

Supporting a Coworker After a Disaster

When a disaster occurs it affects people in different ways. It may be difficult to know what to say to a coworker. Here are a few tips of what you can do when a coworker is involved in a disaster:

Acknowledge the event.

Pretending that nothing happened may seem like the easiest thing to do, but it will not help affected individuals recover. You may want to acknowledge the event with a small ritual, such as sending flowers or making a donation.

Don't ask questions; just listen.

Don't ask intrusive questions or ask for details. If your coworker wants to talk about the event, just listen. He or she may repeat the details many times; this is often an important part of healing. If your coworker is not ready to talk about it, don't push.

Offer long-term emotional support

It takes longer to recover from a trauma than most people realize. For instance, a year might seem like enough time to "get over it," yet the first anniversary is often very difficult for people.

Become involved in the re-entry process.

When your coworker returns to work, you will have natural concerns about his or her ability to work, how he or she will look, whether he or she will want to talk about the event, etc. If appropriate, get involved in planning for your coworker's return.

Offer practical support.

Instead of the catch-all, "If there is anything I can do, just let me know ..." offer to do specific things such as give rides to and from work, run errands, pick up part of their workload (check with the boss first), or other favors.

Watch for reactions.

Behavior that would usually be considered strange is quite normal at a time like this: irrational anger, crying spells, and periods of seeming to be okay followed by relapse. If your coworker seems to be seriously distressed, inform your manager or supervisor; there may be assistance available through the employee assistance program (EAP) or other resources.

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