

Dealing with the aftershock

The after-effects of trauma can be devastating, but you can help sufferers in the workplace, says **Carole Spiers**



THE sheer scale of the Asian tsunami has affected huge numbers of people and has focused attention on the need for post trauma support. But what can you, as a manager, do to cope with bereaved members of your team? The following will help you to understanding post trauma stress and what can be done to help.

Anyone who has been involved in a traumatic incident is likely to have some form of reaction to it. These reactions may not be immediate; they may occur weeks, months or occasionally even years afterwards. They are likely to be worse if many people died or were injured during the incident, or the individual has feelings of helplessness, or the stress resulting from the incident comes on top of other stresses in their life.

Some of the more common emotional reactions are:

- **Guilt** for not having done more or for having survived when others did not
- **Anger** at the injustice or senselessness of it
- **Fear of breaking down** or losing control, or of a similar event happening again
- **Shame** for not having reacted as they might have wanted to
- **Sadness** about the deaths, injuries and the whole circumstances of the incident

Individuals may also feel depressed without knowing why or alternatively cannot stop thinking about the incident. They may suffer loss of memory, concentration or motivation or experience flashbacks.

Physical symptoms can include sleeplessness, dizziness, palpitations, menstrual problems, changes in sexual interest or eating habits — frequently without making a connection with the incident.

People may find themselves taking their anger out on their family, or emotionally withdrawing from close relationships, just when they need them the most.

So what can be done to help? Nature often heals by allowing feelings to come out and making people want to talk about them. This is very helpful and should be encouraged if the opportunity arises.

Talking to a trained counsellor is often a great relief and can reduce much of the tension and anxiety. Trying to ignore personal

with and feel the need to do so

- Their relationships seem to be suffering
- Their work performance suffers
- They are suffering from exhaustion
- They cannot control their memories of the

Trying to ignore **personal** feelings or avoid thinking or talking about a traumatic **incident** may be **harmful** to an individual in the long term

feelings, or avoid thinking or talking about the incident in the belief that they can cope, may be unhelpful and possibly harmful to individuals in the long term. This can lead to a storing up of problems that could create even greater difficulties later.

People who have experienced a traumatic incident should be encouraged to seek professional help if:

- They feel they cannot handle intense feelings or body sensations; or they feel chronic tension, emptiness or exhaustion
- They continue to feel numb or empty
- They have no one to share their emotions

experience

The most important thing is to encourage individuals to remember that they are basically the same person they were before the incident happened and that talking about their experience and their feelings can help. ■

AUTHOR Carole Spiers is senior occupational stress consultant at Carole Spiers Group
CONTACT +44 20 8954 1593

www.carolespiersgroup.com

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CCFoffer@carolespiersgroup.com