

# Guide to emergency counselling and following up



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*This guide was written for staff and managers at the University of Southern Denmark by authorised psychologist Henrik Lyng MSc, Centre of Preparedness Psychology, in cooperation with HR at the Health and Safety Department at SDU.*

*The purpose of the guide is to provide insight into the situation of somebody who has experienced a crisis, his or her need for support and a number of suggestions regarding how SDU can provide such support.*

*Emergency counselling may be necessary when somebody has been exposed to violence or the threat of violence, for instance, to serious distress (e.g. spiteful behaviour or bullying) or serious accidents. Personal crises or crises in a person's immediate circle may also trigger this need; and somebody who has witnessed one of the above-mentioned incidents may also find that they have a more or less stressful reaction to it.*

*This guide describes what a crisis is and what is generally needed in the form of acute emergency counselling and during the subsequent period. There is also information on how and where to obtain psychological assistance from a professional.*

# 1 What is a crisis?

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A crisis arises when people experience incidents that they cannot deal with unaided. An experience of this kind is called a trauma. There are both major and minor traumas and they arise in connection with situations that involve threats, loss and/or responsibility. Crises can be provoked by threats to people's lives, health, safety, rights, dignity or other very unpleasant incidents. Crises may also involve the loss of a relative, for instance, of a physical function or something similar that is of great importance in people's lives. Finally, traumas may arise in people who have had responsibility for something that developed in a negative manner and resulted in serious consequences.

Traumas also create a good deal of confusion because they make it impossible for people to draw on their experience so that they are unable to solve the problem in question. Furthermore, at the same time, traumas may involve dramatic and perhaps even previously unfamiliar emotions such as anxiety, anger, sorrow, guilt and shame. All of the elements of a trauma create a critical state in people so that they need help to cope with the situation.

The first 24 hours after a traumatic experience are usually characterised by a shock reaction. This is a reaction that ensures our survival in response to the acute problem caused by the experience. People may therefore feel quite calm and composed initially and have little or no emotional reaction. This may seem very strange, but it is a perfectly ordinary aspect of human's ability to survive dangerous situations. However, once the shock reaction subsides – typically after a few hours or up to a day – the more understandable crisis reactions: weeping, fear and bouts of anger, come to expression.

No two people react in the same way. Our experiences differ just as much as our fingerprints. Yet it is possible to say that by far the majority of reactions must be regarded as normal – irrespective of whether there are many or few reactions. Some people react rapidly, others only react after a while.

There are no 'right' or 'wrong' reactions. Only the person who had the experience is capable of deciding how violent it was and how it develops. It is perfectly normal to think about the experience a great deal and these thoughts may be difficult to control and stop. Some people may be unable to sleep because of them even though they may be exhausted. It is also perfectly normal for emotions to come and go. Emotions are part of a normal reaction and they will often cause most difficulty during the first few days.

After a violent experience people usually need help and support from their surroundings. But it is important to remember in this connection that our needs differ. Some people want to be alone and their wishes must be complied with. However, experience shows that it is a good idea for people to talk to others that they can trust during the time after a traumatic experience. The only difference is how soon after the experience this is appropriate for the individual.

People who are left on their own with their violent experiences and distressing thoughts and emotions often get on less well than people who share them with others. Crisis reactions will normally last longer for those who isolate themselves.

## 2 Acute emergency counselling

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Most people who have been exposed to violent and unpleasant experiences therefore need help from their surroundings. The best help on the spot comes from family, friends, colleagues and others that they feel secure with. These people know the person in question best and can therefore provide the best, most personal support. The decisive factor is that they are prepared to listen to and back up the person with regard to the violence and unpleasantness of the experience. It may sometimes happen that the people in the person's surroundings find it difficult to listen. They may not feel that the experience in question was particularly violent and are therefore unable to relate to the distressed person's reactions. If this is the case, the person in question must seek help elsewhere. He or she could talk to his or her manager or a good colleague to find out what the options are at the workplace. It is also always possible for people in this situation to contact their doctor.

During the first period of time after they have had a violent experience, people must decide whether they are getting better. They may only experience minor improvements, but this is still a definite sign that they are getting back to their old self again. And they should also remember to listen to their friends and family – who may be able to see an improvement that the person in question is unable to. Finally, it should be remembered that most people completely recover from violent experiences – even though this may take some time.

As a colleague, you may be in doubt as to how much you should become involved and ask the distressed person questions. But as a rule, you should not be afraid of overstepping the mark. Most distressed people rapidly come to feel they are alone with their experiences, thoughts and feelings so it will be a good idea to show a little extra care during the time after the incident. And it is also important to remember that there is not only a need in the beginning. Interest may rapidly disappear when the incident is no longer new, so it is important to follow up on your colleague – even long after the incident. They may have a need to talk about it after a month, three months or six months.

As a manager, you have a collegial responsibility and a responsibility to your staff. This makes it particularly important to show that you are a visible, caring and energetic manager. A combination of these abilities will give the distressed person a clear impression of what can be done at the workplace and of what the workplace expects in the near future. And this clarity will also help to calm the distressed person. Perhaps he or she could be offered other tasks for a while, work fewer hours or something quite different.

### 2.1 Acute self-help

If you are exposed to a violent experience or if the world seems to be falling about your ears, you may need emergency counselling. It is important for you to make use of the good relations in your network – family, friends and colleagues:

- Make sure that you are not alone during the first day after the incident.

- If you have had a shocking experience, you should not sleep for six hours afterwards so that the worst shock reactions can fade away while you are awake.
- Avoid drinking alcohol during the first day.
- Do not use sleeping medicine unless a doctor prescribes it.
- Let others handle practical problems.
- Tell people what you need.
- Take up the offer of psychological counselling, if necessary.

## 2.2 Acute collegial mental first aid

When somebody is in shock it may be necessary for others to provide them with practical assistance.

There is no requirement for a colleague to provide help, nor is there any separate obligation to provide help as a health and safety representative or as a union representative.

But if you have the opportunity and energy to make yourself available and express your sympathy for the distressed person, human support is praiseworthy. In such situations, you should pay attention to the following:

Create a feeling of calm and security.

- Listen to the distressed person – let him or her tell you (again and again) what happened.
- Do not try to play down the incident.
- Do not criticise the activities of the distressed person.
- Make sure that the distressed person is not left alone during the first day. Help to inform relatives if required. Accompany the distressed person to his or her home.
- Accompany the distressed person to the casualty ward if necessary.
- The distressed person may possibly underestimate the seriousness of the situation or may not want to be a burden. It may therefore be a good idea to repeat your offer of assistance in some cases.

## 2.3 The management's acute tasks

As the distressed person's immediate superior, it is important that you demonstrate sympathetic solicitude for him or her to the same extent as described above under acute collegial mental first aid. In addition, your managerial relationship means that the distressed person may expect something special from you and, as a manager, that you have specific options for helping him or her.

- Show your sympathy.
- Ask the distressed person what he or she expects of you.

- Advise the distressed person to go home if you feel this is necessary and arrange transport and somebody to accompany him or her.
- Consider whether to make emergency counselling available. If you are in doubt, it will almost certainly be needed.
- Take responsibility for the distressed person's work and tell him or her what will be done in his or her absence.
- Tell the distressed person how he or she can contact you.
- If possible, tell the distressed person when you will contact him or her to follow up the situation.
- Do not discuss the distressed person's state of mind with other staff or the way he or she has acted.
- Start a crisis management log.

A crisis management log is a written account of everything involved in a violent incident. The responsibility for keeping the log lies with a manager who is appointed to do this or with somebody for whom it is natural to take on the task. If the incident takes place over a longer period of time, it may be relevant to delegate the task of keeping the log to several people. The log must contain the date and time of incidents, decisions, actions, staff arrivals and departures, communication and everything else that takes place during and after the incident. A log will make it possible for SDU to document crisis management and to see the individual details of this management at all times. The length of time that the log should be kept will depend on the incident in question, but it is important to keep it as long as anything new occurs in connection with the incident. There is a log template in the appendix to this guide.

It is also necessary to consider whether to inform or involve specific areas of expertise in the further staff-related matter, including IT-administration, staff administration and work-related injury case-work.

## **2.4 Information**

The distressed person's immediate superior must be informed about the incident as soon as possible after it has occurred.

# 3 Following up

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It should be noted that a need for delayed emergency counselling may arise during the time immediately after the incident.

The incident will also have left its mark or had a direct influence on the distressed person – as a limitation of mental and physical capacity, for instance, and on other circumstances that have an influence on his or her everyday work.

## 3.1 Self-help

As a victim of a traumatic incident, it is important for you to pay attention to your own state of mind and to take care of yourself:

- Take exercise and have something to eat and drink even though you may not feel the need.
- Keep busy with activities you enjoy and that can take your mind off your experience.
- Talk to your family, close friends and other relatives about your experience.
- Do not hesitate to ask for help.
- You should not feel obliged to be open towards others, however.
- Remember that there is a greater risk of accidents after a stressful experience. Take care of yourself – be careful when driving and operating machines, etc.
- If you have been referred to a psychologist you could discuss with him or her when you should go back to work.

Remember that as a witness to an incident or as the distressed person's helper, you may also be deeply affected by what happened and may also need counselling and collegial support.

## 3.2 Collegial following-up

As a point of departure, you may certainly 'meddle' if you are a colleague to a distressed person. If you are worried about a colleague, tell him or her. Think about the extent to which you are on familiar terms, which resources you have to offer and how much support the distressed person wants from you.

You are not responsible as a colleague for providing collegial mental first aid, but you do have a co-responsibility for ensuring that problems are not concealed. This includes informing the immediate superior of the person in question if you suspect that the distressed person needs help from the workplace.

It is regarded as a collegial virtue at SDU to help to initiate supportive measures.

Collegial following-up could include the following:

- Offering to make yourself available for a chat – find out if the distressed person would like you to call at intervals or would appreciate brief visits if he or she is on sick leave.
- Talk openly and in a straightforward manner about what happened.
- Be helpful but not over-solicitous.
- If the distressed person has been referred to a psychologist, leave all types of therapy to the psychologist.
- Give a realistic account of matters to anybody who inquires – and avoid dramatisation.

### **3.3 The manager's following-up**

As the immediate superior of the distressed person you should focus on ensuring that he or she can return to normal work as soon as possible.

#### **Work**

Make a list of the distressed person's work portfolio, meetings and appointments with the aim of cancelling or deferring them or appointing somebody else to handle them. Consider whether it might be helpful for the distressed person to be informed about how his or her work will be performed or whether it would have a disturbing or negative effect on him or her. Remember to take care of technical matters such as establishing automatic answers to e-mails and redirecting telephone calls.

#### **The working climate – colleagues**

Inform the distressed person's colleagues collectively about the incident and about the measures that have been established. Do not discuss the distressed person's state of mind, whether he or she is receiving psychological counselling, if applicable, or the way he or she acts. Follow up to determine whether colleagues feel insecure. Try to prevent the spread of rumours and inform people about the process on an ongoing basis. If the distressed person agrees, provide information on his or her progress. If the incident in question led to negative press coverage it may have an effect on staff, students and external partners. Inform these people that SDU is aware of the negative coverage and that efforts are being made to deal with it. Remember in general that press contacts in connection with incidents that might be of interest to the public or the media must be handled by the management, the Corporate Communication or somebody else appointed for this purpose.

#### **The distressed person**

Stay in touch with the distressed person regularly during the period after the incident. Contact will be particularly important if the distressed person is on sick leave. Talk to the distressed person about what you should do. For example, about which information colleagues may be given, how much contact he or she wants with manager and colleagues and about whether he or she has any requests to make with regard to the workplace. Remember that the most important thing is personal relations. It is not certain that the distressed person will want contact with the colleague who is closest to him



or her organisationally, but may prefer contact with a colleague he or she feels closest to.

Show your sympathy and ask discreetly how things are going.

- Arrange where and when you will meet the distressed person again. Stay in touch with him or her regularly during the subsequent period.
- Offer the distressed person the opportunity to contact you.
- Offer the distressed person the opportunity to meet any other people who were involved in the incident.
- Arrange a meeting with the distressed person about three months after the incident in order to find out whether he or she is still experiencing difficulties and/or needs more help and support.

The following rules apply to interviews with staff at SDU who are on sick leave. In connection with longer periods of sick leave, the manager is obliged to invite the member of staff by letter or e-mail to attend a sick leave interview during working hours at reasonable notice no later than four weeks after the first day of sick leave. The purpose of the interview is to determine how and when the person in question will be able to return to work on a full-time or part-time basis. The interview should therefore be regarded as a care interview. More information on the rules for sick leave interviews can be found in the 'Internal circular letter on guidelines for handling sick leave' at sdunet.dk.

- Support the distressed person if he or she wants to return to work. Clear up his or her need for a gradual return, for instance, for assistance with his or her work or possibly a transfer to a different type of work. Remember to focus on opportunities rather than on limitations. Take your point of departure in the type of work the distressed person can do rather in what he or she cannot do.

### **Notification**

Consider in the individual case where there are units at SDU that should be notified about the incident or that could provide assistance in dealing with it.

### **Reporting**

If the need for emergency counselling was due to a work-related incident, it should be reported internally to the Health and Safety Office as a work-related injury. If necessary, the Health and Safety Office will then report the incident to the Working Environment Service and the National Board of Industrial Injuries.

The Health and Safety Office must be immediately informed if the incident results in a death. Relatives must be informed by the police – not by SDU. Incidents involving criminal acts must be reported to the police in consultation with Technical Services.

### **Preventive measures**

Always consider whether preventive measures would be appropriate. If the incident was work-related it should be reviewed in consultation with a health and safety group with the aim of avoiding a repetition in the future. Also consider how to manage emergency counselling and following up activities.

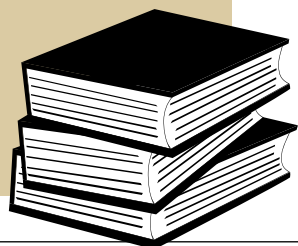
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# Crisis management log

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The log records all events, decisions, actions, staff access, staff resignation, communication, etc.

Date	Time	Events, actions, communication etc	Initials

