

# NEWS YOU CAN USE

## Back to Business?

By Eva Kaplan-Leiserson

*This issue of T+D was going to press just after the tragic events of September 11. We interrupt your regularly scheduled News You Can Use column to bring you important information on trauma and stress in the workplace.*

After the 11th, people returned, shaken, to offices and workplaces and tried to continue with “business as usual.” But just as terrorism

didn't end with that day's events, the psychological effects haven't vanished magically in the weeks after. In workplaces across the United States and the world, managers and HR professionals are trying to help people settle back into their job roles while remaining sensitive to their issues and concerns.

To help with that delicate balancing act, we've com-

plied some pointers with the aid of two experts: Laurie Anderson, psychologist and organizational consultant, and Kathy Kinchen, executive consultant with Personnel Decisions International, a global management and human resources strategy consulting firm.

**Give it time.** Some people react to trauma immediately; others experience the effects

Illustration by Noma

A sense of affiliation and support built around work will help us cope.

months or years later. Don't expect workers' symptoms to disappear as soon as they return to work. Expect that anxiety, malaise, distraction, and other trauma-related symptoms may linger.

Recognize that there is no "normal" reaction. The sheer unpredictability of the events has caused an unprecedented level of anxiety

and distraction in all of us. But no standardized metric exists to evaluate what's normal and what necessitates further attention or expert help.

It's crucial, Anderson says, that managers and HR professionals don't try to make that distinction themselves. Instead, take the temperature of your

group and refer to mental health professionals any employees who display symptoms of anxiety or depression that differ dramatically from those of other staff members, and that don't seem to be diminishing with time.

Connect people back to the work. Emphasize the importance of refocusing on job tasks. Disengagement is a dangerous coping strategy, says Kinchen, that doesn't help people recover and can lead to more severe problems such as apathy or alcoholism.

Instead, ensure that workers understand the importance of their roles to the team, company, and nation. Feeling a sense of affiliation and mutual support built around work will help people cope with the trauma and reclaim a sense of normalcy.

Reexamine basic paradigms. There is no business as usual to return to, says Anderson. We should use this opportunity not to return to normal, but to do things differently and improve.

For example, if workers are reluctant to travel, examine the reasons you're asking them to. Will they really get three days of useful information out of a three-day conference? Most likely the answer is no. Examine not only what you're asking people to do and how, but also why. What is the ROI?

In the case of conferences, meetings, classroom-based training, and other face-time

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events that cause people to travel distances and join together, make sure you know why you're asking people to do things that might make them fearful. **Stay in touch.** Check in with employees periodically, both individually and in a group. As a manager, you'll have to walk a fine line between being supportive and holding people accountable, Kinchen says. Try to understand where each worker is in the recovery process, while clarifying performance expectations and helping that person understand his or her value to the company.

## Warning Signs of Trauma-Related Stress

In most cases, the following symptoms are normal reactions to abnormal events. But if symptoms last more than a month or you or someone you know feels out of control, consider seeking help from a mental health professional. If you need to locate a referral system in your area, call the American Psychological Association at 800.964.2000.

- Experiences recurring thoughts or nightmares about the event.
- Has trouble sleeping or changes in appetite.
- Feels anxious and fearful, especially when exposed to events or situations reminiscent of the trauma.
- Is on edge, easily startled, or overly alert.
- Feels depressed or sad, or has low energy.
- Experiences memory problems, including difficulty in remembering aspects of the trauma.
- Is scattered and unable to focus on work or daily activities.
- Has trouble making decisions.
- Is irritable, easily agitated, or angry and resentful.
- Is emotionally withdrawn or disconnected.
- Cries spontaneously; feels a sense of despair and hopelessness.
- Is extremely protective of, or fearful for, the safety of loved ones.
- Is unable to face certain aspects of the trauma and avoids activities, places, or people that recall the event.

Source/the American Psychological Association, [www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)

Also consider holding regular meetings to solidify team resolve and purpose. Discuss project objectives, team member roles, and the status of deliverables, and don't forget to celebrate successes and acknowledge team member contributions.

The attack on the World Trade Towers was a strike at the U.S. economy and workplaces. But just as the Chinese symbol for crisis combines the symbols for danger and opportunity, we can take this opportunity to transform our workplaces.

Think about the potential for, in the midst of our grief, becoming better leaders and team members with a greater sense of connection to our work and our value to it. Think about the potential for, in the midst of our grief, making our economy and our nation ultimately stronger. If we can do that, if we can build a sense of spirit and unity that carries us through, then we will have triumphed.

What is your organization or department doing to minimize the effects of trauma and stress in the workplace? Write to us at [nycu@astd.org](mailto:nycu@astd.org) and we'll publish the best tips.

*Send press releases or short articles on news, trends, and best practices to **News You Can Use**, T+D, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043. Email [nycu@astd.org](mailto:nycu@astd.org).*

## Policy News

A snapshot of U.S. federal legislation affecting workforce development and the HRD profession.

**Permanent Tax Credit for Educational Assistance Enacted.** ASTD's longstanding advocacy and partnership efforts with business and higher education groups resulted in the inclusion of a permanent extension of Section 127 of the Internal Revenue Code (Employer Provided Educational Assistance) in President Bush's tax package enacted in June. The new law allows an employer to offer its employees up to US\$5,250 in tax-free (non job-related) educational assistance for undergraduate and graduate courses begun after December 31, 2001.

**New Bill Removes Barriers to Internet-Based Higher Ed.** The Internet Equity and Education Act of 2001 (H.R.1992) was introduced by Rep. Johnny Isakson (R-GA) in the U.S. House of Representatives to expand options for distance education. The bill would eliminate regulations that hinder students from participating in online courses and would allow schools that participate in the federal student loan program and have a low loan default rate to offer more than half of their courses online.

**ASTD Supports IT Training Legislation.** ASTD has endorsed the Technology Education & Training Act (TETA) of 2001. Senator Kent Conrad (D-ND) introduced the legislation (S.762) in the U.S. Senate, and Rep. Jerry Weller (R-IL) introduced it in the U.S. House of Representatives (H.R.1769). The bill would provide a tax credit for 100 percent of the first US\$1,500 of information technology training expenses paid for by an employer.

For detailed legislative updates  [WWW.ASTD.ORG/PUBLICPOLICY](http://WWW.ASTD.ORG/PUBLICPOLICY)

## More Resources

T+D Web-only articles

 [WWW.ASTD.ORG/VIRTUAL\\_COMMUNITY/TD\\_MAGAZINE](http://WWW.ASTD.ORG/VIRTUAL_COMMUNITY/TD_MAGAZINE)

- "Business Resumption Planning," select November issue.
- "Training for a Crisis," click on Find Past Issues and select September.


- Trauma articles, Websites, advice for parents, and other resources from the APA

 [www.apa.org/psychnet/coverage.html](http://www.apa.org/psychnet/coverage.html)

- Information for HR professionals on emergency planning and response, leave, emotional support, and workplace tolerance

 [www.hrtools.com/c\\_home.html](http://www.hrtools.com/c_home.html)


- "HR Responds to Terrorism," a section of resources offered by SHRM

 [www.shrm.org/hrnews/articles/default.asp?page=terroismpage.htm](http://www.shrm.org/hrnews/articles/default.asp?page=terroismpage.htm)

- Manuals for disaster intervention, from the International Association of Facilitators

 <http://iafworld.org/ManDis.htm>

- A registry of employee assistance providers

 [www.eap-association.org/Chapters/EA-Providers/ea\\_providers.html](http://www.eap-association.org/Chapters/EA-Providers/ea_providers.html)