When the Worst Happens



You work hard at keeping your team safe from any injuries, let alone a fatality. But when the worst happens, how do you help them to cope?

When workers have witnessed or been involved in a horrible scene – a fall from heights or entanglement for example – it can haunt them for years. They need prompt help to prevent short-term shock from turning into chronic post-traumatic stress. Stress can harm a career, relationships as well as mental and physical health.

An affected worker needs to talk to someone within a day or two of the tragedy. In this debriefing, he can discuss what happened. He is also told how people normally react to a traumatic event and how he can deal with the after-effects.

Follow your company's procedures for dealing with a fatality. The human resources department may bring in counselors from another plant location or from the community to help those affected begin recovering from the tragedy.

A person who is stressed by a trauma can experience these reactions:

- The event is relived by unwanted thoughts, images, memories, hallucinations, delusions or dreams. The person may also feel intense stress when faced with a reminder of the event.
- The person avoids anything associated with the event. He tries not to talk, think or feel emotions about it. He avoids activities, people or places associated with it. He may even forget about the event. Emotional disturbances such as difficulty expressing feelings or pessimism may also develop.
- Reactions such as sleep problems, bad temper, inability to concentrate and nervousness can also develop.
- When workers are affected by a fatality, here's how you can help:
- Don't necessarily send workers home. They may need the support and company of their co-workers to get through the days after the crisis. They may find it easier to talk to fellow employees who were also there than to their families.
- Keep workers informed of the facts of the case. Issue regular updates on investigation, funeral plans, medical condition of co-workers also injured in the incident and plans for reopening or changing the work site.
- Consider your own needs too. Feelings such as grief, guilt and anger can make it hard for you to do your job, so take advantage of crisis counseling.

Know your company's procedures for dealing with a traumatic event such as a fatality. It will be easier to cope with a dreaded situation if you know where to start.