



MANAGER SERIES

Tips for supporting your employees in the aftermath of a bush fire

Traumatic events such as the devastation caused by fires disrupt lives physically and psychologically, creating intense emotional distress for individuals, families and whole communities. If your workplace has been adversely affected, here are some useful tips for employers to consider:



Everyone will respond differently and everyone's needs will be different, initially and over time. Being prepared to provide initial and long term support for people will enhance and promote their own personal coping strategies and resilience.



Normal reactions to traumatic events may include:

- Feeling overwhelmed.
- Feeling numb and detached.
- Inability to focus or plan ahead.
- Constant tearfulness.
- Intrusive memories or bad dreams related to the event.
- Sleep disturbances.
- Constant questioning – "What if I had done x, y or z, instead?"
- 'Replaying' the event and inventing different outcomes in order to be prepared should it happen again?







These reactions can be severe and are at their worst in the first week after the event, however, in most cases, they fade over a month. If an employee's day-to-day functioning is seriously affected for more than two months after the event, encourage them to discuss it with a GP or mental health professional.



Beyond a normal reaction, if an employee experiences any of these symptoms at any time, encourage them to seek help from a GP or mental health professional:

- A sense that the emotional and physical reactions are not normal.
- Thoughts of ending one's life or self-harm.
- Loss of hope or interest in the future.
- Avoiding things that bring back memories of what happened to the point where day-to-day tasks cannot be carried out.
- Being startled easily e.g. jumping when a door slams.
- Feeling overwhelming fear for no obvious reason.
- Panic attack symptoms: increased heart rate, breathlessness, shakiness, dizziness.
- Excessive guilt about things that were or weren't said and done.



-  **Encourage employees to communicate their needs**, rather than assume you know what their needs are.
-  **Establish normal routines as soon as appropriate.** This aids recovery by providing people with an opportunity to be active and return to a sense of normalcy
-  **Allow additional time away from the workplace** for employees to spend time with family and friends as this can help them to feel safe and connected. Be mindful that some affected people prefer to return to the 'normalcy' of work and its support structures.
-  **Maintain communication** if an employee is away from the workforce for any length of time.
-  **Create a supportive workplace environment** that allows people to talk amongst themselves about fears and hopes related to the tragic events. Openly sharing with others has been known to promote personal recovery. There is also comfort in a shared community supporting one another. Be mindful and respectful of individual needs. Some people may feel uncomfortable or scared of sharing their feelings. Remember that there is no right or wrong way to feel.
-  **Explore if there are any meaningful and helpful activities for employees to do as a community** e.g. offer basic needs like accommodation, donate food, clothing and other goods, or raise money for charity organisations in the local area.

Provided by Beyond Blue fact Sheet, 'Looking After Yourself After a Disaster'

If you would like to book an appointment and /or speak with one of our Counsellors, it's as easy as calling 1300 66 77 00 or New Zealand 0800 327 669 or visit our website www.accesswellbeingservices.com.au