

Why workers need support after traumatic events

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In light of the recent events in Paris, Mental Health International released guidelines on how employers can help workers manage emotional trauma when there is a perceived threat to public safety. Bill Wilkerson, chair of the non-profit, received an honorary degree and delivered a convocation address for McMaster University Friday morning. Wilkerson, who is also chair of the European Business Leadership Forum for Workplace Mental Health, spoke with the Spectator about how workplaces can take steps to support employees in the aftermath of shocking events.

Should all employers have a trauma plan in place for their employees?

It's common sense. Sometimes it won't be as immediate as it is in other cases. For example, employers in Europe right now are clearly dealing with a more immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks.

How would you adapt your new guidelines on helping employees manage emotional trauma to apply to events more broadly than what happened in Paris?

The generation of students graduating today constitutes the very first who will, by definition, be expected to provide workplaces that are psychologically safe and healthy. That sets the stage for employers to build a trusting relationship that at times of distress or difficulty, their people will understand that their employer has their best interest at heart. It doesn't take a huge catastrophe of the nature we just had but it can take a situation, for example, where there is an explosion. People begin to translate a worry into a terrorist connection because of the prominence of that issue today. We have to be aware that people are interpreting events that otherwise might be seen as an unfortunate but one-off incident. An employer has a common sense responsibility, and in some cases a responsibility in law, to be reasonable and forthcoming about allowing employees to take time or to have flexible work hours to relieve their anxiety about family. In the broader context we have to start to realize that these adjustments are not one-off reactions to a particular event. We must normalize within the workplace the need for adjustments to emotional distress and emotional reaction.

Why should employers want to provide this support for their employees?

It's good business. We send computers in for repair. We reinvest in capital improvements to buildings and equipment. Why would we not reinvest in the most critical asset we have, which are human beings. Reinvesting in them has return on capital and return on investment that can prove the value and worthiness of this kind of approach.

What can employers do daily to support their employees?

Employers today must really promote clarity of expectation of jobs being performed, must emphasize the importance of matching those expectations with the resources needed to do the work. And, thirdly, must help their employees rein in the deleterious effects of social media. Social media is emerging as a tremendous deterrent to productivity in the workplace, and by that I mean, the kinds of cryptic texting messages that can make people in the workplace ill at ease with what it is they're supposed to be doing.

What responsibility do employers have to help employees manage more localized emotional trauma like depression or death in the workplace?

They have, in law in Ontario, a responsibility to support employees who are suffering from mental health or stress-related injuries and they have in law a requirement not to create conditions which produce mental injury. Secondly, what they have is, I think, a natural opportunity to see the value in supporting employees so their productive capacity remains at the optimum or returns to the optimum.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

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Bill Wilkerson delivered a convocation address for McMaster University Friday morning and delivered a convocation address.