



Dealing with the aftershock

The first anniversary of the July bombings in London once again focused the minds of business leaders and the public on the potential impact of traumatic incidents. But as recent media coverage has highlighted, the majority of businesses are still no better prepared to deal with such incidents and their aftermath, and so prevent an already traumatic situation from becoming even worse.

If you run your own business, or have managerial responsibility for personnel within a larger organisation, the chances are that you will already have introduced measures to protect the continuity of your systems and operations if the worst should happen. But what you still may not have considered is the parallel need to ensure the wellbeing of your staff is similarly protected.

It's important therefore to have a clear understanding of the risk of trauma and how your staff could

potentially be affected by it; to know what you should and should not do to help them deal with trauma; and also to have effective plans in place to ensure the impact on your employees – and your organisation – can be kept to a minimum.

The growing risk of trauma

Nothing can adequately prepare organisations or individuals for the experience of a traumatic incident, because by definition it is outside 'normal' experience.

Many victims and witnesses of violence or injury sustained in accidents, criminal activity or during their otherwise normal work may well require professional post trauma support to help them cope with the effects of their experience.

So, whilst all organisations should carry out risk assessments to determine whether employees could be at potential risk of psychiatric harm from events that they may have to deal with in the course of their work, there are some organisations whose staff, by virtue of what they do, are always potentially at risk. These include:

- The armed forces and emergency services personnel
- Bank staff and certain others in the financial field
- Those working in retail outlets, off-licences and petrol stations, where staff may be alone in the premises outside normal opening hours or even all night
- Those who have contact with the



general public in circumstances where there is a greater risk of violence

Companies operating in the travel industry need to be aware not only of incidents that do occur, but also the potential for accidents occurring – and in particular, major disasters for which effective contingency plans should always be in place.

There are also many organisations operating within particular industrial sectors that are inherently hazardous, and where although good risk management can substantially reduce the incidence of accidents, they may still occur. In such instances, contingency plans need to be ready to be implemented, often at short notice, to support those involved.

You don't have to be involved to be a 'victim'

It is not only those people who are directly involved in an incident – ie victims and survivors – who may suffer the effects of trauma. It can also affect those who may be indirectly involved, eg witnesses, neighbours, families and work colleagues. All these people have the potential to be traumatised to a greater or lesser degree

The following are just some examples of how individuals can become directly or indirectly exposed

to traumatic incidents and possible post-trauma stress:

Co-workers who may have to return to work immediately following a disaster will have to come to terms with the injuries and possible death of one or more colleagues, together with possible damage to workplace buildings caused by fire, water, etc. The workplace may have changed dramatically and the effect of this may impact on everyone within the organisation.

There may possibly be feelings of guilt associated with injury and loss of life. Management and staff may feel disorientated and emotional following the harrowing experiences of fellow workers, and will be susceptible to post-trauma stress. Employees may have to be relocated to other premises and be in a position of some turmoil for days, or possibly months, thereafter.

The designated first-aiders within an organisation, who may have had only limited training and experience, will most certainly be called upon to deal with a major incident before the emergency services arrive. Yet the support that they themselves will require in the aftermath of the event is often overlooked.

The train driver who experiences a person committing suicide under the

wheels of his or her train, and the maintenance team who have to remove the human remains from the track, may be required to relive the situation when they give evidence to an inquiry – which can sometimes be months or even years later. This can trigger again the traumatic reaction to the original incident, and the person may be unable to 'close the chapter' until all investigations are complete.

A traumatic incident may also impact on the confidence of other employees performing similar jobs within the organisation.

Proper consideration should also be given to people involved in potential incidents or 'near misses'. These may include people who believe that they came close to a major accident or incident, even where they themselves sustained no actual damage or physical injury.

The effects of a traumatic incident

Anyone who has been involved in a traumatic incident is likely to have some form of reaction to it. These reactions may happen immediately, or may not occur for weeks, months or occasionally even years afterwards. They are likely to be worse if:

- Many people died or were injured during the incident, or death or injury was sudden, violent or happened in horrifying circumstances
- The individual has feelings of helplessness or wanting to have done more



It's important therefore to have a clear understanding of the risk of trauma and how your staff could be affected by it



- They do not have good support from family, friends or colleagues
- The stress resulting from the incident comes on top of other stresses in their life

Emotional reactions

An individual's emotions or feelings are likely to be in chaos after the event, although alternatively they may feel nothing. Some of the more common emotional reactions are:

- Guilt – for not having done more, or for having survived when others did not
- Anger at what has happened, or the injustice or senselessness of it
- Fear of breaking down or losing control, or of a similar event happening again and being unable to cope

- Shame – for not having reacted as they might have wanted to, or for feeling helpless, emotional and wanting others to be with them
- Sadness – about the deaths, injuries and the whole circumstances of the incident. Individuals may also feel depressed without knowing why.

Mental reactions

People are very likely to find that they cannot stop thinking about the incident, dream about it, or suffer loss of memory, concentration or motivation. They may experience flashbacks, hate to be reminded of what happened, or have feelings that they are always on their guard or easily startled.

Physical reactions

Individuals often experience tiredness, sleeplessness, nightmares, dizziness, palpitations, shakes, difficulty in breathing, tightness in the throat and chest, sickness, diarrhoea, menstrual problems, changes in sexual interest or eating habits, and many other symptoms – frequently without making a connection with the incident.

Other difficulties

People may feel hurt, and their relationships with others, particularly their partner, may feel under additional strain. They may find

themselves taking their anger out on their partner or family, or emotionally withdrawing from close relationships, just when they need them the most. (It's important to try not to do this.)

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 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 will come out sooner or later – possibly creating even greater difficulties.

When to look for professional help

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; their emotions are not falling into place; or they feel chronic tension, emptiness or exhaustion
- Continue to feel numb, empty or without feelings
- Have to keep active in an attempt to suppress their feelings

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- Continue to have nightmares or are sleeping badly
- Have no-one to share their emotions with and feel the need to do so
- Start to have accidents or their work performance suffers
- Start to smoke, drink or take drugs to excess
- Are suffering from exhaustion or depression
- Cannot control their memories of the experience, and these are affecting their personal wellbeing
- Their relationships seem to be suffering, or sexual problems develop



It is also important to encourage individuals to remember:

- That they are basically the same person they were before the incident happened
- That talking about their experience and their feelings can help
- That suppressing their feelings can lead to further problems

Planning for the unimaginable

Research shows that how an organisation treats its staff in the aftermath of a traumatic incident will have a profound effect, not only on the recovery of the individuals involved, but also their colleagues, their productivity, and their commitment to the organisation moving forward. To ensure your organisation has adequate protection against these issues, you need to consider the following:

- You (or your HR managers) may find yourselves playing a key role in managing a situation which may ultimately be far more damaging to the organisation than the initial event itself.
- This is also the case with incidents in which employees become involved outside the work environment, and in which the organisation may otherwise be totally uninvolved.
- Traumatic incidents can happen at any time. Risk assessments should therefore be undertaken to identify potential risks, whether such risks are significant, and what measures should be implemented to prevent

or minimise them.

- An effective post trauma support programme needs to include:
- Careful selection and training of staff who are to work in potentially dangerous or aggressive environments
- Well-designed emergency procedures and action plans
- An education programme detailing potential hazards
- Dedicated on-scene support
- Professional backup following the incident – aimed at providing short and long-term psychological support as needed
- Experience in counselling,

You need to be prepared for the fallout of a critical incident

psychological debriefing and post trauma management are vital in enabling traumatic incidents to be handled professionally and effectively.

Whether or not a traumatic event has happened to you yet, you need to be prepared for the fallout of a critical incident, often in the form of panic, anxiety or violence on the part of victim, witness or even perpetrator.

It is the sudden unexpectedness of a disaster that drives it so deep into the mind, beyond reach of normal logic, and liable to cause irrational

side-effects. (Many people suffer these effects without even realising it.) You need to do everything you reasonably can to manage these largely intangible problems, with their possible knock-on effects on the rest of your team. It is also worth bearing in mind that the skills required to deal with the effects of traumatic incidents can be invaluable in coping with more day-to-day occurrences such as bereavement.

Do not wait for the unimaginable to happen – or to be the next person saying 'I never thought it would happen to me'. Make sure you have the skills you need now to protect yourself and your team.



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A successful entrepreneur herself Carole is the founder and MD of the Carole Spiers Group (CSG), a dynamic niche consultancy and the UK's No 1 provider of stress management and employee wellbeing, from the shop floor to the boardroom. Carole is author of Tolley's *Managing Stress in the Workplace*.

FREE Special Report for Management Services readers – *Trauma Management – handling shock victims & training for occupational risks*. Email sb@carolespiersgroup.com.

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