

Post-Traumatic Incident Management Instruction

Owner: Manager, OHS
Last Update: 3 December 2009

Counselling

1. Staff and students who have been involved in a traumatic incident or who are showing signs of unusual distress should be offered counselling. Recent evidence suggests that blanket counselling can dramatise an event and actually generate more distress, and thus slow down the natural healing process. Therefore the offer of counselling should be selective and only occur after consultation with the counsellor on the need for intervention and the appropriate response.
2. Access to trauma management counselling as soon as possible (within the first two hours, and then in follow up stages) has proven to be of significant help in reducing chronic abnormal responses. Well-handled interventions in critical incidents has led to 95 per cent of people going back to work/study and functioning well within seven weeks
3. A trained professional can facilitate normalisation of reactions, provide a buffer and an educative function for family, co-workers and other students to enable them to avoid accidentally impinging on the victims.
4. Advice should be also sought from the counsellor on related issues such as media releases and the investigation process.

Arrangements

5. The Director, Student Life will designate a counsellor for each campus to provide initial counselling intervention prior to the affected staff or students leaving the campus. The Director, Student Life will ensure that counselling services are reasonably available and contactable in a crisis
6. The manager or supervisor of the staff/students affected needs to alert the Director, Student Life to the need for counselling. Further steps the manager can take after 24 hours, one week and two weeks are outlined [below](#).

Information on Post-Trauma Reactions

7. Traumatic incidents can be a threatening experience not only for those who are directly involved, but also for staff and students indirectly involved. The way in which those in authority respond after a traumatic incident is a significant factor in the long-term recovery of staff or students who have been adversely affected by the incident.
8. The victim of a critical traumatic incident will have his/her personal defence structure weakened under the stress of violation, leading to high susceptibility to the influence of others. This makes the behaviour of significant others unusually powerful in the period immediately after the incident. The active participation of supervisors/lecturers in supporting staff/students is considered the key factor in diluting the extent of stress reactions experienced by a traumatised employee/student.
9. It is important that the initial emotional and behavioural reactions of those affected by a traumatic incident be seen as being normal reactions. If reactions are unrecognised, unaddressed or misunderstood, they may develop into abnormal reactions, which can cause severe personal and organisational difficulties.

Prevention

10. When there is an indication of a traumatic incident consultation with the senior Student Life counsellor on campus may assist. A carefully planned joint intervention may dilute or avert a serious incident. This may occur for example where:
 - a staff member/student may be suicidal or exhibiting self-destructive behaviour
 - a staff member/student may be demonstrating threatening or some other disturbed behaviour.

Management of Traumatic Incident Responses

11. Immediately following a critical traumatic incident:
 - Ensure the threat has passed.
 - Provide assistance (follow the relevant Emergency Arrangements procedure e.g. Bomb Threat, Fire, Medical).
 - Contact the senior counsellor in the Division of Student Life on the following campuses:
 - Burwood: 46300
 - Geelong: 71221
 - Warrnambool 32256

12. Initial management of a traumatic incident involves the following:
 - Work with the counsellor. To be as effective as possible, the counsellor will need information about the incident. They will also need a private room or area in which to see every person involved in the incident before they leave the campus
 - Explain the process which follows a critical incident to the people involved
 - Allow emotion
 - Minimise questioning of affected staff at that time
 - If necessary, ensure family members are informed before rumours and telephone calls reach the family
 - Inform the relevant senior manager
 - Inform the campus occupational health and safety officer.

13. In the following 24 hours:
 - Allocate time and be available for individual discussions with staff/students
 - Allow affected staff and students to perform alternative, less stressful duties
 - Be flexible in the amount of people-contact the affected person engages in during the first 48 hours
 - Explain the situation to all people who were indirectly involved. This will protect the persons directly involved from a proliferation of questions, from rumours and scapegoating
 - With the assistance of a counsellor, provide a debriefing session for those people involved
 - Be aware that if the incident was severe and intrusive, even people who have not been directly involved may experience traumatic reactions. This is normal. Airing those reactions can be helpful. Some people find that a traumatic event may trigger reactions to earlier traumatic experiences. Recognition of such reactions is important. It is recommended that the use of Student Services be encouraged in these circumstances.

14. Within one week:
 - Staff and students involved should have the opportunity for individual conversations with their supervisor/lecturer and Student Services staff about how they are coping.
 - Encourage understanding from other staff/students.
 - Encourage staff and students to return to normal duties/study, even if gradually. Phobic reactions may develop the longer someone avoids return to work/study.
 - Plans should now be made for handling and preventing similar incidents. Individuals involved in the incident may need to be invited to assist in this process.

15. After two weeks:
 - If the incident has impacted on a number of people, expect a change in the working environment.
 - Set aside time for individual discussions with the staff/students, if they wish it. There may need to be a further debriefing session.
 - Be mindful of differing reactions. Some groups will become very close. Some groups will leave out the person who was most affected. If one person has been the main target of, for example, violence, their reactions, experiences may be felt to be too uncomfortable for the rest of the group. This situation can lead to further victimising of a survivor.
 - Be on the lookout for signs of inadequate coping. If the event has been major and intrusive, some people will still be struggling with difficult reactions. For some people the experience will have so shaken their expectation of a safe world that continuing counselling is advisable.

Definitions

16. Traumatic incidents: are events that can cause excessive stress to individuals. The nature and extent of individual response to a traumatic event will vary from person to person. Responses may include mood swings, excessive melancholy, depression, anger and so on. Events that may lead to these effects include:
- violence or threats of violence
 - someone with a life-threatening or traumatic illness
 - death or injury of a colleague, family member or friend
 - intense harassment
 - fire
 - bomb threat.