



Supporting Your Staff During and After a Critical Incident

During and following a critical incident, employees look to their supervisors and leaders for guidance, information, direction, and support. This may feel completely new and overwhelming, so the HealthPoint Employee Assistance Program (EAP) has outlined some general guidance on how you can support your employees.

As a leader and manager, one of the best things you can do is be intentional about checking in with your team. This can be done in-person, through Zoom or Teams meetings, or through an email to your direct reports.

- In your communications acknowledge the event and that they may evoke various emotions.
- Inform your team about available resources on campus for staff and faculty support.
- Communicate care and concern, encouraging your employees to utilize these resources.
- Do not feel as if you need to speak on behalf of the University or provide all the answers to your employees' questions.

It is normal for an individual to experience many emotions during and after a stressful or potentially traumatic event and for different people to respond in different ways. The impact of an event is shaped by several factors including someone's closeness to the event (Did the individual directly witness it or are personally affected by it?), as well as by one's family history, communities' history, and past experiences of trauma.

Here are some resources and tips to help you support your team.

Mental Health Counseling and Consulting Resources at The University of Texas at Austin

- Assistance for faculty and staff is available through the *HealthPoint* Employee Assistance Program (EAP). The EAP's trauma-informed, experienced counselors provide free, confidential in person and virtual counseling, manager consultations, referrals and group meetings within departments. Phone: (512) 471-3366; Web site: <http://eap.utexas.edu>; 24/7 counseling available: 512-471-3399. A language line is available for all services.
- The Behavior Concerns Advice Line or BCAL, 512-232-5050, <https://bcal.utexas.edu> is available 24 hours a day to provide guidance to anyone concerned about someone else's behavior on campus.
- The primary counseling resource for students is the Counseling and Mental Health Center (CMHC), located in the Student Services Building (SSB). Phone: (512) 471-3515; Web site: <http://cmhc.utexas.edu/>; 24-hour crisis telephone counseling: 512-471-2255.

You can reference these guidelines when communicating with your employees

- When there is a high stress event or critical incident occurring it is best to acknowledge the event and to name that it may stir up many emotions and that there are resources on campus for free and confidential support.
- Check in with your team members, ask how they are doing and what they need. Actively listen, and validate the emotions and information they share, fostering a sense of genuine understanding. This can be as simple as saying “Thank you for telling me,” or “I appreciate you sharing your feelings and concerns.” This effort to remain present can be conducted through one-on-one or group meetings or through your other communication platforms as needed.
- Recognize employee performance may be affected. There may be increased absenteeism, inconsistency in performance, impaired problem-solving and planning, and increased feelings of frustration, anxiety, and being overwhelmed. Assist your team by clearly prioritizing goals and communicating essential information in writing so they can refer to it if they have difficulty concentrating. Additionally, consider reassessing deadlines, as necessary.
- Some employees may need supports during the event, in the days immediately following or for others it may be weeks or months after the initial crisis that an employee names the lingering impact due to the ways trauma uniquely impacts each person.
- Promote peer interactions and provide opportunities for team members to connect. Research indicates that the supervisor-employee relationship is the primary buffer against the impact of overwhelming events and followed closely by the quality of peer relationships.
- Express gratitude and appreciation to your employees for their hard work during this challenging time.
- Contact HealthPoint EAP for help navigating these complicated situations to receive support in coping with your own reactions or to discuss your role as a leader or manager during this time.

Providing Support During or After a Critical Incident

There is value in providing a safe, private space for employees to share what they are experiencing. Researching shows that listening to another’s experience helps one to feel seen, heard and understood, and has a powerfully positive impact.

- Listen with compassion. Take a deep breath and connect with your intention to provide a supportive space. Focus on your intention to listen to their experience without taking on their pain or trying to fix anything. Listen without judgment, reflect on their strengths and resources, and normalize their feelings.
- Encourage acceptance of all individual reactions. Remember that each person copes with stress in a unique way, and there is no "right way" to react. For some, the critical incident may trigger strong memories and feelings related to previous trauma. The incident may

also have a stronger than expected impact on employees with existing medical or mental health conditions or on those who are experiencing other major stressors in their lives.

- Release yourself from the pressure of coming up with something perfect to say. Discussion can be brief, often even a short acknowledgement is very helpful. Thank them for sharing and remind them of campus counseling resources that can be utilized during work time.

During and Following a High Stress Event or Critical Incident	
Common Reactions (*this list is not exhaustive)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confusion, disorientation, worry, overwhelm, fear, intrusive thoughts and images, heightened alert, self-blame. • Shock, sorrow, grief, fear, anger, numbness, irritability, guilt, shame, Helplessness. • Rumination or replaying the event repeatedly. • Isolation, interpersonal conflict, feeling weary and exhausted. • Fatigue, headaches, muscle tension, stomach upset, increased heart rate, feeling on edge, feeling wired and tired. • Difficulty sleeping, eating, focusing, remembering details.
Helpful Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give yourself permission to feel whatever you feel. • Connect with caring community. • Focus on something practical that you can do right now. • Engage in activities that help you ground in your body and in the present Moment. • Recognize your limits. • Practice relaxation methods. • Prioritize sleep, remembering to hydrate, and eating nourishing foods. • Maintain as normal of a schedule as you are able. • Find places where your experiences are heard and validated. • Reach out for support through counseling (contact HealthPoint EAP).
Promoting Growth During and After	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus first on re-establishing a sense of physical, psychological, and emotional safety. • Allow yourself to include your full range of emotional responses as they arise. Don't talk yourself out of a feeling. Try to name what you feel (e.g. outraged, scared, bewildered, overwhelmed, etc.) and listen for what the need underneath might be asking for. Is there a need to feel? To act? To connect? For comfort? For distraction? Needs can change daily. Explore how this need might be met. • Produce a narrative authentic to you and your experience about the events to understand your experience. Having the words to understand and articulate your experiences is powerful. Confusion related to your internal experience may increase feelings of distress, helplessness, and hopelessness. • Engage in self-care that is empowering and protective. Understanding

	<p>your own experience will also help you be intentional about your self-care practices. Engaging in self-care can range from limiting your social media use to avoid triggers to engaging in activities that will increase feelings of empowerment. Whatever you choose, remember to be mindful of the function that it serves and be kind and compassionate towards yourself as you figure out what you need.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Connect with caring community to process feelings and experiences. Ask for what you need. Often people are afraid of doing or saying the wrong thing but are relieved if you can tell them what is helpful for you.• Take control of what you can control, such as what you want to share with others about your experience. You don't have to repeat your experiences with everyone. Be prepared to say, "I need to not talk about this right now." Respect that everyone needs to deal with things in their own way and own time.• Act in ways that benefit or simply express gratitude and show compassion to others.• Reconnect with your values and make choices that are aligned with what matters to you the most.• Look for personal and shared missions that energize you and help you find meaning.
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Responses That Can Lead to Greater Suffering

Please refer to the EAP if you see any of the following:

- Using alcohol or drugs to cope.
- Working too much.
- Extreme avoidance of thinking or talking about the traumatic experience.
- Violence or conflict.
- Not taking care of themselves.

To discuss concerns about a specific person, contact EAP at 512-471-3366 or eap@austin.utexas.edu or call BCAL at 512-232-5050.