

How Supervisors and Managers Can Support Staff during COVID-19

Traumatic stress reactions have an impact not only on the individual, but on the agency as a whole.

Common traumatic stress reactions that staff may be experiencing due to COVID-19 include:

- **Shock** – people often use the term “surreal” to describe the situation or themselves in relation to the situation.
- **Fear** – for the health and/or safety of yourself, friends, family, co-workers.
- **Anger**- directed at how the situation is being handled, and feelings of injustice and unfairness.
- **Sadness** – feelings of loss and grief. Some people can develop a sense of hopelessness or depression.
- **Survivor Guilt** – why am I ok and others aren't? For others they may feel that they are not doing enough or as much as they could do.
- **Frustration** – feeling like you are not doing enough to help people.
- **Compassion Fatigue** - Be aware that some staff may reach a limit in their abilities to continually provide care and empathy to others.

Risk factors for increased stress in staff include:

- Financial problems
- Recent personal, family, marital problems

- Major medical illness, or the illness of death of significant others
- History of substance abuse
- Limited social support systems
- History of poor coping during stressful work situations in the past

Actions you can take to support your staff:

- **Provide a supportive presence** –The most helpful thing that you can do for staff who are stressed is to **check in and listen**. Supportive listening shows staff that you care, which helps to re-build a sense of safety and trust.
- **Create opportunities for Peer Support**- Make time for staff to share their experience with their co-workers, but don't force them to do so.
- **Normalize staff reactions** – Let staff know that their reactions are common and expected for anyone going through this kind of experience.
- **Promote a work life balance**–Remind staff to practice healthy behaviors such as getting a good night's sleep, eating healthy, daily exercise, and breathing to reduce stress. Remind your staff to take breaks and talk it out when things get stressful at work. Encourage them to do something fun or pampering for themselves each day.
- **Be aware of struggling staff** – Staff with pre-existing mental health problems

(including substance misuse) might have experienced a worsening of symptoms. Encourage staff to seek support through our EAP or through a professional mental health provider.

- **Understand that stress reactions may be delayed** - Some people may seem to be doing fine now, but may experience a delayed reaction once the COVID-19 response ends.
- **Bring compassion and grace to your interactions.** Everyone's experiences will be different. If someone has had previous trauma they may have a more intense experience of fear and disempowerment because of this situation. Trauma is common and can wire our brains to respond quickly to fear and stress.
- **Expectations and Flexibility-** If staff are re-assigned to COVID roles, they will not be able to complete the same amount or any of their previous work during this time. Adjust expectations of what can be done during this time as staff juggle a variety of roles. Be clear with staff about those adjusted expectations and flexibility for managing this work.
- **Communication-** While clear communication is always important, highly stressful situations demand clear and simple communication. This may mean sharing short and essential information, sharing key information in multiple ways or repeating it.

Be a role model of healthy self-care.

- **Practice what you preach.** The advice that you give to your staff, is what you should also be following.
- **Recognize if you are becoming desensitized to the situation.** Compartmentalizing emotions can be effective short-term, but does not work for long-term coping.
- **Notice** if you are projecting negative feeling from the workplace at home, or with friends.
- **Manage your stress.** Take time every day to reflect, notice, and acknowledge your stress reactions.
- **Share your experiences** with colleagues as you feel comfortable, and remember to practice healthy behaviors and stress management on a daily basis.
- **Seek Help** –Call the Disaster Distress Helpline at 1-800-985-5990 or text 'TalkWithUs' to 66746 to get help and support for any distress that you or staff may be feeling related to COVID-19.

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