

PROVIDING SUPPORT TO EMPLOYEES DURING/AFTER A NATURAL DISASTER

Guidelines for Managers & Key Personnel

In light of the current crisis related to the impact of the wildfires in northern Alberta, many people are feeling uncertain, anxious and worried about the consequences of this disaster. The impact of environmental disasters may result in additional feelings of insecurity and collective vulnerability.

Some of your employees may experience a range of reactions to this unsettling event. Many will be concerned about the evacuation and the impact on their families. Some people may become distracted, anxious, or less productive in their day-to-day functioning. These feelings are all perfectly normal and understandable. Managers will find that some employees are more affected than others. Employees' reactions also depend on their current life stressors and their association with previous fires or other disasters.

It is natural that during this crisis, and for some ensuing period, collective productivity of your staff will diminish. At the same time, as crisis tends to bring people together, your staff may have developed closer connections and improved relationships with one another.

Typical Stress Reactions

Typically, people experiencing stress do not openly communicate their fears and anxieties. Often, the only observable signs may be behaviours such as:

- Increased absenteeism.
- Difficulty concentrating, attending to tasks, easily distracted, fatigue, exhaustion.
- Uncharacteristic decline or change in performance.
- Unusual irritation and agitation.
- Unusually high expectations directed at managers to answer questions and ensure employee safety.
- Withdrawal as a result of concerns about financial security, housing and other potential losses.
- Expressions of sadness, anger and vulnerability.

How Managers can support employees

To support employees, it will be helpful to:

- Acknowledge employees' concerns in a respectful, empathic and non-intrusive manner.
- Feel free to acknowledge some of your own concerns and reactions to the crisis.
- Recognize and acknowledge, in a non-judgmental way, that employees may have different emotions, attitudes and opinions related to this situation.
- Remind employees that they each have a very unique and resourceful way of coping with stressful events and to continue to draw on their natural resilience.
- Urge employees to reach out to people they feel close to.
- Inform staff experiencing anxiety that these feelings may vary from day to day and may be different than the feelings and thoughts of those around them.
- Prompt employees to focus their attention on matters over which they have influence.
- Demonstrate that you are as concerned about your employees as you are about work objectives.
- Address critical changes in performance in a timely, clear manner while conveying understanding of anxiety and stress for employees.
- Provide factual information regarding dedicated resources to address specific concerns.

Resources and Support for Employees

- Provide information on EAP and other community resources that are available to employees and family members (*see telephone numbers below*).
- Request debriefing to help employees deal with the immediate impact of the critical incident and organizational stress situations.
- Consider Group Stress and Anxiety workshops that provide education on managing anxiety.

Key Considerations for Managers

1. Be visible and manage employee anxiety and fear by walking around, listening, asking questions and being seen as delivering solutions. Effectiveness is increased if leaders receive information and coaching on how to manage affected employees.
2. Communicate frequently. Should this crisis directly affect your organization, conduct regular and daily communication. This should ideally occur at the same time each day and contain practical and accurate information for employees.

3. If a corporate crisis or disaster plan has been established, ensure that all key roles and responsibilities relating to the effective management of employees during a crisis are clearly understood and communicated. Be sure that safety and security plans, emergency communication plans and employee assistance programs reach all employees wherever they are located.
4. Provide employees with clear information regarding how to access internal and external resources, including the EFAP, or call yourself, for a consultation with your local Account Manager on any situation related to your employees.
5. Remember the best way to help your employees is to take good care of yourself. Seek personal and professional support, if you need it, to help you manage your own stress.

Call your Employee & Family Assistance Program (EFAP) toll-free, 24 hours a day, seven days a week for immediate, confidential help:

1 800 387-4765

TTY Service: 1 877 338-0275

Or, visit online resources: www.workhealthlife.com