



Optima EAP Offers Understanding the Impact of Natural Disasters – Tips for Leadership

Hurricanes and other natural disasters are events that threaten our sense of security and disrupt the normal flow of life. Such times have the potential to be traumatic and to produce extreme stress. This stress may appear at work regardless of an employee's status in the company. It is helpful to understand the stress process in order to help those around you cope more effectively.

There are no "right" or "wrong" ways to react to an extreme stressor, like a hurricane. In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, people, including those who usually cope well, may experience a number of different reactions. If you have had to deal with a disaster, you or those around you may have felt one or more of the following:

- Difficult or restless sleep or insomnia
- Nightmares
- Mood swings
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering things.
- Restlessness throughout the day
- Eating too little or too much
- Numbness or lack of feeling
- Needing to talk about what you experienced with a sense of urgency

All of the above are **normal** stress reactions to an **abnormal** event and are usually temporary. The extent of the impact of the event on the employee can influence how long these reactions last. Another influence is whether the employee has a past history of other traumatic events. It is only when the reaction continues for weeks or longer, that one may need to seek professional help to cope with the disaster.

What can supervisors do after a traumatic event?

- Be sympathetic and sensitive about the event and the strong emotions it caused.
- Understand that trauma affects individuals differently.
- Speak with your employees as soon as possible, especially about safety and health issues.
- Provide what information you can to reassure employees and help them take control.
- Encourage open communication between employees and management.
- Understand that employees may experience a short-term reduction in focus and productivity.
- Educate yourself and others on the signs of emotional distress & how to provide support and help.
- Temporarily reconsider expectations about productivity, travel and time out of the office or workplace during the recovery phase.
- Provide ongoing communication and support until employees indicate the need has passed.
- Contact the Employee Assistance Program anytime you need help with managing a situation.

How can you help yourself to feel better?

People respond best to timely, accurate information about what has happened and what they are expected to do in the time following a crisis. Steps you can take can include:

- Try to stay calm, be patient with yourself and others.
- Seek reliable information, verify information and avoid spreading rumors.
- Don't try to go it alone, get feedback and help if you need it.
- Talk about what you are doing and how you feel about it to someone you trust.
- Get adequate rest and food.
- Find opportunities to help others when you can.

(Adapted from "When Disaster Strikes: Managing Mental Health in the Workplace", The National Partnership for Workplace Mental Health)

Optima EAP is available to provide assistance with the types of challenges we can all face in work or home life. If you are currently faced with a challenge, please call us to schedule a *confidential* appointment with one of our licensed or clinical professionals. 1-800-899-8174 or 757-363-6777

Visit us online at www.OptimaEAP.com for additional topics and information.