

Christchurch: Fear, Grief and Pain

Her presentation on dealing with stress and fatigue in the aftermath of a disaster was meant to reference her work following the September earthquake in Canterbury.

Instead, Sandra Johnston honoured her commitment to the conference organizers and flew into Auckland from Christchurch, where she had been working since soon after the February 22 quake supporting one of the search and rescue teams.

Delegates at last week's Zero Harm in the Workplace conference, organized by Conferenz, hung on her every word as she reported from the front line of disaster.

Immediately after the September quake, she said, people's eyes were bright with fear. Three weeks later they were dull with fatigue. "This time you see abject fear and grief and pain beyond comprehension." Johnston, trauma support manager with Vitae, said post incident support is aimed at keeping people at work and minimizing their psychological risk. It isn't the same as counseling, which happens much later in the process. Personal and workplace issues which have been rumbling under the surface will tend to come to the fore, and typically there is an increase in drug and alcohol consumption.

"A critical incident is a jigsaw puzzle. Each person has their own piece. The aim is to give people an opportunity to put the pieces together in a safe environment, with a trained independent facilitator. Their story is important to them." As well as natural disasters, critical incidents could be a work vehicle crash or a sudden death in the workplace. "For some people, these can be life-changing events."

In Christchurch, overwhelming fatigue is a major issue and is affecting the ability of people to carry out their work accurately and safely. After the September quake and its thousands of aftershocks, said Johnston, people developed

changed sleeping habits. Many of them developed a pattern of waking three or more times in the night, even if there were no aftershocks. They woke up tired.

Put together the shock and disorientation from the February disaster, and many people are having difficulty carrying out relatively simple tasks such as filling in EQC claim forms. "Shock is still evident. People can't make logical decisions or follow instructions. They are at risk and need support." Managers, said Johnston, might be particularly vulnerable. Many of them have lost their homes or sanitation but they are supposed to act as role models to employees, so they put their own feelings aside.

"It's not safe. It's not healthy. How to support them? In some cases people have come down from the North Island and stood alongside them, or taken over when appropriate. It sends a strong signal that the organisation cares." Johnston said she believed the old attitude of "leave your problems at the door" is no longer acceptable in most organisations, but nevertheless employers whose businesses were still operational had to make decisions about how much slack to allow their disoriented staff to come back up to speed. "Some people are still disoriented. We see brain fog, irritability, inability to perform the job well, and fear to admit to problems."

After the September quake, many people felt they weren't back to full work capacity until three or four weeks later. Vitae, said Johnston, was still running support sessions as recently as ten days before the February event. "In Christchurch, there are people whose resistance post September was so low they have no hope of coming up for a very long time."