

## HELPING PERSONNEL WHO EXPERIENCE WORK-RELATED TRAUMA EXPOSURE: *Recommendations for Supervisors*

Many people are exposed to trauma at some time in their life. Personnel in certain occupations may be repeatedly exposed to trauma in the course of their work duties. Such professions include law enforcement, healthcare, public health emergency, and those involved in the intelligence field, among others. Their exposure may be through directly witnessing or by hearing someone re-tell distressing events. It may also occur through exposure to the media, such as photographs, audio, or video, or a combination of these. More distressing trauma of longer duration and repeated exposure can increase the risk for adverse effects, which negatively impact interpersonal relationships and work performance.

Adverse effects of occupational exposure to trauma include distress reactions (insomnia, anger, guilt, scapegoating, anxiety, decreased perception of safety) and risky behaviors (increased alcohol and tobacco, social isolation and restricted activities, reduced self-care

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behaviors). In the workplace, lost productivity, absenteeism, and distractibility may also occur. Prolonged and more severe responses can include psychological disorders, such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, and complicated grief.

Some occupations have a culture of pride in being able to withstand trauma exposure and not seek support, which can delay recovery. Supervisors can help by debunking myths and encouraging support at all levels, while maintaining performance and accountability, to promote a healthy organization.

Supervisors can assist personnel repeatedly exposed to occupational trauma through education, training, modeling, and support using evidence-based early interventions. The recommendations below describe actions supervisors can take to help personnel before, during, and after occupational exposure to trauma.

### BEFORE

Being prepared (mental, physical, equipment) helps personnel focus on the task at hand.

1. Obtain information about anticipated trauma exposures (risk analysis).
2. Provide adequate protective equipment and ensure personnel understand their purpose and proper use.
3. Determine minimum required exposure to perform essential tasks.
4. Train personnel about expected trauma exposure and normal reactions: insomnia, anger, boredom, decreased feelings of safety, guilt, helplessness.
5. Educate personnel to monitor for difficulties and when to get help: persistent difficulty with sleep, increased problems at home or work, reduced self-care, thoughts of harming self or others.

### DURING

Efforts to limit the intensity and duration of exposure to trauma decrease adverse effects. Identifying problems early and providing prompt and effective interventions can protect performance.

1. Foster peer support where employees support and regularly check-in with one another.
2. Model self-care, including adequate sleep, hydration, nutrition, stress management, and exercise.
3. Encourage help-seeking, such as taking a break or talking to someone.
4. Monitor and adhere to exposure limits. Reduce exposure or temporarily remove those showing significant adverse effects from further exposure.
5. Conduct team check-ins to enhance cohesion, discuss challenges, dispel misconceptions, and informally assess personnel.

6. Use breaks or brief team huddles to facilitate peer support.
7. Directly encourage and facilitate help-seeking for personnel having persistent or increasing difficulties at work.
8. When particularly shocking or disturbing exposures occur, anticipate, validate, and respond supportively to grief and other distress reactions.
9. Use effective communication strategies: say what is known and unknown, commit to getting answers when there is uncertainty, follow through and keep promises, avoid false reassurances, always tell the truth. Good communication builds trust and decreases rumors.

## **AFTER**

Adverse effects of trauma exposure may not be seen until after the stress of operations are over. Self-care and peer support are important first-line interventions. Screening and referral are helpful for those with significant problems or impairment.

1. Remind personnel about normal and expectable reactions to trauma as well as common patterns of recovery.

2. Communicate the value and benefits of peer support in maintaining well-being and recovery.
3. Ensure personnel have access to resources (healthcare, family support, financial assistance).
4. Continue informal check-ins with personnel. If concerns arise, seeking additional information, when possible, from co-workers, family, or friends may help in understanding.
5. Create opportunities for informal social interactions (coffee and donuts, etc); these can strengthen cohesion and promote informal peer support.
6. Engage Employee Assistance programs or other resources for more formal assessment measures to help workers struggling in silence. Offering compassionate and confidential screening and referral to treatment can encourage employees to seek assistance who might otherwise feel stigmatized.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

Fact sheets to help leaders prepare for and respond to crisis and disaster events:

<https://www.cstsonline.org/fact-sheet-menu/leadership>