

Solutions Digest

Mental Health and Substance Abuse Issues That Affect the Workplace

May – 2010

Supporting Employees with PTSD

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which grave harm occurred or was threatened. Events that may trigger PTSD include experiencing industrial or automobile accidents, crimes like bank robberies, violent personal assaults or abuse, natural or man-made disasters, or military combat. Trauma can arise through involvement in an incident yourself or by witnessing it as it happens to someone else. The trauma is usually associated with actual or threatened death, serious injury or physical threat. It is important to understand that it is normal to have powerful reactions and develop upsetting mental images after traumatic events.

When something traumatic happens in the workplace, many employers offer critical incident stress management (CISM)—inviting professionals in to offer staff the opportunity to talk about what happened and how it affected them. This venting can be a tremendous relief and sometimes prevent individuals from moving into more serious cases of PTSD.

Symptoms of PTSD – While persons with PTSD are unlikely to display dramatic symptoms and rarely exhibit a loss of control, uncharacteristic behavioral changes are often the first things noticed in the workplace. The employee might:

- be irritable or argumentative
- miss work irregularly
- have trouble concentrating or communicating
- be anxious or startle easily
- experience a decline in productivity
- develop moodiness or relationship problems
- become depressed or isolated

“These symptoms rarely reflect risk for others. They are a part of a person struggling to deal with an extraordinarily negative event, integrate it, and move on with life.”

–Alan Winslow, MSW, LCSW
Solutions EAP therapist

When PTSD sets in people don't always have all the symptoms. They might feel depressed and draggy or tired without reason. They might feel irritated with people but not connect this with what happened. Often they feel alone and unable to talk about it, or they rationalize their symptoms away.

Consultation with Solutions EAP for a better understanding of the needs of an employee exhibiting symptoms is always welcome and appropriate.

Assisting the Employee with PTSD

Educating employees about symptoms of PTSD can be very helpful. For someone experiencing trauma, knowing what you're experiencing can make all the difference in the world. It may even help symptoms disappear more quickly.

Suggestions for helping the employee on the job include:

- **Lack of Concentration**—reduce distractions; provide private space; plan uninterrupted work time.
- **Disorganization**—use electronic organizers; assign a mentor to assist employee.
- **Coping with Stress**—allow more frequent work breaks; restructure work to include only essential functions; encourage stress management techniques; allow time off for counseling.
- **Interacting with Co-workers**—encourage employees to walk away from frustrating situations and confrontations; provide education and training.
- **Dealing with Emotions**—if an employer observes workplace behavioral changes outside the employee's normal behavior, and a supervisor addresses them with no improvement, counseling may be suggested based on workplace performance.

Therapist Becky Alexander, LCSW, has seen the effects of employer understanding, “The bottom line is CISM and EAP help employees because they feel more supported by their employers and feel they really care. This inspires loyalty and helps people better put aside stress at work and not be so affected by it. When people are mentally healthy, it makes for less distraction and absenteeism and creates a feeling of safety in the workplace.”

This quarterly newsletter is designed to give you brief and useful information about mental health and addiction issues in the workplace. If you have questions regarding strategies for mental health issues in the workplace, or newsletter questions or suggestions, contact:

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