

Plan for post-disaster management

Disasters (such as shootings, earthquakes, fires, and even major downsizings) have one thing in common. They produce stress in people. Surprisingly, the stress can be just as great for people who don't experience direct damage from the disaster. This stress can persist for months. It can cause health problems and make it difficult to deal with both personal and professional demands.

As an individual, and as a company, there are steps you can take to minimize a disaster's negative effects. Plan now, when there is no disaster to deal with.

Have a plan

Every company should have a disaster plan, a list of things to do and people to call during and after emergencies. This will save you lots of trouble and frustration should a disaster occur.

Have all employees list the people and phone numbers they want called if something happens to them. Parents should list their children's daycare centers and/or schools, too, in case they're unable to pick them up. It's also helpful to have employees list their doctors and insurance plans in case they need medical attention. Make sure these lists are updated regularly.

Always be prepared

You should also conduct fire drills, earthquake or tornado drills. Everyone should know where the fire escapes are located, how to get out of the building without using the elevators, and what is recommended in case of natural disasters.

Keep emergency supplies on hand (flashlights, batteries, radio, water, food, etc.) Buy canned goods, crackers, and other non-perishable foods now. Every Christmas, donate the food to your local food bank, and replace your supplies.

Recovering from disasters

If a disaster occurs, here's how to help people recover.

- Arrange for mental health professionals to "debrief" everyone. Debriefings are counseling sessions that educate people about traumatic stress reactions, help them express their feelings, and teach them coping strategies to minimize the impact of the trauma. These sessions are usually conducted in a group, so people realize they're not the only ones feeling grief or anxiety.
- Encourage workers to take "coping breaks." They can do this on their own or you can set up group relaxation, meditation, or exercise sessions.
- Acknowledge how difficult things are and then focus on how everybody is pulling together and coping. This will foster feelings of teamwork, and your staff will start viewing themselves as survivors.
- Ask employees to help the company plan how to cope with future disasters.
- Look out for workers who deny their true feelings by burying themselves in work. Research shows that these people are likely to develop psychological and/or medical problems later. Help them work more realistic hours and participate in the debriefing sessions and stress reduction activities.
- Model appropriate behavior. Many employees will watch to see how you respond. Take care of yourself and participate in as many of the group activities as possible. This will help you and your employees recover.

Rick Allen, PhD, is editor of *Post-Disaster Interventions* (1993) and consults with schools and businesses about how to develop disaster plans. He is the leading expert on community recovery after earthquakes. He can be reached at 408/459-2895.