



Florida State University Employee Assistance Program

Critical Incident Response Guide

Introduction

A critical incident can be defined as an event that has a stressful impact sufficient enough to overwhelm the coping skills of an individual. When a critical incident occurs, the FSU Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can provide guidance on how to support the affected workplace. The EAP can assist with:

- Helping to identify critical issues, next steps and individuals that may be at risk of being overwhelmed by an event.
- Equipping managers with the tools and resources to support individuals and the workgroup before, during and after an event.

This handout is intended to offer guidance and resources. The information is based on the knowledge, training and expertise of the EAP, as well as other professional organizations. Please consult with the EAP about the incident. EAP is here to assist you to determine and plan the most supportive plan for your staff, and partner with you to provide support and guidance. Knowing that there has been an event at your workplace helps the EAP be prepared for outreach from employees accessing services as a result of the event. In all cases, regardless of your decision to request EAP critical incident services,

What is a Critical Incident?

A critical incident is defined as any event that has the power to overwhelm typically effective coping skills. Some examples of critical incidents include the following:

- An act of or threat of violence.
- An emergency in which employees are responders.
- An onsite accident where someone is severely injured or killed.
- An assaultive patient or family member
- An adverse medical event
- A natural disaster where the organization or employees are significantly involved or impacted
- A death of an employee's family member with significant impact
- Multiple employee deaths within a short period of time or a long-term employee that was well known and respected within the organization
- Suicide of an employee or family member

Single incident: an unexpected and overwhelming event such as an accident, natural disaster, a single episode of assault, sudden loss, or witnessing violence.

Vicarious trauma: The emotional residue of repeated exposure to traumatic stimuli that comes from bearing witness to the pain and trauma of others.



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What Can I Expect from Employees Who May Be Impacted?

Anyone can be impacted by adverse experiences in the workplace and may experience impacts to our emotional and physical wellbeing as well as our work success and satisfaction.

Employees exposed to traumatic events are less vulnerable to secondary reactions, when there is positive support and/or acceptance by co-workers, management, friends, family and community agencies.

While each employee is unique, there are some common reactions to critical incidents, including:

- Numbness- feeling distant from others, difficulty feeling positive and low interest in activities.
- Disbelief
- Shock
- Helplessness
- Confusion
- Disorientation
- Horror
- Fear
- Anger

It may be difficult to judge whether, and to what extent, employees have been affected. There are, however, some telltale signs that a situation needs to be addressed:

- Apparent difficulty concentrating among employees.
- Absenteeism
- Increased concerns about personal safety
- Irritability, anger or tearfulness
- Complaints about headaches, shivering or rapid heart rates.
- A sense that employees are highly uncomfortable or overwhelmed

The EAP can help with a plan to support employees and return the workplace to its usual level of productivity.



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Here's What to Expect from the EAP

The EAP consultant will ask questions to evaluate what's happened, what's needed immediately and how to respond over the days that follow. Employees may be in shock in the immediate aftermath of a critical event and may not benefit from interacting with an EAP professional right away. The EAP will walk you through the next steps specific to your present situation.

When appropriate the EAP will offer a meeting in person or virtually with your group, typically a day or two following the event, taking into consideration the availability of the impacted staff. The EAP staff may conduct sessions with employees — sometimes jointly with managers — to review common reactions (emotional and physical responses felt by others who experienced similar events) and discuss coping strategies. The goal is to help employees realize that their reactions are understandable, reasonable, and likely temporary. Attendance is encouraged but not mandatory. The group allows staff to grieve together in the case of a death of a coworker, or in the case of a traumatic event; allow staff to get support of their peers related to their experience. Employees will be reminded of the various services provided by EAP, including the availability of referrals for individual counseling sessions. Leadership will be encouraged to continue to communicate the availability of free and confidential EAP, video, telephonic or face-to-face counseling.

Tips for Managers

Provide a physical or virtual space where staff can meet, and if possible, keep the space available throughout the day for co-workers to gather and talk.

- It is important for staff to be able to share memories, discuss the situation and spend time talking. Doing so is not wasted time and helps affected staff cope with the shock and grief of the situation.
- Allow people to express their feelings.
- Model and Normalize It is important that supervisors and managers model and normalize responses to grief.
- Take the time to allow for acknowledgment of loss and associated difficult feelings.
- Some employees will be impacted more significantly than others and may want to take a break from work, end their workday, contact the EAP or just need some additional private time. It is important to honor these needs as much as possible.



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Making the Initial Announcement

- Consider who, how, when and to whom you make an announcement.
- Consult with your HR Partner, senior leadership, executive management and/or communication department.
- In most situations, you might want to call or speak to the immediate manager to determine who should make the announcement to the impacted work group. Take into consideration those in the group who might be traveling, working remotely or located in another office.
- Typically, a general announcement follows the work group announcement.
- However, there might be situations where the event is already in the public domain, indicating the need to make a general announcement sooner or without first doing a work group announcement. Employees will have a strong need for information about the incident.
- Supervisors and managers should make an effort to get as much information as appropriate or available and share it in a timely manner.
- Express the commitment to keep staff up to date as much as possible.
- Stress the importance of information coming from one or two reliable and informed sources.

Sample Email to Announce EAP Support

The following email can be edited and sent to the impacted staff.

I would like to invite you to a staff support session facilitated by the Employee Assistance Program. This voluntary group will be an opportunity for you to share your experiences and concerns related to _____ and how it has impacted you. The EAP will talk about the resources available to you and explore healthy ways of coping. The session is scheduled for _____ (date and time) in the _____ (location). As a reminder, EAP is also available for you individually, call 850-644-2288 to schedule a confidential appointment.