

Traumatic Events

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When confronted by a traumatic event in the workplace, our coping mechanisms are stretched to the limit. That's when we need the help of a trauma support service.

The type of events that tip the balance beyond our ability to cope are called 'traumatic events'. A traumatic event is any incident, either unexpected in itself or unexpected in its degree of impact, that has the potential to overwhelm us and shut down our coping abilities - either at the scene or later.

The key issue is the impact of the event. A little stress is normal and most of us need it - in fact, we have to have everyday stress or we don't function. However, stress related to a traumatic event has the potential to overwhelm our coping strategies altogether.

Traumatic events services are part of a standard of care that recognises people are complex emotional creatures who may suffer long-term effects from a traumatic event.

Essentially, such services provide psychological first-aid. A traumatic event will often leave people vulnerable to experiencing unexpected emotional trauma any time that associative triggers - such as a sight, a sound, a touch, a smell or a taste - are set off. A traumatic event service uses trained staff to help defuse these events so people are less vulnerable to future triggers.

The first part of Vitae's trauma support service takes place before any event occurs - helping organisations put in place the policy and procedures for the care of staff in the event of an incident. It is important that such policies are written down and are owned and understood by the organisation - and that everyone knows how to activate the service should the need arise.

If a traumatic event does occur, the process is a simple one:

- The service is accessed through a 24 - hour freephone
- An immediate needs assessment is done over the phone (assessing factors such as the nature of the incident, the number of people involved, and the ongoing risk); Traumatic events most of the time, people will cope following a traumatic event in the workplace - but, says Sandra Johnston, support from trained personnel will minimise any long-term effects.
- We determine the urgency and time frame of the response required and arrange for our responders to attend the site (in most cases we're usually on the road within minutes of the call);
- Our responders meet the designated contact person at the site and, after a quick briefing, begin the process of defusing with those affected by the event;
- People receive supporting material to take away before we ensure they're safe to go home;
- Finally we follow up with a phone call to each individual 48 hours later and then again 30 days later.

The defusing process is designed to help people stabilise their emotions and return to their normal state of emotional wellbeing as soon as possible. Acknowledging the impacts of an event is a key part of this process. Trauma support staff allow people to talk about the event, and provide a supportive ear and information about other support services if necessary.

These days, there's a move away from only seeing 'big bang' crises as traumatic events. Traditionally, traumatic events services have been primarily associated with heavy industry such as rail, freight, and manufacturing where the risk of physical trauma is higher. Today, clients activate our traumatic events service for a range of scenarios, including 'near misses' or the death of a colleague - expected or otherwise.

The view that people just have to 'get over it' is increasingly something of the past. Trauma support is like an insurance policy for your staff - but it needs to be in place before an event occurs.