

GUEST BLOG | Prioritizing Mental Health: A Crisis Manager's Guide to Self-Care

Remember to Take Care

One of the last topics crisis and emergency managers want to discuss is mental health. The irony of our collective avoidance is that mental health and wellness is often the root cause of employee burnout and staff turnover. It doesn't matter if you work in the private sector, for the government or a non-profit organization, in education, or military – responding to emergencies and disasters affects each of us. And sitting in silence is the worst remedy.

On January 6, 2021, I was the executive-in-charge of the District of Columbia's emergency operations center (EOC) as we activated ahead of a planned event at the US Capitol. Without getting into the politics or nuances of the day, the event took a turn for the worse, and it shocked everyone who watched it unfold on national television. Thankfully, the District of Columbia's Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency performed at the highest levels of competence and agility as we helped our first responders at the US Capitol.

But despite the agency's amazing work, I silently fought another battle that day. My husband was in the Capitol, and I could not get a hold of him to verify his safety status. Given the unprecedented events, I continued to push through, shoving down my fears and anxiety as one hour of silence turned into two, eventually turning into five, until I heard from him again. In hindsight, that act of stubbornness and grit ultimately defeated me, causing long-term stress and anger that lasted months after January 6. And in the end, I left a job I loved to focus on rebuilding my mental health and wellness.

Much like other organizations, our agency circulated Employee Assistance Program (EAP) information in the aftermath of January 6, but it didn't help. I was so good at pretending that day never happened that I didn't talk about it for six months. I certainly wasn't going to call an (800) number to speak to a stranger about it. However, once I found the strength to talk, it felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders, and I could finally start my recovery process. I wonder if I would have stayed in the job longer had I been more intentional about addressing how that event affected my mental health and wellness.

The Call to Action

As crisis leaders, your programs and business processes must include a mental health and wellness component. In many organizations, EAPs are readily available. They are the first line of defense when a crisis occurs, but I cannot stress enough that the EAP is only one tiny aspect of addressing your workforce's mental health and overall wellness.

So, as you set out to craft the elements of your program, what should you be considering? The recommendations below offer specific actions you can quickly implement in the immediate aftermath of a crisis. While each workplace culture is different and team dynamics unique, these actions should be the framework by which you tailor your program to meet the needs of your workforce.

Recommendation #1 – Check-in Immediately

Assuming the crisis doesn't impact your organization's regular communication platforms, it's imperative that those in leadership "break the ice" by being the first to talk about the incident openly. In many cases, the workforce may be spread out geographically, so an all-staff conference call, followed by an all-staff email, may be appropriate. If an in-person all-hands meeting is more in line with your organization's culture, then this approach is preferred. But now that you have a platform, what should you say? First, address the event and specify how it impacted the organization. It's okay to be candid here, but most importantly, you must be authentic and genuine. Second, offer condolences and empathy to those affected. It's okay to be sentimental. Third, provide a listening ear and emphasize your ongoing availability for a one-on-one conversation if they need it. Lastly, extend grace and understanding by supporting their need to take personal time off, if required.

Recommendation #2 – Lead by Example

If your workforce was personally affected by the event, your job as a leader is to encourage and foster workplace community assistance. Some circumstances may require your undivided attention as a leader, so it is perfectly acceptable to leverage colleagues willing to help with this. Still, the key to this recommendation is to rally around your affected workforce. What might this look like? Coordinating donations, food delivery services, childcare, and a workplace community hub for ongoing conversations is a great place to start. From a management and administrative standpoint, are there items, tasks, or activities you could help alleviate so the workforce can focus on wellness? If so, leverage the flexibility in your systems to offer help.

Recommendation #3 – Schedule Listening Sessions

Everyone is different, and everyone’s preferred method of addressing crises is unique. In some cases, staff will want to talk openly about what happened; in other cases, some folks won’t want to engage like that in the workplace. And that’s okay! Despite these differences, it’s imperative that leadership schedule listening sessions, offering a safe space for your workforce to communicate. This can take many different shapes:

- You can facilitate this session yourself if that fits your workplace culture.
- You can bring in a mental health expert to facilitate the session.
- You can offer and facilitate small group or one-on-one conversations between and among staff, if appropriate.
- What’s most important in this recommendation is that you continue to check in, offering additional listening sessions if needed– even to those employees who didn’t want to talk in the first round.

Recommendation #4 – Offer Resources

This recommendation includes offering your organization’s resources, like an EAP. Be mindful of execution, noting that these resources should be one component of a much larger program rather than the focal point of your support.

Recommendation #5 – Have a Backup Plan

As I pushed through my work on January 6, I knew that my coworkers knew my situation. Reflecting on our interactions, I see now how much they took care of and how sensitive they were to what was happening. While I felt the urge to continue working, I knew they would have been there to step in if I needed a break. Having a backup plan to finish the work is reassuring and comforting, but as leaders, it’s not easy to back away when the goings get tough. And this is precisely why my last recommendation is the most important.

Following an incident, your workforce will depend on you for strength, reassurance, and a path forward, so you must be there to provide it. While your “job” as a leader is to monitor your employees, ensuring the operation is running as it should, you must ensure that you have someone you trust on the sidelines monitoring you. A trusted ally should pay attention to your body language, decision-making capabilities, tone of voice, and exhaustion levels. If there is any indication that you need a check-in, this is the person that will pull you aside. Listen to them.

Just as your organization depends upon you to get them through a crisis, it’s equally vital that you have someone you trust to check in on you, too. Even though I chose to push through, I am forever grateful that I had a colleague who intentionally checked in on me to ensure I was okay that day. That simple act of kindness reminded me that I am human, too.



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