

Information for Families

When a Family Member is Traumatized at Work

When a family member is traumatized at work, it also affects other family members. Although your loved one who experienced the traumatic event¹ may be experiencing normal reactions, their behavior may not seem normal to the family. It may take time to understand and cope with the event and family members can help. Two other factsheets in this series address 1) reactions to terrible events as well as coping strategies and 2) connecting with others, giving and receiving social support. Take a look at these factsheets.

Family members also may have strong reactions to the traumatic event such as fear, anger, sadness, protectiveness, or withdrawal. Whatever the reactions are, they are normal responses to a highly charged, abnormal traumatic event. This handout aims to provide some suggestions that may help family members help their loved one and themselves. The most important suggestions involve listening to feelings, not imposing a response or solution based on your feelings, and to remain emotionally present.

Remember

- Stress responses can occur right away, or within hours, days, or even within weeks after the event.
- Your loved one may experience a variety of stress symptoms or may not feel any of them.
- Most people recover from traumatic events and feeling safe in the support of family, friends, and co-workers is important to that recovery.
- Reactions and symptoms usually subside and disappear in time; often, by four to six weeks, symptoms are gone or greatly diminished in the majority of people.
- If the signs of distress and the intensity of the reactions have not subsided within four weeks, or if they intensify, your loved one should consider seeking further assistance.
- For most people, if you don't dwell on the symptoms and allow yourselves a chance to deal with the event, the suffering will lessen.
- Encourage, but do not pressure, your loved one to talk about what happened and their reactions to it. Talk is the best medicine. You can be most helpful if you listen and reassure.
- These events are usually upsetting to children. They will need to have some understanding of what happened; that mommy or daddy may be going through a difficult time, but that she or he will get better; and that they are safe and loved.
- If children are not coping well, child counselors or child psychologists can assist.
- Even if you don't fully understand what your loved one is going through, you can still offer your love and support. Don't be afraid to ask what you can do to help. Try not to be offended if they withdraw from the family or become overly protective of you or of children. These are normal reactions to trauma.
- Accept that life will go on. Maintain or return to a normal routine as soon as possible and maintain a healthy lifestyle. For children as well as adults, normal routines, especially for eating and sleeping, help us feel ourselves again.
- Be kind to yourselves.

See the companion factsheets entitled, "**Connecting with Others**" and "**When Terrible Things Happen,**" and "**Caring For Yourself in the Face of Difficult Work.**"

¹ Traumatic Event, defined: "An event that has the power to overwhelm the normal coping abilities of an individual or group such as a disaster, violence, serious injury, or death".