

THE ROLE OF SAFETY PROFESSIONALS IN MANAGING PTSD IN THE WORKPLACE

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Trauma and post-traumatic stress are becoming more prevalent in workplaces all over the world. The goal of this literature study-based paper is to investigate the role of the safety professional in managing this increasing occurrence of post-traumatic stress in the workplace. Through an analysis of existing literature, this paper will investigate the role of safety professionals in managing post-traumatic stress and apply this information to real-life situations. This paper will be of value to safety professionals with experience on a basic to intermediary level in the field of safety management.

Keywords and phrases

Trauma, post-traumatic stress, workplace, safety professionals, safety management, traumatic stress, trauma, victims, trauma management, multi-dimensional, prevention strategies, safety culture, behavior based safety, multilingual, multicultural, human resource professional, employee assistance program, corporate culture, visible leadership, safe work procedures.

I. INTRODUCTION

When undertaking initiatives aimed at preventing traumatic stress reaction, it is important to define what constitutes trauma. Other aspects that should be addressed include the sources of trauma, both at work and at home, and its impact on the individual. Victims of trauma can be divided into primary and secondary groups, each experiencing their own set of reactions. This paper will define these aspects and indicate their applicability on the safety management profession.

The importance of trauma management in the sustainability and success of an organization cannot be overstated. When employees have the impression that the employer is trying to help them, by implementing trauma management initiatives, they are more willing to work overtime or even work extra hours without overtime pay in order to help the employer during difficult times.

The role of the safety professional is multi-dimensional. The safety professional will be working with human resource managers to implement and maintain prevention strategies. Since the human resource managers have more direct contact with employees, they should be able to ensure that their intervention is applicable to multi-cultural diversity and to different levels of employees.

A safety culture of interdependent support is required to prevent the occurrence of post-traumatic stress. This is achieved by ensuring a companywide implementation of behavior based safety.

Another role that the safety professional needs to fulfil is that of management liaison. Management buy-in and commitment ensures that reporting on the practical implementation of post-traumatic stress prevention strategies are taken seriously at an organizational level that will truly impact on the success of such initiatives. The higher the level of management buy-in, commitment and reporting of incidents/accidents, the greater the possibility of success of these traumatic stress prevention initiatives will be.

Globalization has led to a situation where many safety professionals find themselves in multilingual and multicultural work environments. This presents unique challenges when attempting to address issues such as post-traumatic stress.

Safety professionals and managers at all levels play an irreplaceable role in managing post-traumatic stress, in order to ensure both employee safety and sustainable profitability within the organization. This paper will present the audience with tools that can be applied in real life situations to manage and prevent occurrences of post-traumatic stress.

II. DEFINING TRAUMA

When investigating the definition of ‘trauma’, it is important to look into the origin of the word. Trauma originates from a Greek word that means ‘wound’. This means that the word ‘trauma’ is used to indicate that a person suffered some sort of wound or injury (Herbst & Reitsma, 2016:2). Hecker (2007) expands on this by explaining that the wound can be physical, or emotional. Trauma is a very personal experience and what may seem a commonplace occurrence to one person, may be extremely traumatic to another person.

Herbst & Reitsma (2016:3) explain that there are many symptoms that indicate whether a person is traumatized. One of these symptoms is memory intrusions. This occurs when memories of the traumatic event pops up unannounced and uninvited. These intrusions can occur in the form of flashbacks, nightmares, and dissociation. During these events, the traumatized person will feel as if the event is happening to him/her again. The person will not only be thinking back to the traumatic event, but will be experiencing the same emotional and physical sensations as was the case during the original event.

The next symptom of trauma is avoidance. Normally, avoidance is seen as an acceptable coping mechanism whereby the traumatized person avoids people, places and situations that remind them of the traumatic event and that could lead to flashbacks. Unfortunately, for some people their avoidance behavior hampers their ability to lead a normal life and to function effectively and efficiently at work and in their relationships.

Changes in thoughts and feelings are also a normal reactions and symptoms of trauma. Traumatized people may be more negative and constantly blame themselves and others for what happened to them. Extreme feelings of distrust may disrupt all relationships in this person’s life. Mood swings and permeating negative emotions may be the order of the day and the longer these symptoms persist, the more likely it is that this person may be suffering from post-traumatic stress (Herbst & Reitsma, 2016:4).

Finally, it is important to mention the physiological stress responses that a traumatized person will exhibit. As can be expected, the body’s survival systems kick in and the person will exhibit major changes in his/her eating and sleeping habits. The traumatized person may be prone to outburst of anger, fits of tears and irritability. All these factors should be taken into account by safety professionals because a traumatized person in the workplace will react and function differently than the rest of the employees.

III. PRIMARY AND SECONDARY VICTIMS OF TRAUMA

A primary victim of trauma is the person with whom the traumatic event actually or nearly happened. On the other hand, secondary victims are the people around the primary victim who is also traumatized by the event that occurred. The traumatic stress reaction displayed by both primary and secondary victims are similar. However, there are indications that a secondary victims of trauma display more severe reactions, since he/she were not actually present and the person’s imagination fills in the gaps in the story of what happened to the loved one(s).

This means that trauma is not simply experienced on a personal or individual level, but also on a community level. From a South African perspective, it could be stated that the entire country is traumatized from daily exposure to violence, criminal activity, unemployment and poverty, fragmentation of families, communities and the government.

The evidence of this traumatization is clear when somebody asks South Africans what makes the country unique. Instead of sharing the legacy left behind by great people such as Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, or explaining the concepts of *Batho Pele* (people first) and *Umunthu* (human kindness, respecting the interest of the community above that of the individual), many South Africans will talk about the daily traumatic stresses (Herbst

& Reitsma, 2016:45). This situation is not unique to South Africa, and the effect of trauma on whole communities will influence the behavior of people in the workplace.

IV. SOURCES OF TRAUMA

What are the causes of trauma? Traumatizing incidents occur both at work and in other areas of a person's life. Traumatizing events include, but are not limited to:

- War events
- Physical violence
- Sexual violence
- Accidents
- Violent and non-violent crime
- Natural disasters
- Death and illness

(Herbst & Reitsma, 2016:50)

Louw (2011:10) adds to this categorization by stating the additional categories of trauma as economic trauma and spiritual abuse.

Traumatizing events are not exclusive to a home or social environment. The above mentioned sources are related to an individual's life, but interesting, the same is applicable to the workplace. Workplace trauma sources include, but are not limited to:

- Workplace violence
- Workplace bullying
- Victimization in the workplace
- Occupational incident/accidents
- Interpersonal conflicts in the workplace
- Cultural, ethnical or religious conflicts in the workplace

Tehrani (2004:44) further provides and categorizes the following traumatic events found in organizations, which are not limited:

Operational

- Exposure to biological hazards
- Exposure to carcinogen (e.g. asbestos)
- Exposure to toxic fumes/substances
- Destruction to workplace

Interpersonal

- Death, suicide, illness of colleague
- Witness to injury on duty
- Exposure to violent strike/event

Criminal

- Bomb threats
- Mugging/burglary
- Violent attacks/threats

Injuries caused by one of the following

- Vehicle accident
- Equipment failure/misuse
- Small-scale fires
- Lifting & handling of objects

V. POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS

Stress is, to a certain extent, a normal part of life. The list of potential stressors that people are faced with every day is very extensive. Normal stress activates a person's stress response and prompts them to take a certain actions. Therefore, in essence, stress is not necessarily a bad thing. Turnbull (2011:147) explains that stress can challenge a person and force him/her to react on a psychological, social and biological level. However, all people have a threshold limit of how much stress they can handle before they explode or overflow.

This type of stress overflow also leads to psychological, social and biological reactions, as can be seen in trauma responses. People who suffer from post-traumatic stress exhibit clear physical symptoms, their relationships suffer and they suffer from serious psychological symptoms such as flashbacks (Turnbull, 2011:152). Stress levels will normally fluctuate, but once it remains extremely high, post-traumatic stress disorders becomes a real risk.

Research indicates an increase of post-traumatic stress in the workplace, especially in the form of bullying. Post-traumatic stress in the workplace usually causes psychiatric injury, which is invisible and most likely to be ignored (Kinchin, 2004:88).

Post-traumatic stress disorder is only diagnosed if the symptoms of trauma remain extreme for more than a month (Herbst & Reitsma, 2016:13). Louw (2011:15) explains that post-traumatic stress reaction can develop immediately after the traumatic event, or even months afterwards. This statement highlights the importance of addressing post-traumatic stress as soon as possible and thereby preventing the development of post-traumatic stress disorder. When they are equipped with the right tools, most people should be able to work through trauma on their own and have no need for intensive therapy – if they are able to get help timeously.

The exact causes of post-traumatic stress disorder remain unknown, although research points toward exposure to previous trauma and certain demographic factors which may increase the likelihood of developing PTSD (Parslow, Jorm & Christensen, 2006:387). Whatever the inherent cause of PTSD is, it is a stress reaction that makes even the most menial task in the individuals life a nightmare (Tehrani, 2014:66).

VI. WORKING WITH THE HUMAN RESOURCE PROFESSIONAL

Most organizations will make use of an employee assistance program for dealing with personal and personnel issues. Usually, the human resource professional will be closely involved in this process. The human resource professional should have a list of contacts and procedures in place to deal with the occurrence of post-traumatic stress in the work environment. This means that the safety professional should be able to communicate with the human resource professional, should there be concerns about specific employees.

A healthy collaborative relationship will ensure that the employee receives the help needed, while the safety professional can still be concerned with the safety and health of all employees. At no stage should the safety professional get involved in the counselling process of traumatized employees, but is in a unique position to identify and address ‘at risk’ behaviors and facilitate the process whereby an employee will have access to professional help.

VII. THE ROLE OF A SAFETY CULTURE

An organization’s safety culture is an extension of the corporate culture and the attitudes and beliefs of employees are very influential in this regard. The characteristics of a safety culture include the recognition of the value of resources, employees and the interaction between management and employees; a visible commitment to safety by the leadership of an organization that actively seeks the involvement of all stakeholders in safety aspects; regular safety meetings, where accountability as per defined roles and responsibilities is a priority; monitoring employee attitudes and behavior towards safety aspects; integrating safety into all work activities with a positive safety attitude; learning from safety incidents; improving skills and encouraging development (Louw, 2014:4).

If one takes into account that the belief system and values of a traumatized person has been compromised and the traumatized person is struggling with negative emotions and attitudes, the importance of a collaborative safety culture becomes all the more important. If the shared beliefs, values and attitudes within an organization are based on viewing employees as valuable, learning from mistakes and encouraging positive, safe work practices, a traumatized individual will find that he/she has a valuable support system in place at work.

VIII. LIAISE WITH MANAGEMENT

An organization with an established safety culture will have the added advantage of visibly experienced leadership, whereby respect is earned through actions that support the well-being of employees. Visibly experienced leadership can be practiced by safety professionals and all levels of management by actively preventing workplace trauma, demonstrating a personal commitment to safety and the well-being of every individual within the organization (Van Loggerenberg, 2015:10). Viewing every employee as a valuable individual who has distinctive talents and makes a unique contribution to the organization will afford traumatized individuals the opportunity to grow and heal, while still getting their jobs done. The value of a supportive work environment cannot be overstated.

IX. GLOBALIZATION AND A MULTICULTURAL-MULTILINGUAL WORK ENVIRONMENT

Some countries, like the USA, are facing an influx of immigrants that need to be integrated into the existing workforce (Flynn, 2014:52). Other countries, like South Africa, have been functioning as a multicultural and multilingual society for many years. In both these instances, a diverse workforce presents unique challenges to safety professionals and they need to respond to this diversity in order to ensure the success of their endeavors. The safety of immigrant workers is not just a humanitarian issue, but impacts directly on the economic viability of an organization, since an increase in compensation benefits and downtime creates difficulties for all businesses (Flynn, 2014:53).

The first barrier that needs to be overcome in a multicultural and multilingual workplace is knowledge (Flynn, 2014:53). Imparting the knowledge of how to work safely remains of paramount importance, regardless of the ethnic composition of a workforce. One way of ensuring that all employees understand the safety regulations involved in their work, would be to present training in their native language. Although this may imply extra effort, it will be well worthwhile.

It is also important to keep in mind that a less educated workforce is not untrainable. Safety training can be adjusted to accommodate the literacy levels of anybody employed in the organization and the employer has a responsibility to ensure that the training material presented in other languages are of a high quality. Flynn (2014:53) explains that a lot of translated material as well as training were found to be of poor quality. The benefits of providing sufficient, good quality training to employees outweigh the monetary and time costs involved.

Appointing a liaison person to act as a translator is one way of overcoming the language barriers experienced in a multilingual workplace. Most people in South Africa are able to speak more than one language. In theory, a multilingual work environment should then be less of a challenge, since there are many ways in which employers and employees can communicate. In practice, however, many misunderstandings still occur and misunderstandings can easily lead to safety incidents that could have been prevented. One way to address the issue would be to appoint liaisons in the position of safety representatives, who are skilled in the applicable languages and who can translate safety instructions when necessary. Flynn (2014:54) adds to this by suggesting that language classes should be presented. These classes should not only be presented in English, but also in the other prevalent languages in order to ensure that everybody improves their language proficiency. Practicing these language lessons will not only solve communication issues, but will also contribute to team building.

Culture is a system of shared beliefs that go beyond ethnicity (Herbst & Reitsma, 2016:10) and in a multicultural work environment there are many issues that may emerge by the different ways in which people perceive and understand things. Some employees may seek the employer's favor by being more productive than anybody else, inadvertently placing their own safety and the safety of others at risk. When creating a safe work environment, the safety professional needs to be aware of these cultural nuances and take these into account while respecting the various value systems that underpin this behavior (Flynn, 2014:54). In small and large organizations alike, it is very easy for managers and safety professionals to overlook the cultural diversity of the workforce and only focus on the goal that needs to be achieved. By showing respect for cultural differences and the different value systems, employees will not only be easier to manage, but they will also be more loyal and conscientious in their actions.

Regarding to reactions to a traumatizing event, culture plays a significant role. The safety professional needs to take the different reactions to both workplace and other trauma into account to ensure the safety of all employees in the organization. In this process of cultural awareness, the safety professional should also be aware that people have their own cultural background and be aware of the fact that this cultural background influences their beliefs, views and reactions. Ideally, the safety professional should have an open and respectful relationship with employees from other cultures, where an environment can be created that encourages all involved parties to share thoughts about their culture and the way in which they view the world.

A respectful and safe work environment is especially important to the traumatized individual, who may be oversensitive and vulnerable. People suffering from post-traumatic stress will have a hard time making decisions and performing other cognitive actions. Although the safety professional should not tolerate behavior that place employees at risk, these changes in cognitive and emotional capacity should be taken into account. Avoiding stigmatization and

stereotyping is a vital part of respect (Herbst & Reitsma, 2016:40) and this type of behavior should not be tolerated from either fellow employees or management.

X. TOOLS TO USE TO ENSURE EMPLOYEE SAFETY

The safety programs of the future will need to accommodate the diverse workforce, as a rule instead of formerly, only the exception. Similarly, the needs of traumatized individuals should also be addressed in the safety programs of the future.

Health and safety policies are unique to every organization and should be signed by the CEO and other members of top management to indicate their support of the policy (Van Loggerenberg, 2015:47). Health and safety policies, with updated accommodations for cultural diversity and trauma management, should be prominently displayed and communicated to all stakeholders. This policy needs not be extensive, but should clearly convey the commitment and attitude of management on these topics.

When documenting employee responsibilities, an attitude of assisting co-workers should be integrated into the lists of responsibilities. Safety professionals and other supervisors should have access to a list of resources who can be contacted if somebody suffers from post-traumatic stress. These resources should be as easily accessible as the information used in case of disasters and other emergencies.

Safe work procedures should be documented for every task within an organization (Van Loggerenberg, 2015:51) and when a supervisor suspects that an individual suffers from post-traumatic stress, he/she can assist these individuals by reminding them of these safe work procedures and following up on whether these procedures are followed or ignored.

Knowledge is power and training employees, supervisors and managers on how to deal with the trauma they may be exposed to on a daily basis in their work environment, or in their private lives, will help to better equip them and manage the effects of traumatic stress. During employee orientation, the goal is to encourage employee awareness. Along with safety awareness, supervisors and safety professionals should highlight the importance of using the employee assistance programs that are available to employees. This orientation-type training should be repeated from time to time and especially after a traumatic event occurred.

Employees are required to undergo medical examination after working under certain conditions. Similarly, they should also undergo medical examinations when they suffer from post-traumatic stress. This will ensure that they are under the care and guidance of a trained medical professional (Tehrani, 2014:27). As mentioned, trauma affects every aspect of a traumatized person's life, therefore it will affect a person's efficiency in the workplace. Traumatized employees are compromised in their ability to reason, manage change and communicate to others and more likely to suffer from depression, substance abuse and other health problems.

An employee assistance program will assist in offering critical incident response services in times where employees are exposed to traumatic events that may lead to workplace disruption. Such a program will provide guidance and support to employees and managers by acknowledging and addressing traumatized employees in a non-threatening and non-judgmental way (Meyer & Hullet, 2014).

Normal emergency and disaster management procedures should not just be a paper exercise. A delay in appropriately responding to such emergencies can aggravate or lead to post-traumatic stress in the employees involved. Safety professionals need to ensure that written procedures are in place for all foreseeable emergencies and disasters and that everybody is aware of exactly what they are required to do when such emergencies occur (Van Loggerenberg, 2015:61). Safety professionals should also ensure that the required resources, such as fully stocked first aid kits, are available at all times and are easily accessible.

XI. CONCLUSION

Many PTSD sufferers are able to work and function at a level where they are capable of performing a job, but it is essential that these sufferers receive support from outside and inside the work environment.

PTSD can easily be neglected in the work environment although it has a significant effect on the individual suffering from it and can be seen in the individual's work performance and output. Sufferers of PTSD therefore will also have an impact on co-workers. The symptoms of PTSD manifest in different ways in the workplace and may be activated or aggravated by the work environment. The most general PTSD symptoms in the workplace manifests usually in the form of memory problems, lack of concentration, difficulty in recalling information and poor interaction with co-workers.

It would be desirable for a safety professional to undergo training in recognizing PTSD symptoms and making him/her capable of handling sufferers in the workplace. Having knowledge about PTSD in the workplace will enable a safety professional to be open for listening and discussing PTSD sufferers' limitations related to work performance and additionally should be able to evaluate the effectiveness of the work environment in determining the need to get satisfying work performance from such an individual.

The success of safety professionals in any situation depends not only on their knowledge, but also on their personal characteristics and skills. Commitment to the well-being of each employee, excellent skills of observation and communication will serve the safety professional well. An efficient safety professional will ensure that he/she has the required knowledge and skills to deal with both safety and workplace issues, such as the invisible injury of PTSD. Preparing for dealing with traumatic stress is part of these skills that a safety professional needs to acquire in an ever increasing traumatic work environment.

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