

After Critical Incidents - guidance and support for team leaders

Tena koutou katoa colleagues

People across the country have experienced traumatic events over the past few days. Experiences have ranged from fairly mild to extremely severe, and our reactions to these experiences depend, to some extent, on our past experiences and our personalities. What we will all have to do as time goes by, is find a way to make sense of these events so that we can go on living productive lives that are not limited by the psychological results of trauma.

Above all, remember that this is a time to be ensuring physical and emotional safety: First, if you are in areas affected, make sure you have safe food, water, shelter and clothing and that any injuries are attended to. Then make contact with the people you know and love, and take comfort from them. Then gather information about where to get assistance from relief services such as housing, work and income, food banks, or counselling. Keep your plans very simple and remember that our most fundamental needs are for our physical safety and our connections with supportive others. Anything else can wait until the danger is passed and we are recovering from the shock

The Role of the Manager

An initial response of shock at what has happened followed by grief is an important and necessary process for any impacted employee(s), and recovery takes time. Telling an individual to “get on with it” or to “snap out of it” will not assist in returning an individual to a productive life and is not conducive to a productive work force. Asking how they are doing is helpful and sending clear messages about it being ok to seek help will make a difference.

Some of your team will have been impacted by what has happened this week and for others there will be a recollection of earlier events and with that some potential retriggering of earlier distress. Be aware that we don't have to have been where the event occurred to be affected. Your key role or job as a manager is not to “manage the grief” but to create an environment where work can safely progress as your employees move through their coping with what has happened and the grief process.

Your warmth, support and professionalism can set an example that will last long after the experience and is one of the most conducive elements to supporting the wellbeing of your team.

For employees who has not yet returned to work, stay in touch. The co-workers themselves may also remain in contact, but supervisors should make sure they stay in touch as well.


Taking care of yourself as an individual and getting guidance and support in your managerial role is very important at this time. Managers can play an important role in workplace healing.

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Tips for managers at the worksite

- **Walk through the workplace** – where appropriate. Let your presence be seen. Talk with the staff. One of the biggest factors to helping a workplace heal is for management to demonstrate that they understand the employees have been affected and by communicating that to them. Acknowledgment and expression of this awareness significantly reduces the chance that traumatic responses will persist or become severe.
- **Let your staff know that you know their work will temporarily be affected.** Ask what they need.
- **Managers need to spend some time with their employees after an event.** Employees need to be reassured of management's concern, and they need to be able to ask questions. It matters that "the company cares" about the employee as a person. Senior managers should ensure that immediate supervisors are supported in this role, relieved of unnecessary duties, and not pulled away from this role with work that can be postponed until later.
- **Be tolerant** of a wide range of individual responses among the employees. And still be aware of appropriate and safe behaviour at work.
- **Be family/whanau focussed** in your approach with your team. Many with young children or with parents they support will be concerned about being potentially separated from them in a future quake. Encourage the individuals to have a written plan with contact details for their children and another adult they trust who could collect their child if they could not or visit their parent and then liaise with the school or early childhood centre or person to consent to this so that the plan is in place. You can also consider if people can work remotely as an interim measure.
- **Access Vitae's Manager helpline service**
Ring and talk to us if you have concerns and want some guidance – you do not have to work out scenarios/situations in isolation and we are available 24/7 just ring in and ask for the manager/duty manager
- **Update your staff on safety of the building they work in**
Once your site has been cleared let the team know not just that they can come back but that the site has been cleared and that the engineer or whoever has inspected the building has deemed it safe.
- **Keep a staff contact list with you**
Ensure that you can contact your people all the time

Sharing information with your team / employees

Employees will have many questions and they need answers (often more than once) if they are to resolve the experience for themselves. As more information develops, it is important to continue to provide updates of information to the workforce. Best practice is to communicate that you will provide updated information at routine times during the day, i.e., "I will give updates of information at 3pm today via email." It is also o.k. to say, "An investigation is underway, and this is the information I can release at this time." Information can be conveyed via email, through notices posted in strategic places in the workplace or through other methods in which employees have been briefed.

Contact Vitae as your workplace wellbeing provider and request onsite support if needed for your people.

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In summary

- Take care of your own people first within your organisation.
- Provide for frequent breaks for the team and ensure that people are maintaining their nutrition and hydration –you may support this by providing food and drink and making sure that people step away from work to gain some rest and time out
- Send clear messages about being rested and managing fatigue and focus on your people in safety sensitive roles in particular
- Take steps to reduce the source of the stress. Provide information on how your team can access support by ringing in themselves to us at Vitae on 0508 664 981 24/7 or contact us to come onsite and support your team at work
- Suggest the team save the Vitae Freephone number to their cell phones
- Communicate with your employees and have an agreed communication plan so that information is consistently communicated across the staff team.
- Encourage teamwork and cooperation and people supporting and looking out for each other- peer support makes a difference.
- Set clear work standards and expectations.
- Modify office rules and procedures that are counterproductive after a traumatic event.
- Give staff information about when a return to work is possible, if they can work remotely, updates on relocations is needed and give information about pay/wages for those who may not be at work for a while
- Take steps to prevent accidents and illness.
- Support staff with children to have contingency plans in place for their children to be collected by others where they are having difficulty travelling to them
- Prevent overwork and exhaustion and have a plan to monitor fatigue.
- Make it clear that this is a difficult period, and it's okay to share feelings of anxiety, fatigue or frustration.
- Acknowledge the value of accessing trauma support services professional counselling, and encourage your employees to get whatever help they need.
- Provide opportunities for employees to talk about their stressful experiences. Remember that the team at Vitae is a resource.
- Don't underestimate the impact of stress on you as an individual. Take care of yourself, too
- Contact Vitae for further material such as wallet cards and pamphlets
- Update your intranet with info on how to access support

Where you have any concerns remember that you can talk with us and seek support and guidance at any time.

Sincerely

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