



## **Helping Your Workforce Cope with Disaster-related Anxiety**

In the aftermath of a natural disaster, our world has drastically changed, and focusing on business-as-usual continues to be difficult. But returning to productive work is a necessary step in our healing, as individuals and as a community.

Mental Health America (MHA) offers the following information to assist employers in responding to the San Diego County wildfires with the goal of helping them help their employees recover and return to productive life. We must remember, however, that for some people the effects of the disaster may not be felt immediately, but instead may arise in months and, in some cases, years to come.

### **Signs of Emotional Impact**

Over the coming months, employers may begin to see the emotional impact of the disaster in their workforce. This may play out an employee's performance and productivity in the following ways:

- Working slowly
- Missing deadlines
- Calling in sick frequently
- Absenteeism
- Irritability and anger
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- Appearing numb or emotionless
- Withdrawal from work activity
- Overworking
- Forgetting directives, procedures and requests

Difficulty with work transitions or changes in routines

## What Employers Can Do

To help your employees work through the emotional toll of the disaster and reduce the impact on your organization's productivity, MHA recommends taking the following steps:

1. **Speak to the entire organization as soon as possible.** Leadership should meet with staff at all levels to express shared grief, as well as to promote available counseling services and other resources. Use the key messages included to plan your discussion.
2. **Educate your supervisors and managers:** Inform all supervisors and human resources professionals about the signs of emotional distress; all policy changes and actions being taken in response to the crisis; and available treatment resources so they can inform their staff. Direct them to encourage staff to seek treatment when necessary. Most importantly, remind them that they should seek support as needed, in addition to facilitating this for the people they supervise.
3. **Provide educational resources:** Your employee assistance program (EAP) and/or mental health administrator may have educational materials and information on covered treatment resources. MHA has resources available on coping with loss, helping children cope, post-traumatic stress disorder and other topics through our web site ([www.mentalhealthamerica.net](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net)) and toll-free number (800-969-6642).
4. **Facilitate communication among employees:** Support among colleagues can help employees work through difficulties. Consider allowing people to break from work periodically to talk. Provide a comfortable environment for them to gather.
5. **Consider bringing a professional counselor/facilitator on-site:** A professional, or multiple professionals, can conduct group meetings and provide individual counseling. Such an approach can help you identify and get help to those who need it, which will alleviate their immediate pain and reduce their need for services down the road.
6. **Revamp your leave policy temporarily:** Allow people time off beyond the norm for donating blood, community activity and personal needs. Employees will benefit significantly from feeling that they are able to take positive action and make a difference.

7. **Reconsider your current travel needs:** Employees, clients and other individuals may be hesitant to make business trips for some time. Consider postponing or canceling upcoming conferences and other meetings that require travel. Your EAP may assist staff in dealing with flight anxiety. You also may need to revamp your travel policy as flight security regulations change.
8. **Organize community action:** Hold a blood drive at your worksite, collect clothes and food for the victims and their families, or start a voluntary collection fund for relief efforts. Show employees that your organization is committed to helping those in the workplace, as well as the community at large.
9. **Plan for future emergencies:** Create or review your organization's emergency plan to address any situations that arose with the recent disaster. Make sure to involve all segments of your staff in the planning.

### **Key Messages For Your Staff**

Talking with staff at a difficult time like this can feel like a daunting task. Below are some suggested key messages that may help you communicate with your employees and facilitate their recovery and return to productive work.

- **We grieve.** Find out if any employees have lost family, friends, acquaintances or property. Share your grief and offer support.
- **Know what to expect of yourself.** You may experience emotions of denial, disbelief, confusion, shock, sadness, yearning, anger, humiliation, despair and guilt, and you may not be prepared for the intensity and duration of your emotions or how swiftly your moods may change. However, these feelings are common, healthy and will help you come to terms with this tragedy. Be aware that you may resolve your feelings and symptoms but then have a recurrence of traumatic symptoms during stressful times, such as retirement, divorce, or loss of a loved one.
- **Talk and listen patiently with your co-workers.** If you feel grief, anxiety or anger, you are not alone. Talk to your colleagues who are experiencing the same feelings. Some may have gone through the aftermath of other disasters. When listening, don't try to "fix it" or offer false comfort, especially

if somebody has lost a loved one. Instead, offer a simple expression of sorrow and take time to listen to them. Where possible, offer to help them with tasks of daily life, such as errands, cooking and shopping. Discourage damaging ways of coping such as excessive drinking. Don't hesitate to recommend professional help when you feel someone is experiencing too much pain to cope alone.

- ***Be aware that people will respond differently and recover at different paces.*** Some will want to get back to work to regain a sense of control, and others will have difficulty focusing for some time. This is a normal response to a crisis. Many people survive disasters without developing significant psychological problems, but many may need assistance.
- ***Business will go on.*** Acknowledge that work will be subdued and perhaps very different in some ways, depending on your particular industry and how severely it was impacted, but there will be continuity. Returning to productive work will help with healing as individuals and as a nation.
- ***Many people with family that have been affected through evacuations maybe be concerned for their ongoing safety.*** Ask employees if they fall into this category, and encourage them to seek support and care as needed.
- ***Many employees who are required to travel for work may be afraid to do so.*** Reassure them that this is a normal reaction, and that you have their safety in mind first and foremost.
- ***Take care of yourselves and your families.*** Eat well, get plenty of rest and exercise, spend time with those closest to you, postpone major life decisions and other significant stressors when you can, and seek outside help when necessary.
- ***Take care of your children.*** Many of you who have children are concerned about their well being while you are at work and at home. There are several steps you can take to help them handle the effects of this crisis:
  - Turn off the TV when they are in the room;
  - Let them express their feelings and ask questions;
  - Share your own coping strategies with them;

- Get back to your family routine as soon as possible; and
  - Reassure them that they are safe.
- **Seek help if you need to.** If your feelings are too much to bear, seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness. Mental health problems- in general and in response to this tragedy - are real, diagnosable and treatable. People should not be embarrassed to seek the help that they need. Furthermore, mental health treatment (including both talk therapy and possibly medication) is very effective. The information you provide will vary depending upon your organization's resources, but may include information about your EAP, health plan, mental health administrator, and community resources. Make sure you have current provider listings available, as well as documents detailing available benefits and the processes for accessing care. Tell them whom to contact in your organization if they have trouble with accessing services or with the quality of care that they receive. Be aware that people with a history of trauma or mental health problems are more likely to have mental health treatment needs- as are those who have lost loved ones.
  - **Contact us with any concerns or suggestions.** Let them know that the doors of your organization's leadership are open to them during this and other times of crisis. Designate a human resources or other manager as a contact person.

### Local Resources:

Access and Crisis Line:	800-479-3339
2-1-1 San Diego:	211
Mental Health America:	619-543-0412
NAMI:	619-543-1434 or 800-523-5933

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**Mental Health America of San Diego County** (legally Mental Health Association in San Diego County) is a 501c3 not-for-profit organization. Since 1942, MHASD has been dedicated to providing mental health, preventing mental disorders and achieving victory over mental illness through advocacy, education, research and service. To learn more about MHASD, the public can visit [www.mhasd.org](http://www.mhasd.org) or call 619-543-0412.