

Anxiety in the Workplace Post-September 11, 2001

The executive director of the Greater Los Angeles Federal Executive Board shares her experience and views on responding to stress and reducing anxiety in the workplace.

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Threats of violence, whether from individuals outside the agency, fellow employees, or terrorists thousands of miles away, can lead to severe stress situations which may go on for weeks/years and affect many people. As the stress or anxiety level in the workplace increases, an individual who may be violence-prone, but has not demonstrated the behavior in the past, is more easily provoked. In addition, employees who have never demonstrated a propensity for violence may be experiencing some new feelings of anxiety that may create an internal struggle to regain control and foster aggressive thinking. To alleviate the adverse impact of stress in the workplace, employers should:

- do everything possible to lessen the source of stress;
- keep open lines of communication; and
- understand and do not underestimate the impact of stress.

It is important to deal with stress and conflict right away—if avoided it can become something more serious. And when it does, everyone will be asking: Why didn't someone see it coming and do something?

US Postal Service (USPS)

Being aware of the emotional pulse of the workplace is the first step to preventing workplace violence. To build an anti-violence network requires cooperation between groups that do not routinely talk to one another. Because some of the first, highly publicized cases of workplace violence occurred in the USPS, there is a misconception that USPS experiences a high rate of workplace violence. The reality is, per capita, the USPS has statistically fewer workplace violence incidents than many other employers. The USPS experience has evolved into a premiere workplace improvement program, which includes threat assessment teams who

meet to review warnings about potentially violent behavior. These warnings are received through multiple avenues from employees, contractors, and customers.

Early Intervention

Eighty-five percent of workplace violence can be prevented if one responds to the warning signs. Ignoring warning signs and concerns of employees and coworkers can be deadly. This lesson was learned with a Department of Agriculture workplace shooting that occurred in Inglewood, CA in April 1998. An employee warned her supervisor about a co-worker who was making threatening statements about the supervisor. In less than six months, the violent co-worker, the warned supervisor, and a union steward were dead.

Early intervention is the best way to prevent workplace violence. To ignore warning signs is to condone the behavior and it will escalate until there is an intervention. A simple three-step process is suggested:

- confront the employee, ask open-ended questions: What did you mean? Who are you mad at? (chase words carefully, use eye contact, express concern and state that you want to help);
- tell a supervisor; and
- get outside help.

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Internal and External Threats

Prior to the April 19, 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, most workplace violence incidents had a direct connection to the affected worksite. Sheryl and Don Grimme identify perpetrators of violence in the workplace as: customers (40 percent), strangers (25 percent), current employees (20 percent), domestic violence spillovers (6 percent), or former employees (3 percent).

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For federal employees, the Oklahoma City tragedy was the first time we realized that regardless of which agency we worked for, we worked for the “government,” and although Timothy McVeigh represented a group that was unhappy about something the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms had done, they symbolically took out an entire federal building to make their point. The notion of being able to identify and control the “direct connection” between violence and the workplace became far more difficult.

Since April 1995, we federal employees have experienced a generalized sense of anxiety and vulnerability in our workplace. As each federal facility was fortified with metal detectors and barricades to prevent truck bombs, we felt safe, or at least safer.

On September 11, 2001, the notion of safety was stripped from all Americans and the use of symbolic targets was expanded. As private sector employees were interviewed about being afraid to go to work, the rest of the country came to terms with what we have known for years—anyone can be a victim of terrorists.

Events that happen in other parts of the country do impact the climate of our workplace. To understand the impact of terrorism on the country as a whole, we look to the population exposure model. This model suggests that those people not at ground zero and who did not have loved ones at ground zero, are also at risk of adverse psychological impact.

Behavioral Indicators of Stress

In fact, acts of terrorism are designed to inflict widespread pain and fear to effect the political changes desired by the attacker. In 1996, the year following the Oklahoma City bombing, nationwide there was an increase in behavioral indicators associated with stress. It is not surprising that for the one-month period following the September

2001 attack, there was a 16 percent increase nationwide in the prescription of antidepressants as compared to the previous year.

In the years since Pearl Harbor, we have been lulled into a false sense of safety and security. Our lack of vigilance had made us vulnerable and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 were our wake-up call. Terrorist attacks and tragedies leave people struggling to cope with both the loss at hand and uncertainty about the future. In the process of coming to grips with the new circumstances facing us, we have to sort through many thoughts, concerns, and emotions and learn ways to prepare for the future positively and constructively.

Fear is an emotion usually associated with negative connotations and is defined in the dictionary as “an unpleasant, often strong emotion caused by awareness of danger.” Fear is a response to a clearly identifiable stimulus.

Anxiety is a response to an unclear or ambiguous stimulus, which is why it is so difficult to address. With fear, we know what we are up against, and we can plan how to combat it. But anxiety has no focus; the cause is neither known nor understood. Anxiety is less intense, but typically long-lasting. Of the two, anxiety generally produces the worse psychological effects.

In the workplace, we encounter both fear and anxiety. In addition to individual stress, our new environment includes fear of terrorist attacks, anthrax exposure, economic instability, and job uncertainty.

Reducing the Adverse Effect of Anxiety

To reduce the adverse effect of anxiety, it is our individual responsibility to pay attention to the emotional pulse of the workplace. Rather than sitting back and waiting for a manager or security specialist to notice and intervene, we have a responsibility to identify behaviors and emotions that are destructive to our work environment and eradicate them.

The anxiety that is prevalent in our workplace is interfering with our employees’ morale and productivity. Remaining silent about the underlying fears and anxieties will not make them disappear, but rather results in employees focusing on how to feel safe, rather than working toward accomplishing the agency’s goals. The solution is not to send employees home every time there is a perceived threat; however, employees will respond to managers communicating that your employees’ safety is your number one concern and they will be grateful and more productive as a result.

A poll conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management in October 2001 heard from 5,600 human resource representatives how they thought the workplace will change as a result of the national tragedy. Sixty-six percent said that employees would be more caring toward one another. Fifty-six percent said that their organizations had put higher security provisions in place and 52 percent

Table 1: Responses to Life Threatening Events

BEHAVIORAL	PHYSICAL	COGNITIVE	EMOTIONAL
Sleep problems	Tightness in chest	Confusion	Shock
Hyper-vigilance	Agitation	Intrusive thoughts	Anxiety
Tearfulness	Fatigue	Memory difficulties	Irritability, Anger, Rage
Increased family conflicts	Gastrointestinal distress	Concentration problems	
Decision-making difficulty	Sadness, Grief, Depression		
Social withdrawal	Appetite change		
Despair	Self-doubts		

felt that employees would not consider travel as glamorous. An additional 37 percent said that business travel would be curtailed and 35 percent said workers will be more wary of working in high-rise buildings.

Emergency and Crisis Management Plans

As most Americans were taken off guard by the attacks, so were many organizations. This same survey reported that 60 percent were either not prepared at all to deal with the aftermath of the attacks or were only prepared to a small extent. Only eight percent felt they were prepared to a great or very great extent. A valuable change that can come from this crisis is to have employers and employees work together to put in place an emergency/crisis management plans.

In a typical, one-occurrence disaster, such as an earthquake, most people recover fully from moderate stress reactions in 6-16 months. Most workplaces throughout the country have a new environment: stress, fear, and anxiety are here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future. Although individual reactions vary, researchers have identified a common pattern of behavioral, biological, psychological, and social responses among individuals exposed directly or vicariously to life-threatening events. Typical reactions are summarized in Table 1 above from the work of Dr. John A. Call.

Should you observe these behaviors in a co-worker or if you are experiencing them, the behaviors need to be addressed. Again, early intervention is the key.

Complicating Factors

It is necessary to understand that individuals respond differently to the same event based on a number of variables, such as:

- prior or pre-existing mental health or substance abuse problems;
- prior traumatization or unresolved losses;

- low socioeconomic status, low education level;
- family instability, conflict, single-parent household;
- perceived or real lack of social support, isolation; and
- exposure or perceived exposure to a dangerous or noxious substances.

Individuals who do not have these factors present in their lives tend to be more resilient. Co-workers and managers should pay particular attention to individuals who you believe may be more vulnerable to anxiety or lack a support system outside of the workplace.

The word terror derives from the Latin word *terrere*, meaning, “to frighten.” One of the greatest fears a human can have is loss of control, of not knowing what is going to happen, when it is going to happen, or what one should do, when it happens. The foundation of counter-terrorism lies in developing and applying procedures to reduce fear. The best counter-terrorism measure that can be implemented in the workplace is regular communication between management and employees on these issues. In this way, employees gain and maintain control over their work environment, which will reduce anxiety.

Lessons Learned

In a recent Los Angeles County Emergency Preparedness newsletter, the most often cited lessons learned from New York City were the importance of:

- establishing and maintaining cooperative relationships with an array of organizations;
- the ability to go beyond written plans and even beyond agency policies to improvise *ad hoc* solutions to problems;
- high-level organizational and political support and the empowerment to move swiftly to implement solutions; and

- remembering that people are the most important asset in any organization, and even though the technology is important, in the final analysis, it is the people who solve problems and restore order.

Some additional practical workplace tips for responding to the national tragedy of September 11, 2001

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follow: (These are based on the lessons learned from the Oklahoma City tragedy which were shared by LeAnn Jenkins, executive director of the Oklahoma Federal Executive Board, the Office of Personnel Management, and the Saint Francis Medical Center.)

Normalize the Environment As Much As Possible

Be aware of the healing value of work. Getting back to the daily routine can be a comforting experience, and most people can work productivity while still dealing with grief and trauma. However, the process of getting staff back to work is one that must be approached with great care and sensitivity. In particular if anyone has died or been seriously injured, the process must be handled in a way that shows appropriate respect for them. Make sure every employee has a place to go in anticipation of the workplace being destroyed. Pre-determined alternate work locations should be part of your agency's continuity of operations plan. It is best that employees not be instructed to stay home when they have experienced a recent workplace trauma as they may slip into depression.

Turn off the Television

Allow for the need to get factual information, making personal phone calls, radios, television etc., but encourage workers to limit their watching or listening as over-vigilance can produce more anxiety and tension. Children are most sensitive to television images, as they are unable to comprehend that each re-broadcast is the same event and they think that it is happening over and over again.

Keep Communication Levels High

Communication that comes from organizational management during times of crisis gives a sense of security and order to chaos. In the absence of information, rumors grow—suspicion and perceptions become reality. Rumor control is important. If you do not give the employees

or the media the story, they will make it up. The media's misinformation can exacerbate the trauma. Agency plans should make sure they have public affairs staff involved early on following the tragedy.

Be Aware of Possible Workplace Tension

Anxiety causes people to be less tolerant of differing political beliefs and racial and ethnic backgrounds. Fear gives rise to hatred, anger, and violence. Review workplace discrimination policies and advise supervisors to be vigilant as to any ethnic intimidation (i.e., workplace discussions, mistreatment, mistrust of co-workers, etc.) that may be occurring due to speculation about the perpetrators of the attacks.

Organize the Workforce into Productive Action

Contact the local American Red Cross or blood bank about donating blood or the need for donating supplies, services, or money to helping agencies, such as the Federal Employee Emergency Assistance Fund.

Help Workers Focus on Concrete Tasks

Focused actions can alleviate stress. Ongoing projects with no resolution in sight may cause more stress during chaotic times. Now is the time to organize files, clear out old e-mail, complete that "to do" list, etc. The tragedy has made employees feel out of control, which we know creates fear and anxiety. Employees need to feel as if there is something they can control, and doing these mundane tasks helps create that sense of control.

Encourage Workers to Make Use of Existing Resources

Promote awareness of your employee assistance program, exercise rooms, community resources, in-house educational programs, and human resource staff, etc. Employees need to know their families are taken care of and the more the workplace can do to prepare employees to take these concepts home with them, the better.

Encourage Employees to Talk About Their Feelings

Many people are uncomfortable with others who are experiencing emotions, particularly in the workplace. When emotions are stifled, anxiety heightens and violence may follow. When a traumatic event occurs in or around the workplace, one of the best things we can do is listen to those that are hurting. How to listen to someone who is hurting:

- The most important thing to do is simply to be there and listen and show that you care.
- Find a private setting where you will not be overheard or interrupted.
- Keep your comments brief and simple so that you don't get the person off track.