have, but you seem tense all the time, and this is the second time this week I've seen you crying at your desk. You don't need to tell me what's going on in your life, but if there's anything our EAP could help with, I wish you would go talk with them. We can adjust the schedule to fit your meeting times, and nobody else in the office needs to know where you are. And if I can be of help with anything, I hope you'll let me know."

- If the employee's performance or conduct is deteriorating, then document the deficiency and discuss the matter with your personnel office. Whether or not formal action is appropriate at this time, it is essential to counsel the employee about the deficiency and refer the employee to the EAP. It may seem cruel to confront a person who is obviously suffering, but sometimes this is the only way to help. Reminding the employee how essential she is to the organization may actually help boost her self esteem.

If you suspect a co-worker is being victimized--

If the person is your friend or co-worker rather than your subordinate employee, you have more latitude about how to approach the situation. If you decide to confront the problem, you may want to ask whether the person "*feels safe at home*," rather than asking directly about "*abuse*." This wording, based on first-hand experience, can make it easier for the person to open up about the problem.

If your friend denies that there is a problem, or gets angry at you for suggesting that there is one, don't give up or take it as a personal rejection. Your friend may be so beaten down emotionally that she isn't ready to face the reality of what's going on in her life. She may be telling herself that she deserves what she's getting, or that her husband will change if she only does things better. She may be terrified that any action, even admitting the problem, may lead to greater danger for herself or her children. Even if she seems to reject your concern, you can still be a friend, let her know you are there for her, and remind her that you believe she deserves to be safe and happy.

It can always be helpful to get confidential professional advice before you try to intervene. You might want to talk with an EAP counselor, or contact a community organization specializing in domestic violence.

A Final Note: Tips For Coping With Extreme Stress

- Concentrate on caring for yourself.
- Talk about it with other people in the same situation. Compare reactions, reassure yourself that you are not alone in the way you are feeling.
- Talk about it with friends and relatives who care about you. It's normal to need to tell your story over and over.
- Keep your schedule as routine as possible, and don't overdo it.
- Allow time for hobbies, relaxing activities, being with friends, even if you don't quite feel like it.
- Participate in whatever physical fitness activities you normally enjoy.
- Utilize whatever spiritual resources are part of your normal lifestyle.
- Beware of any temptation to turn to alcohol, tobacco, caffeine, and sweet foods. They may make you feel better momentarily, but can cause more problems in the long run. Concentrate instead on a healthy diet.
- If you can, postpone major life decisions until you have had a chance to get yourself back onto a more even keel.
- Don't hesitate to accept help from friends, co-workers, and others. If you can, offer help to others affected by the event.
- Sometimes good self-care and talking with friends are not enough. You may want to seek professional counseling through your Employee Assistance Program. This does not mean you are "sick," but rather that a counselor may be able to help you get your recovery process on track.