

Absorbing the Shock of Significant Events

If you have recently received significant news (especially news of injury or death of a colleague or family member) it's quite normal to experience some sort of reaction. This may naturally include strong feelings and thoughts about the event. Feelings of grief and loss associated with bereavement are to be expected at some level. However, it's also common for people to experience reactions of stress and worry. With support and using personal coping skills, you and your colleagues will adjust to this news over time.

Absorbing sad or significant news takes a bit of time for the brain, heart, and body. It's not unusual for people to show the following signs related to moving through grief:

In the early stages:

- Shock and feeling that things aren't quite real
- Feeling alert, energised, and wanting to help out
- Feeling distressed and sad
- Feeling nervous, stressed, or worried
- Unexpected tears
- Feeling slowed down and not thinking as clearly
- Feeling frustrated about events, or just generally more frustrated
- Very aware and/or sensitive to the environment
- Feeling physically ill or tense (e.g. headaches)
- Wanting to know more information; trying to understand the situation.

And later:

- Feeling tired and exhausted
- Feeling generally blue
- Feeling unmotivated
- Feeling alert, energised, and wanting to help out
- Getting memories (or flashbacks) of the event or situation
- Feeling guilty
- Going into review or evaluation mode – sometimes this feels like playing the situation over in your mind and can be hard to switch off
- Changes in sleep, diet and health patterns (e.g. less sleep, less eating and less exercise)

These reactions are the result of adrenaline (the hormone responsible for getting us into action mode) hitting the body and then working its way out over time.

Everyone is different and may experience different reactions and at different times. No matter how experienced, smart, tough or healthy you've been... if you get a strong surge of adrenaline from a major event, you'll have some sort of reaction and need to look after your energy and tension levels. Some people experience feelings and reactions later down the track, so it's often an automatic step for people to have a check-in or follow up with those involved in these sorts of events, a week or so later.

Often these reactions resolve in the few days to a week following an event. However some people have extra things on their plate and then may be surprised by persisting reactions and need a bit more time and help to get back on track. If any of these reactions are really strong or persistent and keeping you from your home or work goals, then professional counselling and extra support could be really beneficial for you.

Maintaining Morale Following Significant Events

Leaders can show their support, maintain morale, and assist in reducing the consequences of stressful events by extending their existing supportive management skills. The list below is generated from our experience and research into best practices.

Strategies for defusing and maintaining morale:

1. Communicate (approved and mindful) news as early as possible and in person where possible (seek advice or a basic script if this sort of communication is new to you)
2. Be available and visible – for enquiries
3. Model calm behaviour and communication
4. Do more of the good stuff:
 - a. Listen and nod
 - b. Reassure people
 - c. Praise efforts
 - d. Focus on the positive and strengths where needed
5. Invite senior managers and leaders to be present when ‘walking the floor’ and touching base with people in the days after the event – this shows added recognition and support
6. Defuse strong emotions with extended listening, paraphrasing, and taking notes of issues to come back to
7. Walk the floor and talk to people
8. Provide direction through action planning and a communication plan – e.g. when you’ll be able to update people, and the focus and work plan for the ‘meantime’
9. Be consistent – do what you say and within the expected time frame
10. Recognise signs of stress early, approach the person and offer support, and refer to counselling or other support such as:
 - a. Talking with peers and managers
 - b. Talking with the counsellor from the Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
 - c. Talking with their family, doctor, mentor or other
11. Follow up on people who weren’t there or are on leave – don’t forget the unique teams or smaller groups who might be overlooked
12. Identify special needs groups or individuals who might require further follow up
13. Keep in mind that other or recent events could be contributing a separate impact on either increasing tension or reducing energy (separate these events out for staff; and draft an action plan for each if needed). These other events may be:
 - a. Concurrent increased workload or reduced staffing
 - b. History of other significant or similar events
 - c. Other recent strains, such as conflict or relationship strain
 - d. Change (systems, organisation, or people)
14. Seek advice from your internal resources (such as HR, WH&S, internal consultants, managers) and/or your Employee Assistance Program for complex people-support cases