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Employers Must Address Emotional Trauma In The Workplace

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In the wake of recent tragic events in Paris, employers must remain alert and responsive to the potential "emotional aftermath" of terrorist attacks among employees. Such events can cause considerable potential trauma and anxiety for workers, and employers have a responsibility to ensure that the workplace remains a venue of safety, security and open discourse.

Unaddressed mental illness in the workplace costs Canadian businesses more than \$50 billion in lost productivity each year, and a recent Ipsos MORI global survey supported by Lundbeck investigating depression in the workplace revealed that a third of managers surveyed had no formal support or resources in place to help them deal with employees suffering from depression.

Prioritizing your relationship with your employees is not just good business, it is common sense. Employees may be the most critical asset that organizations have, but first and foremost they are human beings. To help employers manage emotional distress among employees when there is a perceived threat to public safety, Mental Health International, the organization I lead, has compiled the following new best practice guidelines:

1. Employers should make arrangements to allow employees to discuss traumatic events at work, either in small groups, one-on-one with managers, or with professional counselors.
2. Employers should reassure employees that measures to protect their safety have been taken. If security measures are put in place at work, these should be explained clearly and with sensitivity by management.
3. Managers should be trained to deal with signs of anxiety in their employees at work. This may be expressed by appearing preoccupied or "distant," to more overt expressions of apprehension regarding future plans, overnight trips, or upcoming vacations.
4. Working parents may wish to stay close to their children in the aftermath of tragic events. Employers should respect and accommodate such employees in these circumstances, allowing them to leave work early to pick up their children from school, or the flexibility to keep very young children at home from daycare should they wish.
5. Working parents should receive suggestions as to a message they can take to their children in order to provide the same level of assurance for the days after an attack or event on the scale of Paris.

6. Such employees should also be allowed time off to consult with the teachers and schools their children attend: What are their kids being told there? What, if any, special security arrangements are being put in place and how are these being explained to the children? If a child becomes upset for reasons unclear at school, what steps will the teacher take, and will parents be contacted? These are things that will be on parents' minds, and of which they will want to be kept informed.

7. The key to mental comfort for employees is the connection they have to friends, co-workers and families. Employees absent due to illness or injury should be contacted by their manager to see how they are doing, whether they need anything, and to be invited to work to be part of any conversations happening there, should they be able to.

8. Similarly, employees with elderly or disabled parents should be encouraged -- not merely allowed -- to get in touch and visit with them. This gives that person a connection through which to voice, reflect upon and understand their own worries, and how those worries can be calmed.

These accommodations should not constitute one-off reactions to a particular event, but form part of best-practice in workplace relations, and I encourage employers to take formal steps to incorporate these new guidelines into their organizational processes.

The shocking images relayed by the media on the night of the Paris attacks will remain in the public consciousness for some time. Employers should take proactive and preventative action to ensure the mental well-being of their workers during the coming months, and seize upon this opportunity to strengthen their relationship with their employees for the future.

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