

arrange for your rehabilitation coordinator to contact the therapist. Offer to facilitate on-site fear reduction (because exposure to the actual situation which caused fear is much more effective than simply talking about that fear).

## **Conclusion**

As in most areas of management, planning ahead can make a real difference - to how your staff cope, and to the long term health of your business.

If you would like assistance in producing your Trauma Management Plan, contact David Brown. Otherwise, we trust that this briefing has been of assistance to you in forming your own plans.

# **After the trauma - reducing the risk of long term distress**

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## Trauma - a new word for an old problem

Although the word “trauma” has only been widely used in recent years, people have always been faced with the psychological impact of overwhelming events. Here are some old-time expressions:

**Emotional** - numbed, shocked, devastated; it blew me apart, I couldn't get myself back together, I fell apart at the seams; I just can't face going back there

**Mental** - I can't get it out of my mind, I can't stop thinking about it, it just goes round and round

**Physical** - you could have knocked me over with a feather, I felt sick in the stomach, I couldn't sleep.

Do you agree that these expressions mean something real to you, whereas the term “traumatised” is just a word? If you asked your grandmother what to do with someone who felt “numbed”, she could probably give you advice based on her own experience. But if you asked her what to do about post traumatic stress disorder, she would say “We never had that in our day!”

This is not the first time that medical-sounding terms have taken away our ability to cope. In the 1980's, the term “RSI” took over from “aches and pains”, so people with sore muscles were sent to “RSI specialists” instead of getting a massage. It was not until the old words were reclaimed that people began to reclaim control over their bodies. Then in the mid 1990's, the term “stressed” took over from the words “angry”, “frustrated” and “tired”; thereby contributing to the current “stress epidemic”.

Once we realise that “trauma” was not discovered by trauma counsellors, we are free to look at the vast scientific literature on arousal, fear, shock, emotional and mental distress, where we find the following important facts:

**Fact no. 1: An emotionally aroused person is suggestible.** Advertisers know this, and use the terms “push” and “guidance” to describe the emotionally arousing and the informing aspects of their work. A good adver-

not take over from any doctor or psychologist that the person is already seeing, but encourage the person to use whatever coping techniques they have been taught.

### 7. Let people go when they are ready.

Once people have settled down they will spontaneously start to leave, saying things like “oh well, there's nothing more I can do here”. That sort of statement, particularly if expressed almost with reluctance, should be taken as a sign that the person has completed the necessary settling down process and has benefited from the group's time together.

### 8. Provide contact details for those who wish to talk more.

The contact list should include workmates and management as well as a counsellor.

### ***What to do at the accident site***

If a person has been seriously injured, the accident site should be thoroughly cleaned and rehabilitated as soon as all required inspections and investigations have been completed.

If a worker has been killed, a mark of respect should be visible at the site until the funeral.

In today's multi-cultural society it is important to be aware of cultural differences, for example the Christian cross is not necessarily appropriate.

A simple white cloth covering the site is generally acceptable, perhaps with a vase of flowers if that seems appropriate.

The manager of the firm could put a note on the notice board, saying what he remembered about the staff member's qualities, and others could be encouraged to write their own recollections.

When the funeral has been conducted, all memorial signs at the site of the accident should be removed, to show that life goes on.

### ***What to do if someone does not come back to work***

Some people may seek outside assistance from psychologists or counsellors. It is each person's right to seek the assistance they need, and the employer should try to cooperate with such arrangements.

However the only time off work that is helpful is a short time to allow recovery from any excessive fatigue that can occur as a result of emergency response work.

If you find people staying off work for more than two days, or begin to receive reports that a person “needs prolonged counselling” for fear reduction,

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fer to talk privately, you can talk to (name the person).

- It is not necessary to discuss your feelings, but it may help you to settle down a bit quicker. If you prefer, you can just write down your thoughts and not show anyone.

“The Pocket Fear Eliminator” can be used as a handout.

### 3. Try to keep people there for 60-90 minutes.

People need time to come to terms with the event. Their heart rate, circulating adrenalin and other hormones take about 90 minutes to subside. If at all possible, keep people in or near the group until that amount of time has passed.

Keep people warm, fed, and informed about the progress of any rescue or medical activity. If possible, express information in terms of how the response team is **coping** with the problem, for instance “The ambulance team has now removed Joe’s body, the Government inspectors are still inspecting the site and we expect to be able to start the cleanup tomorrow morning.” That is, use the active voice rather than passive voice, so that everything you say sounds like “we are coping”.

### 4. Guard the group against disruption.

The counsellor acts as a “shepherd”, keeping the group protected from adverse influences until they have settled down, so that the necessary “coming to terms” can proceed uninterrupted. Keep the media away, and keep spectators away. If one group member is causing the others to be upset, take them aside and engage them in conversation until they are calm.

### 5. Let people speak, or not speak, whichever they prefer.

Social relationships within a workplace or small town are based on a social order defined by competency and self confidence. Men and women alike may be reluctant to display what they see as “weakness” by publicly admitting to their feelings, and it does not necessarily do them any good to pressure them to speak. Most people only need a safe place to wait while their reactions subside. For those who need more, the psychologist provides a safety net, unobtrusively taking people aside for a more private discussion if it seems needed.

### 6. Watch for people who are not coping.

If a group member appears to be withdrawing too far, the counsellor can subtly influence them to speak about something which is not too daunting, or take them quietly aside for a chat.

In general, people who have a great deal of trouble coping are those who have an existing psychological or personal difficulty. The counsellor should

tisement arouses an emotion (interest, humour, even antagonism), then simply tells the person about the product that is being promoted. This is all it takes to produce attitude change!

This tells us that an event which leaves people aroused or agitated will leave them more suggestible than normal. It is only sensible to protect people from damaging suggestions such as “you are feeling angry” or “you will feel numb and confused” during the first hours after the incident. If they really are feeling angry, this can be dealt with later - the important thing is to avoid **creating** problems.

A skilled psychologist can identify and neutralise influences which are potentially harmful during this highly suggestible period. Just as important, positive suggestions can be used - “It’s hard, but you will get through this”.

**Fact no. 2: Fear is strengthened by avoidance, and reduced by safe contact.** Only some of the people involved in an incident will develop fear, but for those people, fear can be disabling. The only way to resolve fear is to “get back on the horse that threw you”, and to stay there until you stop shaking.

Time is needed for our body to realise that the risk has gone and that the horse (the place, the car, etc) is no longer dangerous. If a person gets on the horse but then gets off again, they know in their mind that they can ride, but they might still be afraid. Staying on the horse until you calm down is essential!

Most people would prefer not to get back on; the skilled psychologist, like the riding instructor, knows how to coax the student back into the “saddle”. Research on learned fear in animals confirms that the same laws apply across the animal kingdom, and that exposure to that which we fear is the only method by which fear can be overcome.

**Fact no. 3: Untreated fear generalises.** The person who is afraid of the place that an accident happened is likely to react to the road leading to the accident, and to anything that reminds them of the accident site. We might call this “a pool of fear” which temporarily spreads over everything surrounding the traumatic event. If the person faces the fear through safe contact, the pool of fear starts to dry up, until the person is only afraid of the exact thing that caused the problem; then that fear goes too.

**Fact no. 4: Powerlessness and depression are linked.** If a person feels that their actions make no difference, depression can result. One of the more serious reactions to a traumatic event is the feeling that the world no longer makes sense, and that “I no longer have control over my own life” (as the thing which has just happened shows that life can be swept away in a moment). Anything which vests control in another will increase the risk of this adverse reaction, and anything which restores control helps to prevent it. From the very moment of the incident, people need to see that their decisions

make a difference - even waiting for an answer to the question “would you like tea or coffee” is important!

### ***Our natural ability to cope***

Natural coping occurs when we face the thing we fear, and do not run away. The sooner this is done, the less the person suffers, and the less widespread their fear becomes. When we look at long established customs, we can see that people have always understood this fact.

Following an accident or death, people group together spontaneously. Perhaps they talk, perhaps they simply stand around in groups and don't say much. This grouping can be observed at any accident site, even at the site of a minor car collision, where strangers stand together and watch. After some time, when they feel ready, they begin to leave.

If a tragedy occurs in towns which have existed for many years, this natural grouping is usually facilitated by the elder women of the town, who arrange a safe meeting place and provide food and warmth to keep people together. It happened by the roadside in country New South Wales following a major bus accident; nearby residents spontaneously brought tea, coffee and blankets to the accident site to look after the survivors and rescuers alike.

This grouping keeps participants exposed to the traumatic event in a safe manner until their reactions have subsided. The topic of conversation is relatively unimportant, rather the group is providing an emotionally safe space in which participants can remain near to the site of the incident so that natural coping can take its course.

We should aim to facilitate the emergence of these natural support groups, by providing the physical and social surroundings in which they can occur.

## **Planning ahead for trauma management**

Every organisation needs a pre-established plan for dealing with catastrophic events, There are two reasons for this.

- If something very serious happens in your company, you cannot guarantee that you will be thinking clearly.
- It is often difficult to gather all of the required support facilities in a short period of time if you have not made prior arrangements.

For instance, you cannot rely on using your company canteen, as your major premises might be unusable following the incident.

### **1. Provide a safe meeting place, preferably near the site of the incident, in which people can gather and form spontaneous groups.**

- Use common socialising cues, for instance tea and coffee urns, cakes and biscuits.
- Provide a comfortable environment, for instance if the temperature is low, provide a heater or fire around which people can gather, or provide blankets. If it is hot, provide cool drinks and ice.
- If there are only a few people involved, bring in supervisors and senior company staff to make up sufficient numbers for a comfortable supportive atmosphere. Try to arrange for the most senior person in the company to attend. This should be negotiated when you make your disaster plan.

### **2. Provide basic facts about trauma, focussing on the natural ability of everyone to cope.**

When everyone has a cup of tea or coffee, and seems reasonably comfortable, the person supervising the session should give a short and informal talk, providing the following information:

- Injury and death are part of life. We all come equipped by nature to deal with trauma.
- If we face the horror, after a while our feelings change, and we can cope.
- Running away can be useful for a short while, but we have to “get back on the horse”, and preferably do it soon.
- Some people find it hard to stop thinking about the event. There is a simple method called “thought stopping” that can help (demonstrate it).
- If you want to talk about how you feel to others, that is fine. If you pre-