

Identifying Traumatic Reactions in the Workplace

Washington State Employee Assistance Program

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People experiencing work-related trauma have reported the following reactions:

- Experiencing physical symptoms without a medical explanation for their persistence.
- Having original symptoms become worse or generalize to other situations.
- Feeling out of control – unexpected episodes of tearfulness, disrupted sleep patterns, appetite disturbances, panic attacks.
- Having difficulty concentrating and/or experiencing memory loss or impairment.
- Being hyper vigilant – very tense and easily startled.
- Having stomach disturbances separate from injuries related to trauma.
- Increased consumption of alcohol and/or drugs.

Changes to relationships in work environment:

- Being afraid of returning to workplace.
- Becoming concerned and anxious about the safety of the work environment.
- Changing regular work routines to avoid physical reminders of the event.
- Avoiding performing job activities related to the traumatic event or refusing to use equipment or follow policies and/or procedures associated with the trauma.
- Experiencing flashbacks of trauma triggered by auditory, visual and olfactory cues in the environment.
- Decreasing time spent at work (sick leave, vacation, unexplained absences).
- Questioning whether or not to remain working at “this” job or “this” profession.
- Feeling foggy and numb.
- Being inattentive to the task at hand that leads to increased accidents and errors.
- Deteriorating performance and or customer relations.
- Questioning own competency to perform the job.

Changes in relationship to co-workers:

- Feeling isolated – acting as though nothing has happened.
- Fearing blame for the occurrence of the event.
- Feeling angry about actions or in-actions of co-workers.
- Losing sense of personal and professional self-esteem around colleagues.
- Feeling marked or exposed.
- Withdrawing from usual kinds of peer interactions.

Changes in relationship to management:

- Increasing conflicts with authority figures.
- Feeling betrayed and abandoned.
- Withdrawing into a position of helplessness rather than usual problem solving.
- Becoming “militant” about policy and procedural deficiencies.
- Seeking some evidence of “justice” in management response to incident.
- Turning to legal action if distress is not recognized and dealt with.