



## **Helping Your Workforce Cope and Return to Work**

With the horrific and tragic events that affected the New River Valley, our community has changed drastically, and focusing on “business as usual” has become extremely difficult. But occupying our time with the routine of work is a necessary step in coping with crisis.

Each person reacts differently to a crisis and a range of responses can be expected. You must remember, however, that for some people the effects may not be felt immediately but, instead, arise months later.

### **Signs of Emotional Impact**

In the aftermath of the Virginia Tech shooting, you may begin to see evidence of the emotional impact on employees. This may play out in their performance and productivity in the following ways:

- Working slowly
- Appearing numb or emotionless
- Missing deadlines
- Withdrawal from work activity
- Absenteeism; calling in sick frequently
- Overworking
- Irritability and anger
- Forgetting directives, procedures and requests
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- Difficulty with work transitions or changes in routines

### **What Employers Can Do**

To help your employees work through the emotional tolls of this crisis and reduce the impact on your organization’s productivity, the National Mental Health Association (NMHA) recommends the following actions:

**1. Educate your supervisors and managers.** Inform all supervisors and human resources professionals about the signs of emotional distress; all policy changes and actions being taken in response to the crisis; and available counseling resources so they, in turn, can inform their staffs. Direct them to encourage employees to seek counseling when necessary. Have them tell employees that your doors are open to them during this and other times of crisis. Designate a human resources or other manager as a contact person.

**2. Provide educational resources.** Your employee assistance program (EAP), human resources unit and/or local mental health center may have educational materials and information on covered treatment resources. Make sure to have up-to-date provider listings, as well as information about available benefits and the processes for accessing care. Tell employees whom they should contact if they have trouble accessing services or if they are unhappy with the quality of care they receive.

**3. Facilitate communication among employees.** Support from their colleagues can help people work through difficulties. Consider allowing people to break from work periodically to talk. Provide a comfortable environment where they can gather.

**4. Consider bringing a professional counselor/facilitator on-site.** A professional can conduct group meetings and provide individual counseling. This will help you identify and get help to those who need it most. This will help alleviate their immediate anxiety and reduce their need for services later on.

**5. Consider temporary changes in your leave and travel policies.** Allow people to take time off beyond the norm to donate blood, take part in community activities and to address personal needs. With regard to travel, reassure employees that you have their safety in mind, first and foremost. Tell them about any short-term travel policy changes, and let them know that policies will be revised as required by future events.

**6. Promote tolerance.** Warn employees that you will not tolerate hostility directed at members of specific ethnic or religious groups, in the workplace, among your customers or in the community. Supervisors will challenge discriminatory remarks or actions, or any form of harassment, and disciplinary action will be taken.

**7. Organize community activities.** Hold a blood drive, collect donations for “care packages” or encourage writing letters to people in the military. Show employees that your organization is committed to helping those in the workplace, and to supporting our service men and women.

**8. Plan for future emergencies.** Create or review your organization’s emergency plan to address any situations that might arise from the current crisis. Involve all levels of staff in the planning. Remind employees of emergency procedures. Feeling prepared will help ease their anxiety.

### **What Employees Can Do**

**Know what to expect of yourself.** You may not be prepared for the intensity of your emotions or how quickly your moods can change. If your feelings are too much to bear, seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness. Mental health problems – in general and in response to this crisis – are real, diagnosable and treatable. Furthermore, mental health treatment is very effective. People should never be embarrassed to seek the help they need.

**Talk with your co-workers and listen patiently.** If you feel grief, anxiety or anger, you are not alone. Talk with colleagues who are experiencing the same feelings. Be aware of the special

needs of people who have loved ones in the military or living overseas. When listening, don't try to "fix it" or offer false comfort, especially if somebody has lost a loved one. Instead, offer a simple expression of sorrow and take time to listen. Discourage damaging ways of coping, such as excessive drinking. Don't hesitate to recommend professional help if needed.

**Accept that life will go on.** Acknowledge that everyday life will be subdued and, perhaps, different in some way, depending on your particular situation, but there will be continuity. Continuing everyday routines helps with healing.

**Take care of yourself.** Eat well, get plenty of rest and exercise, spend time with those closest to you, postpone major life decisions and other significant stressors if you can, and seek professional help when necessary.

**Take care of your children.** You may be concerned about the well being of your children. There are things you can do to help them handle the effects of this crisis:

- Turn off the TV news when children are in the room.
- Let children express their feelings and ask questions.
- Share your own coping strategies with them.
- Maintain a family routine.
- Reassure children that they are safe.

The National Mental Health Association has several resources available to help you and others cope with disaster. To obtain this information, go to [www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org) or call our toll-free line 800-969-NMHA (6642)

**For more information contact:**  
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