

A close-up photograph of three hands clasped together in a supportive grip. The hands are positioned diagonally across the frame. The person on the left wears a black and white patterned sweater. The person in the middle wears a grey ribbed sweater. The person on the right wears a dark sweater. The background is a plain, light-colored surface.

How To Support Employees Following a Stressful Event

Table of Contents

Introduction	03
What Are Some Expected Responses to Stressful Events?	04
How To Respond To Stressful Events as an Organization	06
How To Support Employees Impacted by Stressful Events	08
Modern Health Care Recommendations for Coping With Stressful Events	09



Introduction

A stressful or traumatic event goes beyond the normal day-to-day challenges of life. These events could include an assault, a threat to one's safety, the death of a loved one, or world events like wars, hate crimes, and violence against particular communities. Unfortunately, these types of events are relatively common, and with 24/7 access to news, we are more likely to be exposed to them in our daily lives.

Following stressful events, organizations often face the difficult task of empathetically communicating while taking the proper steps to promote employee well-being. Please use this guide to help you navigate the best ways to support your workforce when a stressful event occurs.





What Are Some Expected Responses to Stressful Events?

Employees may experience a wide range of reactions to stressful events, including:

- Trouble sleeping
- Anxiety, fear, or worry
- Anger
- Hopelessness or powerlessness
- Difficulty concentrating
- Struggles with memory
- Fatigue
- Headaches
- Shock, disbelief, numbness, or “no reaction”
- Constantly watching the news or social media
- Avoiding places, activities, or people that cause distress

The term acute stress describes these intense and unpleasant reactions to stressful events. Employees can experience acute stress without being directly involved in a traumatic event, which is known as secondary trauma. If symptoms are severe or last longer than a few weeks, they may want to be evaluated for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).



What is secondary trauma?

[Secondary trauma](#) occurs when a person is exposed to someone else's traumatic experience. Hearing about or seeing videos of traumatic events can lead to many of the same reactions as those who experienced the trauma first-hand. Secondary trauma can impact how people feel, think, and behave. Common reactions may include the same as those listed on the previous page.

Individuals experiencing these reactions for more than a few weeks may benefit from seeking additional help.

What is PTSD?

Many people will experience a traumatic event in their lifetime and may notice changes in their emotions and behaviors after these events. For some, these changes resolve naturally, while others may experience longer-lasting difficulties. [Post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#) is the term used when difficulties with emotions and behaviors persist longer than one month following a trauma and significantly impact a person's life. About 10 percent of men and 20 percent of women who experience a trauma will develop PTSD. Symptoms typically fall into four categories:

- Reliving the event through unwelcome memories, flashbacks, or nightmares
- Avoiding reminders of the event
- Having more negative thoughts and feelings than before
- Feeling on edge or on high alert for danger

Several effective treatments for PTSD and associated problems exist, and Modern Health has providers trained in these options. Modern Health can connect your employees with a certified coach or a licensed therapist to help address their needs.

The vast majority of people who experience trauma won't meet the diagnostic criteria for PTSD. However, that doesn't mean people don't experience real distress after a stressful event.

How To Respond To Stressful Events as an Organization

How your organization [addresses stressful events](#) should be based on factors like your company culture and leadership's involvement in responding to these events. Decisions about what and when to communicate should be internal and based on your specific culture, norms, and circumstances; it can help to have a general plan in place ahead of an event. Modern Health has pre-written email templates for various stressful events that you can repurpose and send to your employees or use as inspiration for your own communications:

[Bereavement email](#): Emphasize how Modern Health resources can help in times of bereavement involving a colleague.

[Natural Disasters email](#): Acknowledge the stress your employees may feel after a natural disaster and guide them to Modern Health resources.



General considerations to keep in mind:

- **Respond as soon as possible following the stressful event.** Although employees may not be ready to engage in mental health services, it is important to acknowledge and validate the potential for distress, as well as to remind them of the support and resources available.
- **Be mindful of who is most impacted by the event** — often, an event might affect a particular group or community more than others.
- Many people feel helpless following tragic events. **Validating and normalizing these feelings helps employees feel supported and cared about.**
- If you plan to encourage employees to reach out to managers, **work to support managers and prepare them for these dialogues.** Schedule a “Supporting Your Team as a Manager: Processing Stressful World Events” Circle to provide managers with the resources they need for these situations. This Circle is available upon request.
- **Words and actions should align in your response.** For example, if you encourage employees to take time off following an incident, ensure that leadership, managers, and colleagues are all on board with this strategy.
- **Check in on employees a few weeks after the stressful event.** Allow employees time to process, then check in again to see how they are doing or remind them about mental health benefits.

Language considerations to keep in mind:

- **Work to avoid stigmatizing language that may lead others to feel excluded.** Inclusive language can relate to diversity in race/ethnicity, physical and mental health needs, families, gender identities, and sexual orientations.
- **Be specific about how your organization will support employees and address the tragedy (if you plan to do so).**
- **Clarify who employees can reach out to for support** and ensure that those people are prepared for this responsibility.





How To Support Employees Impacted by Stressful Events

It's important to understand that no one organizational function or department can solve a stressful event or global crisis. And feeling emotional pain at times is part of being human. What you can do is show up for employees with empathy and compassion without trying to diminish or get rid of their difficult emotions. Here are some ways to [help employees in a tough spot](#):

- **Listen** patiently and acknowledge their experience
- **Share** how much you value them and why
- **Be positive** and hopeful about their ability to cope (avoid saying that it will all be okay or pointing out silver linings)
- **Be patient** — recovering after a stressful event doesn't happen overnight and may include setbacks
- **Encourage**, but don't force them to participate in different activities or events



Modern Health Care Recommendations for Coping With Stressful Events



One-on-one care

One-on-one care is the best option for employees who want or need to process a recent or ongoing crisis or traumatic event, serious loss, or sensitive topic (such as discussions about intimate partner violence or suicide). Modern Health can match employees with a certified coach or therapist trained in evidence-based methods to support their unique needs. All appointments can be held virtually through the Modern Health app, so your employees can access care anywhere with a secure online connection and some privacy.

[Get matched with a provider today!](#)



Why group-based care may not be the best option

It may seem helpful to offer employees a place to be with their work community and to get them to care as quickly as possible after a stressful event. Unfortunately, research indicates that there is a risk of these forums causing more harm than good:

- Each employee has **unique needs, readiness levels, goals, and preferences**.
- Engaging in care before someone is ready can be **counterproductive, increase hesitance** to get care in the future, or even **cause further harm or distress**.
- **Allow employees to set their own timelines** — people are often not ready to process or discuss their distress in the immediate aftermath of a stressful event. Allowing employees to engage with care on their own timelines is important.
- Employees who attempt to process stressful events without a solid foundation of coping skills may experience further distress and have a harder time with emotional regulation. Group discussions on intense topics can be particularly **triggering or destabilizing** for some employees.
- **Employees may feel uncomfortable attending sessions with their colleagues and leaders** when the topic concerns mental health or distress, especially when confidentiality can't be guaranteed.

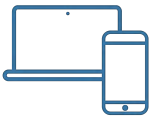




How Modern Health Circles can maximize support while reducing the risk of harm

Modern Health Listen & Learn Circles are recommended for employees looking to add to one-on-one care or seeking a group space in response to a stressful event. Rather than being discussion-based, these educational Circles provide employees with basic information, validation, and skills. Modern Health has a series of provider-led Circles called [Navigating Global Crises](#), designed in response to global crises and events. We recommend these Circles be hosted at least two weeks following a stressful event, allowing employees time to process and consider what kind of care would most benefit them. Employees can get started with these Circles:

- [Processing Stressful World Events](#)
- Navigating Grief & Bereavement (available upon request)



Self-guided digital resources

With Modern Health, your employees can access self-serve digital resources 24/7, allowing them to engage on-demand and at their own pace. These resources include digital programs, guided meditations, and courses, including:

- [Skills for Navigating Intense Emotions](#)
- [Using Visualization to Cope with a Difficult Situation](#)
- [Bereavement and Grief](#)

