

In the Aftermath of a Traumatic Event: Helping Others

In the wake of a traumatic event, it is most human to want to help. Whether we are a colleague, manager, friend, or family member, we often want to do something to support others, or aid them in some way. Indeed, doing so helps to counteract the very feeling of helplessness that a traumatic event arouses. At the same time we don't always know what to do or how to approach those we want to support.

First and foremost, remember that the human spirit is incredibly resilient. Keep in mind that while adaptation will almost always happen over the long run, immediate reactions to a traumatic event can be strong and overwhelming, and exert a powerful influence on your colleague, employee, friend, or family member. Additionally, you may be in the position of also having experienced the event, and you absolutely must find ways to care for yourself and allow others to care for you as well.

Guidelines: Offering Help to Others

While roles may differ depending on your relationship to the person you want to support, below you'll find some guidelines that most of us can put to good use. For example, both the supervisor and the friend may offer concrete support, but the supervisor's support may be in the form of granting administrative leave, while the friend's is in the form of helping with childcare. Offering any kind of support is a choice you make, and it is perfectly legitimate to do so within the confines of your role, your relationship, and your own capabilities.

- Be present and attentive to the best of your ability.
- Listen openly and follow the other's pace.
- Respect the other's space and use touch only if appropriate and accepted by the other.
- Do not probe for details.
- If details surface and you can handle it, remain solid and calm as best you can.
- Patiently allow for both expression of feelings and for silence.
- Be prepared for a range of emotions which may or may not happen, from sadness and grief to anger and rage to anxiety and fear. There may even be numbness and paralysis and no apparent display of emotion.
- Offer to arrange for concrete support (cooking, childcare, etc.).
- Offer choices if the person doesn't seem to know what he or she wants or needs.
- Understand that reactions may vary widely in the immediate aftermath and beyond.
 - Don't assume you know what the other is feeling.
 - Don't compare the person's loss to other's losses.
 - Don't impose your own timetable of recovery on another.
 - Don't try to "solve" the problem or take away the pain.
- Avoid giving advice; allow the person to exert his or her own sense of control in decision-making whenever possible.
- Suggest outside resources if needed, and offer to accompany the person there, or to be present while he or she makes a phone call.

- If you see signs that someone is very depressed or considering harm to self or others, be willing to ask the individual directly about those thoughts. Asking this question will not “cause” someone to want to harm him or herself. (Note: If you believe you will be harmed, leave the space to protect yourself and notify authorities.)
- If the other is considering harm to him or herself or another, be willing to access emergency support if needed.
- Continue to check in days and weeks after the event, and beyond.
- At the same time, follow the other person’s lead; the individual may need to set limits on when the traumatic event or its aftermath is discussed.
- Know when you are approaching the limits of what you can handle or offer, and find a way to gently take a break, ideally after you’ve found someone to fill in for your role.
- Continue to take care of you.

Guidelines: Pay Attention to You

This last guideline, “take care of you,” is very important. Those who help others through a trauma may experience what is sometimes called “vicarious” or “secondary” trauma, which comes from being present, listening, and receiving a powerful sense of the experience. As a result one may start to experience some symptoms of stress or trauma. Pay attention to your reactions, and take steps to get support for yourself if you find that you’re distracted or consumed by what you’ve heard from others.

Helping Others: A Final Note

Care for others while still being aware of your capacity and limits. Pay attention to whether your caregiving depletes your resources, and if so allow yourself to reach out to family, friends, colleagues, communities, and professionals. Social support may be the most crucial factor in building, promoting, and sustaining recovery and resilience throughout our lives. And just as you are supporting others, allow yourself to be nourished by your support system.

Federal Occupational Health’s (FOH) Employee Assistance and Work/Life Program is available 24/7 to provide support to federal employees. Professionally trained counselors can help minimize the impact of a stressful or disturbing event and help promote resilience. The program provides counseling, problem solving, coaching, and support to assist employees and their family members with a wide range of issues or concerns. Contact us today to learn more.

WE CARE, JUST CALL

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Employee Assistance Program (EAP)**

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