

Foreword

Stress Incidents such as suicides, threats of violence, natural disasters and employee deaths don't happen frequently in the workplace. When they do we find that we are often in need of some guidance as to what to do next. The Employee Assistance Program staff is skilled and experienced in the "people" side of disaster, traumatic events, employee deaths, lay-offs and re-organizations. We help leaders, managers and employees return to a state of stability allowing the workforce to cope with the crisis and become productive again.

We can assist with:

- Helping to identify critical issues, next steps and potential risks to individuals and the organization.
- Equip managers with the ability to support individuals and groups before, during and after an event.
- On- site support services when requested.

This handbook and the accompanying information and handouts on our website www.eap.wa.gov are intended to offer guidance and resources for managers, supervisors and human resource personnel. It builds on the partnership between EAP and the work place in addressing the needs of employees. The information in this manual comes from the knowledge, training and experience of the WA State Employee Assistance Program staff as well as other professional organizations.

In all cases we highly recommend that you consult with your WA State Employee Assistance Program even if you decide that an on-site presence by the EAP is not required. Knowing that there has been an event at your workplace helps us to be prepared for employees who may access EAP services as a result of the event.

Incident Stress Guide for Management

Balancing human needs and those of the organization are most difficult when serious illness, death or a traumatic event enters the workplace.

Flexibility and communication are the keys to successfully balancing your managerial responsibilities and desire for compassion. Every office and its culture are unique, but one thing is certain: *the attitude and actions of management and the example a manager sets, are critical.* They influence not only how the employees react to the immediate situation but the long-term impact to the organization.

What is a “Stress Incident?”

A stress incident is defined as any event that has the power to overwhelm usually effective coping mechanisms.

- Exactly what that means can vary but here are some examples from our experience here at the WA State Employee Assistance Program:
 - A bomb threat
 - An act of or threat of violence either by an employee, customer or stranger. This might include gunfire outside of a field service office; or angry and abusive client making threatening comments to an employee or others.
 - A medical emergency in which employees are first responders.
 - An onsite accident where someone is severely injured or killed.
 - A natural disaster where state agencies are significantly involved or impacted such as the OSO mudslides, the fires of 2014 in Central Washington, earthquake of 2001, or severe flooding.
 - Major layoffs or re-organization.
 - An employee death with significant impact. This may include an on or off site death that has news coverage, a major figure in the agency, multiple employee deaths within a short period of time or a long term employee that was well known and respected within the agency.
 - Suicide of an employee or family member
 - Scandal or public investigation that involves news coverage

Making the Announcement:

- Give consideration to how and to whom you make any announcement. Getting input from HR, executive management or communications might be helpful given the situation.
- In most circumstances you might want to call or speak personally to the direct supervisor and determine who should make the announcement to the immediate work group. Take into consideration those from the immediate group that may be traveling for work or located in another office.
- Most often those in the immediate work group will be notified first with a general announcement following shortly afterwards. However there are situations where the event has been in the news or information has already become public that you will have to take into consideration.
- Employees will have a strong need for information so managers and supervisors can show concern and support this by making an effort to get as much information as appropriate or available and sharing it in a timely manner. *If you do not have all the information or there is some that you cannot disclose, share as much as you can and express the commitment to keep staff up to date as much as possible.*
- Be aware of the impact of social media and set appropriate guidelines if necessary. Stress the importance of information coming from one or two reliable and informed sources. Consult with executive management or your communications department for guidance.
- Provide a private area where you can meet as a staff and if possible keep this available throughout the day for co-workers and friends to gather and talk. It is important for staff to be able to share memories, discuss the situation and spend time talking. This is not wasted time and helps affected staff move through the shock and grief of the situation. Allow people to express their feelings or cry. Arrange for Kleenex to be available as long as you are using the room.
- It is important that managers and supervisors serve as role models for appropriate grieving. If you can demonstrate that you are taking the time to allow for sadness and sharing memories but still have the ability to function effectively other employees will realize that they can too. There may be some employees that will be hit harder than others and may want to go home, go to EAP or just need some additional private time. It is important to honor this as much as possible.
- TAKE CARE of YOURSELF. Remember you may be affected and may need additional support. The EAP can be an especially good resource for you during this time.

Management by Walking Around (MBWA)

- It is especially important that you check in on staff periodically during this time. This can just be informally walking around and seeing how staff are doing or by having short check-in meetings during the day. The information you gather by being with staff will be helpful in determining next steps. For example: staff may feel the need for some additional assistance from EAP in the form of a “de-briefing” will be helpful. On the other hand many staff create their own informal de-briefing by being allowed to have time together throughout the day. Either way it is important to loop the EAP into what has happened so that we can be aware of the situation and support employees who may seek out our assistance. It is important to find out what will be most helpful to staff. **DON'T ASSUME - ASK**
- Don't be distressed by differences in the way people respond. Some may withdraw, others might be quite vocal. Some will have an immediate response while others will express feeling “numb” at first and show an emotional response later or privately outside of work. If you have a particular concern about the way that an employee is responding please consult with the EAP.

What is a “debriefing”?

- A “debriefing” is an informational group process that has been developed to help people understand their responses to an incident. Typically these include education about stress response, bereavement and resilience.
 - It is NOT group therapy
 - It is completely voluntary and participants are not required to talk; many participants have found that just being in the room with others has helped.
 - It is understood that what is said in the group stays within the group.
 - Debriefing groups typically will last an hour to two hours.

How do I know if my work group needs a “debriefing”?

- The best way to determine if an EAP debriefing is appropriate is to ask staff directly. You may find that while they may still be grieving they feel their needs have been met.

It is the EAP protocol to have the supervisor that is in charge of the workgroup explain what a debriefing is to staff and find out if they would like to have one. If there are only a couple staff that would like it another alternative is to have them contact EAP individually.

- If a debriefing is requested please contact the EAP and we will work with you in determining the best day and time.

Easy to read handouts for both management (Healthy Workplace) and employees (Healthy You) are available on our website at www.eap.wa.gov. Please feel free to download them and distribute as appropriate.

Additional handouts and resources particular to your situation are available by contacting the EAP at 877- 313-4455 or locally (Thurston County) at 360-407-9490.