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## How Do You Know?

When's the last time you talked with your managers about being vigilant for signs of stress among employees they supervise? A variety of signs and symptoms can indicate that someone is having trouble coping with stress.

Remind your management team of indicators, including the following:

- **Physical signs:** Headache, grinding teeth, clenched jaws, chest pain, shortness of breath, high blood pressure, muscle aches, indigestion, fatigue, insomnia, frequent illness.
- **Psychosocial signs:** anxiety, irritability, sadness, defensiveness, anger, mood swings, Apathy, depression, feelings of helplessness or hopelessness, and a sense of being trapped.
- **Behavioral signs:** overeating or loss of appetite, impatience, Quickness to argue, procrastination, increased use of drugs or alcohol, increased smoking, Withdrawal from others, Poor job performance, poor personal hygiene, change in family relationships.

Make sure your supervisors know what to do if they suspect uncontrolled stress. Create a policy and programs that support employees. The goal is a caring, consistent response.

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## STEVE CRIMANDO:

### *Psychological First Aid*

Steve Crimando is managing director of Extreme Behavior Risk Management, a division of AllSector Technology Group, Inc. He helps organizations "ensure that their emergency plans are accurate from a behavioral standpoint." That means making sure people will actually do what they're trained to do in an emergency.

"Especially since 9-11, in both the private and public sectors, the push has been to what's known as allhazards disaster planning." But Crimando says a one-size-fits-all approach is not the wisest. He offers more specialized training. One of the tools he uses to reduce stress and the negative impact of traumatic events is a concept known as psychological first aid (PFA). Used widely within government agencies, the method is aimed at reducing the initial distress among survivors of crises and natural disasters.

It is described as "an evidence-based approach and intervention, built on the concept of human resilience." Individuals and teams are trained in how to approach, talk to, stabilize, and gather information from people in immediate need.

## Every Minute Counts

According to Crimando, responding promptly to an emergency is one of the surest

ways to reduce the stress and lasting impact of an incident. Traditional response to workplace trauma has been to bring in counselors or employee-assistance specialists. Crimando says the idea is to help the individual accept and adapt to change. "But the last thing people need in these situations is more change," he offers. He favors a style of intervention that minimizes change and helps return people to baseline levels of functioning.

In the same way that principles of medical first aid are known and practiced by nonexperts, the goal of PFA is to train individuals to help co-workers in crisis. The skills are designed to be used within 48 hours of an event. At one federal agency, Crimando was brought in because employees were frequently getting false positive readings about potential disasters. Bringing in counselors every time this happened was impractical. "We needed to teach the workforce to take care of each other and themselves to prevent longer-term problems."

At businesses, universities, and other organizations, multidisciplinary PFA teams are dispatched immediately following a trauma. PFA contacts are not long—just 5 to 10 minutes. But what happens in that brief period of time is extremely important. PFA skills include the following:

- Communicate calmly and warmly, using an open posture; lean forward and make eye contact.
- Establish a relationship. Introduce yourself, if necessary, ask the person what he or she would like to be called, using Mr. or Ms. if culturally correct.
- Speak with respect and use positive language.
- Ask concrete, closed-end questions and explain why you are asking.
- Come to an agreement on something that will help you gain the individual's trust.
- If the person becomes agitated and challenges you, answer the question calmly or repeat your statement. If the person refuses to follow directions, do not assert control. Restructure your request and give the individual time to think about it. If you are threatened, seek immediate assistance.
- Avoid simple assurances like, "Everything is going to be fine."
- Don't force people to share their personal experiences with you.

- Don't tell people how they should be feeling or acting.
- Don't criticize existing activities or services.

#### **Versatile Tool**

"Many employers have various mechanisms to deal with wellness," says Crimando. But what's often missing from their tool box are ways to deal with early stress and the emotional impact of surviving a flood, fire, shooting, etc.

Psychological first aid can also help employees through other kinds of stress-producing incidents, such as pending layoffs or organizational changes. An important aspect of the process is that those trained should not "self deploy." That is, they should not make the decision about when and where their services are needed. Such decisions should be made by a designated executive or crisis-response team.

According to Crimando's website: "It is important to remember that the best sources of help during emergencies are professional responders.

"However, in situations when professional responders are not

immediately available, caring people will want to act and help."

The alternative is to do nothing, which Crimando believes can lead to significant stress and other negative consequences.

There's more about PFA at [www.psychologicalfirstaid.com](http://www.psychologicalfirstaid.com).

PFA is also addressed at the government website, [www.ncptsd.va.gov](http://www.ncptsd.va.gov) under "natural disasters." The Red Cross offers one-day PFA training; check with your local chapter for details.

#### **Many Sources, Many Solutions**

There are diverse sources of employee stress. As well, there are many ways to tackle the problem. Whether you decide to go for traditional methods like employee assistance programs or traditional counseling, or some of the more innovative strategies described here, be sure to get employees involved in the process. After all, the experts agree that one of the best ways to reduce stress is to get workers engaged in decisions that affect them.



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