



Trauma - An Organisational Response

By their very nature, traumatic events are unexpected and shocking, creating unpredictable emotional and psychological reactions in those people who suffer from or witness them. Managing foreseeable risk, understanding reactions to unforeseen events, and providing appropriate support are the key factors an organisation needs to embrace in order to cope positively with traumatic situations.

What is trauma?

A trauma is defined by the Collins English Dictionary as 'a powerful shock that may have long lasting effects'. This suggests an unnatural event (generating the shock) and an enduring nature of the consequences (the long lasting effects).

The definition corresponds to a wide range of situations that present a real and immediate danger, with perceived or actual threat to life. In our everyday lives, any of us might experience a situation that we perceive as frightening, threatening and out of our control. Examples of traumatic incidents can include:

- > Industrial accidents
- > Natural disasters
- > Fire and fire-related trauma
- > Suicide and sudden death in the workplace
- > Serious road traffic accidents
- > Violent personal or sexual assault
- > Diagnosis of a life threatening illness
- > Acts of terrorism
- > Other crime-related violence.

Understanding reactions to trauma

How people respond to distressing or traumatic incidents is based on a number of factors. These can include previous exposure to trauma (and how this was managed) and the adequacy of support networks.

Additional factors include personality, resilience and life experiences together with an ability to express feelings and access self awareness. Responses to trauma can be summarised under three headings (as shown in the table below). These responses represent the normal after effects of a traumatic incident.

THINKING RESPONSES	EMOTIONAL RESPONSES	BEHAVIOURAL RESPONSES
Intrusive or unwelcome thoughts	Nervousness and anxiety	Avoidance or withdrawal
Difficulty concentrating	Sadness and depression	Alcohol/substance misuse
Strong recollections of the trauma	Grief and feelings of loss	Risk taking activities
Confusion and some disorientation	Guilt and shame	Poor sleep or nightmares
Preoccupation of previous incidents	Anger, irritability and intolerance	Loss of libido
Amnesia or loss of memory	Feeling of vulnerability	Increased or loss of appetite
Loss of belief and sense of values	Difficulty relating to others	Hyper-vigilance and alertness

It is important for organisations to offer suitable support to those affected by work-related traumatic incidents. This can help to mitigate the longer-term effects of post-traumatic stress. Equally crucial is for organisations to reduce the threat of incidents occurring in the first place. The ideal organisational trauma strategy embraces three levels of support interventions, whilst aiming to maximise investment in the primary or preventative stage.

Primary intervention – risk management

'Duty of care' strategies should be in place to manage foreseeable risk in a way that minimises both injuries to individual employees and losses to an organisation. These strategies include:

- > Identifying risk and hazards
- > Considering who might be harmed and how
- > Assessing the probability of occurrence and consequences
- > Drawing up plans to reduce the risks.

Secondary intervention – training and education

An effective risk management strategy will include the provision of education and training that will prepare an organisation for a critical incident. Atos Healthcare has worked closely with a number of organisations including Royal Mail to develop Support Post Trauma (SPoT) protocols which guide Operational Managers in post-trauma support intervention and have been externally evaluated as being highly effective.

Tertiary intervention – counselling support

Some people may require additional support and trauma focused counselling can be a helpful and effective intervention.

It is different to traditional counselling in that it is focused on helping the individual to process their experience of the trauma so that they can adjust to what has happened and move on with their life.

Atos Healthcare can provide access to a nationwide network of counsellors who can provide trauma-focused counselling if required. Atos Healthcare is an organisational member of the British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy (BACP), Association for Counselling at Work and are externally registered providers of the Employee Assistance Professionals Association. All practitioners adhere to the BACP Ethical Framework, have a minimum of 1000 hours relevant experience, and receive monthly clinical supervision.

Going forward

Atos Healthcare is one of the largest UK providers of Employee Assistance and Occupational Health Services. We have recognised expertise in Organisational Trauma Interventions and can provide specialist support in managing traumatic situations. For further information and details on the SPoT manager protocol and to discuss how we can support you in this area, please call 01454 284 652 or visit www.atoshealthcare.com

You may also find the following websites and phone numbers useful:

British Occupational Health Research Foundation (BOHRF)

Evidence based solutions to practical questions asked by employers and their advisers in both private and public sectors.

Tel: 020 7317 5898

www.bohrf.org.uk

(click "trauma at work" section)

Samaritans

National 24 hour listening service for people in crisis.

Tel: 08457 90 90 90

www.samaritans.org

Victim Support

Practical advice and emotional support to victims and their families following crime.

Tel: 0845 30 30 900

www.victimsupport.com