

Supporting Employees Affected by a Natural Disaster Recommendations for Managers



In light of the recent wildfires and the resulting loss and displacement of many employees from their homes and work, many people are feeling anxious and worried about the aftermath of this disaster. The impact of natural disasters such as this often results in general feelings of insecurity and collective vulnerability.

Some of your employees may experience these feelings, and also a range of reactions to this unsettling event. Many may be concerned about the impact on their family and friends, or have significant concerns about loss of personal possessions or property. It's natural for individuals to become readily distracted, anxious and less productive in their day-to-day functioning.

Managers will also find that some employees are more affected than others. Employees' reactions also depend on their current life stressors and their association with previous natural disasters or traumatic events. In addition, returning to work

following a natural disaster is a process in which pre-event levels of individual well-being may take several days or even weeks to resume.

As much as it is natural that during this time (and for some a continuing period) productivity may diminish, at the same time the crisis tends to bring people together and your staff may develop closer connections and improved relationships with one another.

Typical Stress Reactions

Employees are resilient; however some will exhibit more reactions and may need additional support in order to cope. It's not uncommon for some people experiencing stress to not openly communicate their anxieties. Some observable signs of stress reactions may include:

- expressions of sadness and vulnerability;
- unusual irritation and agitation;
- unusually high expectations directed at managers to answer questions and ensure employee safety;

Experiencing a Community-Based Natural Disaster

- withdrawal;
- frequent conversations about safety and personal crisis plans;
- increased absenteeism;
- difficulty concentrating, attending to tasks, or easily distracted; and
- uncharacteristic decline or change in performance;

How to Support Your Employees

Reactions to disasters are strongly related to a sense of loss of control and influence over the events taking place. Therefore, a primary consideration for managers is to provide a supportive environment in which control, confidence and competence can be regained. It is helpful to:

- acknowledge employees' concerns in a respectful and non-intrusive manner;
- feel free to acknowledge some of your own concerns and reactions to the crisis;
- recognize and acknowledge, in a non-judgmental way, that employees may have different emotions, attitudes and opinions related to this situation;
- remind employees that they each have a very unique and resourceful way of coping with stressful events and to continue to draw on their natural resilience;
- urge employees to reach out to people they feel close to;
- inform staff experiencing anxiety that these feelings may vary from day to day and may be different than the feelings and thoughts of those around them;
- prompt employees to focus their attention on matters over which they have influence;
- demonstrate that you are as concerned about your employees as you are about work;

- address critical changes in performance, however it is best to convey understanding for the anxiety and stress experienced by employees; and
- provide information regarding dedicated resources to address specific concerns.

Important Considerations for Managers

- Communicate frequently. Should this crisis directly affect your organization, conduct regular and daily communication. This should ideally occur at the same time each day and contain practical and accurate information for employees.
- Provide employees with clear information regarding how to access internal and external resources, including their Employee and Family Assistance Program.
- Reaching out and supporting employees at a time when you may also be affected by these events can be stressful, so it is essential that you take good care of yourself and seek consultation and/or support, if needed.
- Be visible and manage employee anxiety and fear by checking in with employees, offering support as much as possible.

Seek Support from the Employee Family Assistance Program

As part of your benefits, your family has access to EFAP services and as such, you and your family members can call the EFAP for support and counselling when needed. EFAP is a confidential service available to you at no cost, 24 hours a day, seven (7) days a week.

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1.800.663.1142 | **TTY:** 1.888.384.1152 | 1.866.398.9505 (**Numéro sans frais - en français**)
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