



Protecting Employees from Long-term Effects of Workplace Trauma & PTSD

Trauma happens regularly in businesses across Hawaii. People die at their workplaces. Tourists suicide at the hotel they are staying at. Businesses are robbed. Traffic fatalities occur. Workers who are exposed to a workplace trauma can be supported through these experiences in ways that reduce the chances of developing PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) or long-term consequences.

Here in Hawaii, in the past there was a reluctance in many to discuss a traumatic event. "We don't do that in our culture" has been an attitude that fortunately is going away over time, as normalizing seeking appropriate help has increased.

While most of us (70% globally according to the World Health Organization) experience a potentially traumatic event during our lifetimes, only a minority (3.9% of the world population) will develop PTSD. Thanks to effective treatments available, many with PTSD recover within one year.

The chances of recovering from long-term effects of trauma increase when people get appropriate help. If people don't know help is available or don't have access to help, they are not as likely to recover as well.

Trauma versus PTSD

Most functional people are impacted in the short term when a workplace trauma happens. We grieve the death of a co-worker, we have an understandable stress reaction to witnessing a suicide or a tragic workplace accident, we don't want to go around the place that this event occurred. Yet over time most of us resolve our fears and retrain our bodies that nothing bad is happening at that spot today. Most people seem to have a built-in process of recovery that helps us move forward.

For some, however, trauma changes into PTSD. Symptoms develop. They continue to re-experience the event, feeling like it's happening all over again. They avoid reminders of the event, refusing to talk about it or avoiding situations or activities that remind them of the event. They experience symptoms of heightened arousal or vigilance that cause significant distress as it feels they are in a heightened state of danger even when they are not actually at risk. They may blame themselves or someone else for the event. These symptoms develop usually immediately after or within one month of the traumatic event.

PTSD is only diagnosed if the symptoms are still going on for at least one month and are interfering with aspects of their daily life, relationships, or work.

Again, it is important to note that most people will not develop PTSD following a critical event. They have strong social or family ties or healthy relationships where they receive support, they are more physically healthy before the event that helps them recover, they have fewer risk factors such as mental health challenges, physical illness, isolation, or a history of trauma. By the time one month has passed, most feel like they are back on their game again.

The Employer's Role

First, it is important for supervisors and leadership to proactively provide or offer support to victims of workplace trauma. Understand that it's common for a team to all be responding differently to the same event. Keep in mind that some may be concerned about their personal safety or the safety of their team. Some may want to continue talking about the event, while some do not want to discuss it at all. The workplace may be a bit bumpier than usual for the next few weeks while a crew is working on how this event impacted them individually and as a team.

Seek Support and Offer Proactive Support

If you are an employee impacted by a critical event, we encourage you to call the EAP for support! If you're a supervisor or in a leadership position, you can also call the EAP to ask for suggestions on how to support your team in the weeks to follow. The sooner you do this the better! What you might need to do the day of the event may differ if the event happened at the beginning of a workday or at the end, or how close people were to the event or to the person, or what changes were already impacting them at work. You can connect impacted employees with the EAP, and you can discuss whether and when to bring the EAP to the worksite to support a team.

The trick is to connect impacted employees with support available to them, but only if they are interested in doing so. Some people may just want to go home the first day, some may want to stay working. Some may want to call the EAP immediately, some will not want to. You can't force anyone to get help, but you can make it available to them. You want to provide a safe place for people to talk about their experiences without forcing people to do so.

Professional support is available to all of your employees and may make the difference in how they recover from the trauma, or whether their trauma turns into PTSD. The more resources impacted employees have the better, and talking with helpful teammates or supervisors who understand their experiences can also help them cope. You don't want to be their therapist or offer psychological advice, but you may be able to help them by listening and letting them know you care and want to support them as they recover; all while reminding them that professional, confidential, free support is available if they call their EAP. HR professionals can be helpful in providing or arranging for support when leadership is unable to do so or cannot serve in a helping capacity due to their perceived role in the trauma.

In the EAP, we understand trauma. Our trained counselors are trauma-informed, which means we understand the impacts of trauma on a variety of people and know how a background of trauma may impact someone today. We know that supporting someone well initially can help people bounce back faster – when people are educated about normal responses to trauma and what coping methods can help, they feel less like they're "losing it" when they experience normal trauma effects. When people impacted by trauma know they're not alone, and that their feelings are okay, this helps them process the trauma in a healthier way and ultimately helps their relationships, mental health, and job performance. A workplace trauma can ultimately transform a team over time, and responding well to the trauma can help make a difference.

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