

Trauma support:

let's prepare not scare

How do organisations ensure they are prepared to support their workforce in the event of trauma?

Kate Nowlan outlines the critical role of managers and EAPs in preparing for trauma

Trauma support is the general term used to describe the range of interventions and assistance available to individuals and groups from managers, counsellors and employee assistance programmes in response to traumatic events or critical incidents, particularly in the workplace environment. Reactions and responses to trauma will vary, depending on the individual(s) involved, although the impact on employees can be minimised by investment in training, risk management and awareness programmes of the effects of trauma among management and the workforce more generally.

Defining trauma and understanding its symptoms

First, let's be clear that there is no specific definition of a traumatic incident; a situation that one person might experience as traumatic might have little impact on another. In broad terms it is an incident that causes an individual to be emotionally shocked and 'de-railed'.

Common reactions to trauma may include feeling confused, disoriented, upset, sad, anxious, numb, angry, guilty or detached. Individuals may be overwhelmed by

physical symptoms, such as tearfulness, shivering, sweating and shaking and can feel unprepared, powerless and helpless in the face of what has just happened. As time passes, individuals may also experience flashbacks and have difficulty sleeping, combined with vivid dreams or nightmares. There may be changes in appetite, irritability, irrationality, difficulty concentrating, feelings of denial and wanting to withdraw. Additional physical responses might include nausea, rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath and aches and pains.

When it comes to defining trauma itself, it's often tempting to focus on the large-scale incidents that hit the headlines. After all, for many this makes the concept of trauma and the resulting psychological reaction easier to understand. These large-scale events might include acts of terrorism, fire and natural disasters including earthquakes, tsunamis and floods. Alongside these events are incidents that impact individuals directly or involve colleagues or family members and might include a death or suicide, an accident in the workplace, road traffic accidents, diagnosis of a long-term or terminal illness, hostage and kidnap situations or robbery and assault.

Whether it's a larger-scale event or an incident closer to home, such traumatic and critical incidents will impact those involved, who may be affected deeply. They can have long-lasting effects on employees and therefore business performance and operations – regardless of whether they happened in the workplace or not – and as such there is a duty (statutory and moral) on employers to ensure that they plan and prepare for a crisis and the trauma it brings with it, as well as ensuring they are prepared to handle an incident itself and respond to it appropriately.

An individual response to trauma

According to a study by the Institute of Employment Studies¹, 90 per cent of people will experience a traumatic event at

some point in their lives, and of this majority, one third will develop trauma-related illnesses and are likely to have longer-term symptoms that would benefit from professional help. It is only a very small minority of people who will suffer from a persistent impairment that can affect their ability to deal with 'normal' life.

As such, it is almost impossible to predict how one person will respond to trauma and stress at a particular time; some people are capable of dealing with tremendous pressure and can thrive on it, for example; whereas others will feel overwhelmed by the same or even more trivial events.

Reactions to traumatic events can be determined by a host of factors: an individual's state of mind at the time of the trauma, whether there are pre-existing vulnerabilities

Helping managers to manage trauma

- 1 Know what is natural and normal** – managers must be aware of our natural responses to trauma so that they can reassure employees.
- 2 Stay alert** – look out for team members who may be particularly vulnerable. This might involve talking with employees individually and checking to see if extra support is required.
- 3 Be there and be seen** – encourage people to talk with each other about their experiences and get involved with the conversations.
- 4 Hold practical briefings** – staff need to be informed about events. These sessions should be brief and factual and free from emotions. You might want to reinforce key points or update staff by email, but don't let technology be a substitute for face-to-face sessions.
- 5 Let's stay together** – the most effective psychological first aid can be administered by sharing experiences and remaining in the workplace, so don't be tempted to send people home.

- 6 Encourage routine** – try to re-establish normal working routines. Even if employees are having external counselling, suggest that appointments take place during the working day so individuals have the chance, if they wish, to reflect with their colleagues.
- 7 Keep in touch** – if members of staff are signed off work, keep in touch by telephone and email. Try and arrange to visit them personally and help colleagues to make arrangements to do so too.
- 8 Be sensitive to cultural differences** – there are different cultural attitudes to death, disaster and trauma. Managers don't need to know what these all are, but simply be aware there are a range of responses to trauma.
- 9 Give it time** – it can take up to three weeks to settle down after a major trauma.
- 10 Adjust workloads** – normal working routines and performance will be disrupted for a couple of weeks, so accept that you may need to reassess workloads or find additional support and resources.

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(anxiety, depression or trauma from previous incidents), the scale of the event itself and also whether the person or object that caused the trauma is still present. The nature of the reaction, and with it the speed of recovery for those involved and impacted, is also affected by the quality of support and coping strategies that are accessible and available.

Training for trauma preparation

Organisations have two distinct roles when it comes to trauma and critical incident management. Firstly, they have a duty to prepare and plan for a crisis (and by virtue of this, manage the risk involved) as well as preparing for the likely trauma the identified situations might bring. Alongside this, and something which may never be called upon for many organisations and managers, is putting these plans into action and responding to the incident in an appropriate and timely manner.

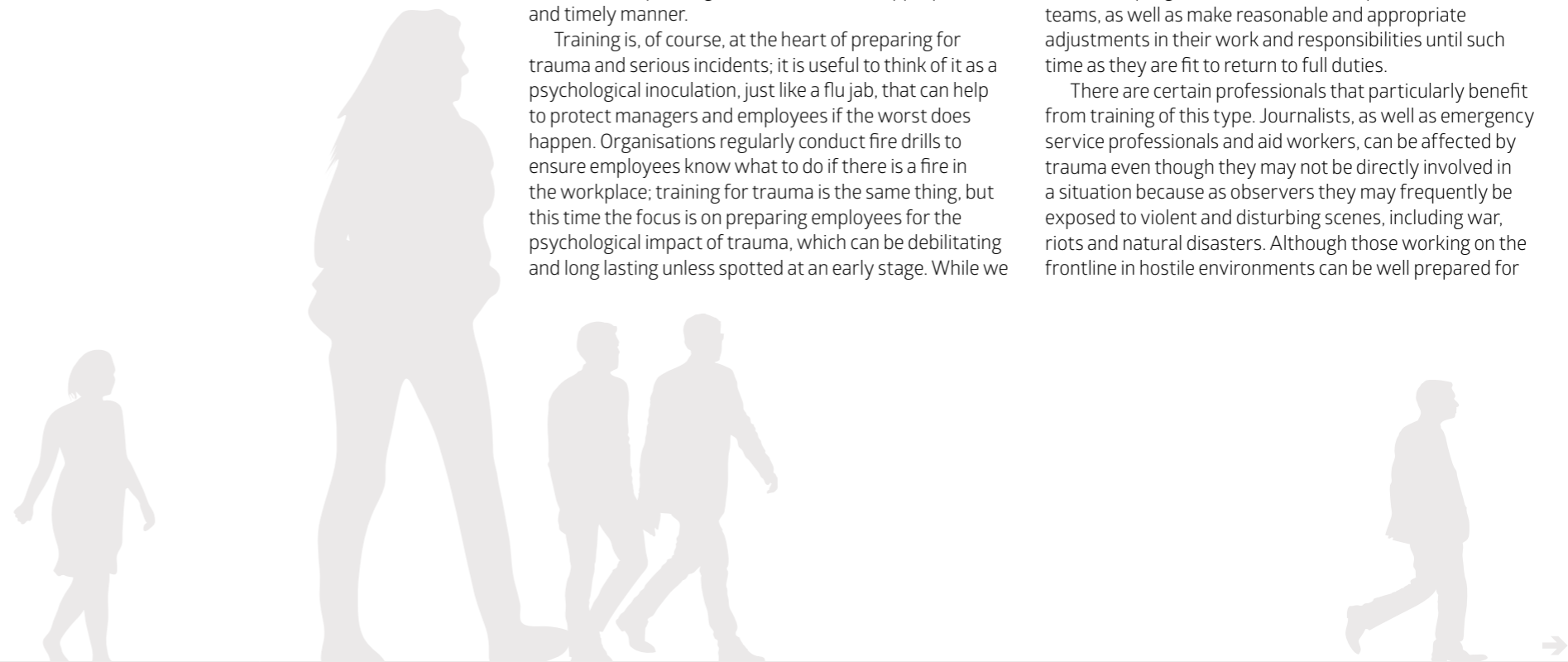
Training is, of course, at the heart of preparing for trauma and serious incidents; it is useful to think of it as a psychological inoculation, just like a flu jab, that can help to protect managers and employees if the worst does happen. Organisations regularly conduct fire drills to ensure employees know what to do if there is a fire in the workplace; training for trauma is the same thing, but this time the focus is on preparing employees for the psychological impact of trauma, which can be debilitating and long lasting unless spotted at an early stage. While we

can't train people for every eventuality, an awareness of what we can do in a range of situations can help to reduce feelings of helplessness for both managers and employees.

Managers need training to better appreciate what an individual might be experiencing after, for example, a death in the workplace, a road accident on their way to the office or something quite unexpected like a suicide. Training will help them to recognise that an employee who has experienced a trauma themselves or witnessed a critical incident may be experiencing recurrent nightmares, losing sleep or drinking or self-medicating heavily, as well as suffering from constant anxiety. Performance at work may suffer, and absenteeism is commonplace at this time.

Awareness of the effects of trauma will also mean that managers can signpost affected employees to support, advice and counselling from services such as employee assistance programmes (EAPs) or occupational health teams, as well as make reasonable and appropriate adjustments in their work and responsibilities until such time as they are fit to return to full duties.

There are certain professionals that particularly benefit from training of this type. Journalists, as well as emergency service professionals and aid workers, can be affected by trauma even though they may not be directly involved in a situation because as observers they may frequently be exposed to violent and disturbing scenes, including war, riots and natural disasters. Although those working on the frontline in hostile environments can be well prepared for



the exposure to dramatic events, they may be less prepared for the effects of cumulative trauma – the relentless nature of their work which deprives them of the body and psyche's natural rhythms of recovery.

The pivotal role of managers in trauma support

Managers of employees affected by trauma can sometimes feel deskilled themselves – unprepared for common reactions which can destabilise teams, particularly if there is little awareness of the emotional and psychological aspects after upsetting events.

In our work with organisations, the employee assistance programme CiC often refers to the 'ripple effect' of trauma that can quickly take hold across departments and affect the functioning of even the most mature organisations. Yet managers who are well trained in spotting aspects of the effects of traumatic events on their workforce will gain respect from their teams as well as feeling confident in their own leadership skills.

EAP trauma support provision

EAPs are in a prime position to support organisations in the development of plans to ensure employees are supported following traumatic incidents, whether it's as part of business continuity planning and playing an active role in the organisation's disaster recovery team, providing telephone support for employees or delivering support for the human resources or occupational health teams following an incident.

In the immediate aftermath of an incident, EAP providers may be called on to attend the scene or company premises to support HR, managers and occupational health, as well as conducting site visits at a later stage when psychological issues are beginning to emerge. Depending on the incident, the EAP may also be called on to support particular individuals – and should always be on the lookout for those who might not have observed the actual event, but may have been a very close colleague, family friend – or who might indeed have lost someone in their own life recently in a similar way.

Whatever the nature of the incident, an employer and EAP provider should agree clear guidelines for the use of online and telephone support for employees. This can be particularly helpful to provide post-incident lines of communication and keep all parties updated with what can be rapidly changing information. Here, the 24/7 helplines might also be used to support groups and individuals who are not normally covered by the EAP contract, such as contractors, customers and members of the public. The expert EAP will also be able to offer practical support such as taking ongoing messages from the company to relay to

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family and friends or even helping with questions around arrangements for hospital visits or a funeral.

Off-site individual counselling support (as contractually agreed and clinically appropriate) might also be available and provided by an EAP provider's network of practitioners. Trauma work is a specialism and suitably trained and experienced professionals should be available to take referrals.

Preparing procedures and protocols

As part of business continuity training for any organisation, the crisis management protocols should be agreed and rehearsed by organisations on a very regular basis. This will ensure that all managers know how they can access on-site support for both individuals and groups.

On-site individual support may be available on a drop-in basis or by appointment. The benefit of individual sessions is that current material or the individual's personal history that might be too distressing for others in a group can be referenced and discussed. Confidential one-to-one sessions will also facilitate links being made, clarity gained and the processing of feelings and reactions undertaken to enable an individual's normal recovery to commence.

On-site group working can be another effective way of encouraging teams to support each other as well as providing an opportunity to normalise reactions and promote strategies of self-care. A well-trained manager will be in a good position to recommend and select suitable groups of employees to sit with a trained facilitator. In these sessions it is essential that group dynamics are managed carefully so that group members are not re-traumatised by reflecting on their traumatic experience too quickly or by hearing about difficult material from others involved. A flexible approach and response is always a hallmark of expert interventions. A combination of group and individual sessions can also be facilitated by EAPs, allowing people to benefit from both approaches and to get the most appropriate support to enable a swift return to work.

To conclude, even with the most detailed planning and preparation, crisis events will, by their very nature, take us by surprise; and trauma, almost by its definition, is unexpected. However, for anyone working in an organisational setting, especially managers, the research

powerfully demonstrates that sound preparation can help lessen the impact of disaster and create an environment in which teams and the people who work in them can adapt, recover and grow in the aftermath of crisis.

Reference

- 1 Rick J, O'Regan S, Kinder A. Early intervention following trauma – a controlled longitudinal study at Royal Mail Group. Institute of Employment Studies. Report 435. November 2006.



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Further information

Kinder A, Hughes R. EAP Guidelines. UK Employee Assistance Professionals Association; 2012.

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