

Tip Sheet – Trauma & Critical Incidents

Roadmap reference: Build Resilience and Coping Skills

Trauma & Critical Incidents

The potential for critical incidents and trauma exists in all workplaces, including the transport, warehouse and logistics industry. A planned response along with appropriate resources can help to minimise potential harm and support the mental health and wellbeing of all staff.

An event or critical incident is more likely to be experienced as traumatic when it's perceived as unexpected, unpreventable or uncontrollable. Actively educating workers about the hazards they face and the range of emotions those hazards might trigger helps to reduce the severity of trauma. 'Forewarned is forearmed', as the saying goes.

A workplace trauma may be due to a single, contained event (such as a serious crash) or could involve multiple exposures that build up over time (such as repeated harassment).

Trauma Defined

Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an assault, car crash or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea.

Indirect trauma or 'vicarious' trauma is a response to ongoing exposure to other peoples' trauma or the cumulative effect of exposure to information about traumatic events and experiences. (Vicarious trauma is why counsellors and social workers debrief).

Types of Trauma & Critical Incidents

Trauma can arise from a range of workplace incidents and environments including:

- Involvement in a motor vehicle crash
- Witnessing an incident that causes a serious injury or death
- Bullying, threats, harassment, intimidation, violence, extreme isolation, unreasonable demands and job insecurity
- Prolonged exposure to noise, vibration, flashing lights and extreme heat or cold
- Chronic and/or acute fatigue
- Acting as the first responder following a critical incident
- Suicide by truck
- Evacuation, lockdown, fire or security threats
- Turning a 'blind eye' when others are being mistreated
- Whistleblowing

What the Workplace Can Do to Manage Trauma & Critical Incidents

Preventing and reducing the impact of trauma and critical incidents will lead to better mental health and safety outcomes, including fewer workplace incidents and injuries, less absenteeism, lowered staff turnover and increased performance and productivity. Below are some tips to help mitigate trauma:

1 Understand

Everyone responds to trauma differently. We don't necessarily know or understand an individual's history or level of resilience, so we might perceive someone as having a disproportionate response to an event (either underplaying it or being overly dramatic).

Stressful events and situations impact people differently and require different responses. Tolerance and compassion go a long way.

2 Consult

Organisational silence in the wake of a serious incident is almost never the right response.

Having a compassionate, supportive conversation with staff directly and indirectly involved will help understand their needs and encourage ideas on how they can be supported. Finding ways to openly communicate about potential risk factors and working collaboratively to find solutions will promote a psychologically safe workplace.

3 Assess

Assess the potential sources of trauma (risk factors) in your workplace. This may include an assessment of one-off risks or potential impacts of repeated exposure to trauma over time.

Refer to your state or territory regulatory body for more information on risk assessment of work-related hazards and how to assess them.

4 Plan, Manage & Review

Serious incidents require a swift response. Plan and document your incident response procedure including where incidents must be reported to regulators within set timeframes. If possible, practice your emergency or critical incident response.

Identify the potential supports and resources you may need in the event of an emergency and have the budget ready to deploy. An emergency is not the time to start researching appropriate trauma responses.

Debrief after every serious incident to see what went well and what could be improved and revise your plan accordingly.

How to Support Staff Exposed to Trauma & Critical Incidents

- Ask the staff member what they need to support them at work and what they want their team to know and not know
- Reinforce important messages on perspective such as 'it wasn't your fault' and 'you did the best you could in difficult circumstances'
- Be available to staff that want to process their feelings but be open about the limits of your expertise and capacity. Listen, but refer on.
- Be ready with information on how to access professional support
- Ask the staff member what they need to feel safe at work and check in with them
- Remember that grief is a process. Sometimes it can look like 'two steps forward, one step back'. Provide an adequate amount of space and time.
- In the event of a workplace incident, a staff member may be entitled to workers' compensation. Provide information on how to access this.

Additional resources:

For more information on supporting staff through one-on-one conversations, go to the Healthy Heads in Trucks & Sheds resources on [starting a conversation](#) or [asking for help](#).

For more information on managing workplace trauma, go to [Workplace Strategies for Mental Health](#).

For a list of resources, go to the [My Organisations Tools](#) in this pack for more details