



# Handling Traumatic Events: Managing After a Disaster

A disaster such as an earthquake or hurricane creates unusual challenges for management. You and your staff may yourselves be suffering from its effects. Emotional stress, physical injury, bereavement, loss of property, and disruption of normal routines may limit the availability and energy of your work group. At the same time, the group may face new responsibilities—caring for its own

members, and facilitating community recovery.

The following suggestions are general principles that can help you structure your response after a disaster.

**Take care of your own people first.** You need to locate your staff and assure that they and their families have necessary medical care, housing, food, and other necessities before they can be effective in serving the public. This task will be easier if you have planned for it in advance.

**Modify office rules and procedures that are counterproductive after a disaster.** Dress codes, rules about children in the office, and restrictions on using telephones for personal business for example, may need to be temporarily adjusted in the post-disaster period.

**Consider expanding telecommuting.** If transportation is disrupted, employees who ordinarily choose not to telework may find telework an excellent interim solution.

**Take steps to prevent accidents and illness.** Much of the human suffering associated with a disaster happens after the event itself, and can be prevented through good management. It is particularly important to prevent the overwork and exhaustion that tend to occur as people throw themselves into disaster recovery operations, because exhaustion raises the risk of accidents and illness.

**Prevent overwork and exhaustion.** After an initial crisis period during which overwork may be necessary, develop procedures to assure that employees do not work too many hours without rest. Provide adequate staffing for all new responsibilities created after the disaster, and for traditional responsibilities that become more demanding as a result of it. Set clear priorities, including identifying work that simply will not be done in the short term. Train managers to monitor their subordinates and check for signs of exhaustion.

**Encourage and facilitate healthy, safe behavior.** Do not stop at telling people what to do; make it easy for them to do it. Educate employees. Remind them of the importance of getting adequate sleep and rest, drinking enough water, and using whatever precautions are necessary to the environment.

**Provide opportunities for employees to talk about their stressful experiences.** To recover from severe stress, people need to talk about what they have gone through, and to compare their reactions with those of others. Consider the following suggestions:

- Provide a group meeting organized by the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).
- Remind employees that the EAP is available to them, since some employees may need personal assistance in resolving problems arising from the disaster.
- Help your EAP to be more accessible to employees who do not want to make a formal appointment but would just like to ask a question.
- Offer opportunities for employees to share their experiences informally, for example, by providing a break area with coffee or other refreshments.

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Stress	<b>For free and confidential assistance, call your Employee Assistance Program and speak with a Care Coordinator:</b>			Marital Problems
Financial		(713) 781-3364	Se Habla Español	Family Problems
Legal		(800) 324-4327	(800) 324-2490	Alcohol/Drug Problems
Depression		<b>www.4eap.com</b>		Other Referrals

Your employer has contracted with Interface EAP to provide an Employee Assistance Program.