

Employers and the Christchurch Mass Tragedy

The mass tragedy in Christchurch affects many people. The injured and deceased are part of our Canterbury community. Some are work colleagues, and others are friends and family of workers. Most workplaces are affected.

The events bring a wide range of emotions, including anger, grief, loss, and deep sadness. At times people have strong emotions, while others can feel numb and switch off.

Anxiety also increases. Members of the ethnic groups at the centre of the events are experiencing a lot of uncertainty and anxiety. The wider community can also have a heightened sense of anxiety.

There can be changes in how individuals think about life, and how safe we feel. These are major changes, and it will take time for people to come to terms with them.

Employers and leaders have a challenging role in this situation. The following are some key guidelines from local and international research.

Key Point 1: People are not identical

Work can be good, as it keeps people in contact with each other, and brings a sense of normality. But it has to be a supportive workplace where the leaders understand what people are experiencing.

People react in different ways as they deal with a tragedy. Some are deeply affected, some share their emotions easily, while others may take longer to process matters. In this tragedy, specific communities are particularly affected. Employers need to be alert to differences between people.

Key Point 2: Situations keep changing

There are different phases in a disaster. These usually start with a period of heroism, where we value brave acts, large public memorials and fundraising. But after that phase we move into the long-haul of living with the changed realities. There are often long term effects that don't go away, especially for the people affected the most.

Through each of these stages, individuals' needs can change. People who seem to cope OK at the outset, may not always be like that. People have different types of needs at different times. Some types of needs to consider are social and emotional support, counselling, as well as practical things like flexible work arrangements to let workers be with families or have time and space to adjust.

Key Point 3: Situational Awareness your most important skill

There's no magic instruction sheet to follow. Situational awareness means really being alert and tuned-in to what is happening to your team. You need to be approachable, otherwise your team won't talk with you. You need to be able to listen, so that you can hear what's going on.

Ask the question “how’s it going”, but stay and really listen for the answer. Initiate communication, don’t wait for staff to come to you. Be there; be on hand to chat with your staff. Just being ‘around’ shows that you are involved.

Research shows that in workplaces where employers think about their workers and understand what’s happening, there is much better recovery, compared to ones who don’t make this effort.

Face to face communication is better than emails about matters affecting staff wellbeing. Also, look for key team members who can update you on the team, and how people are coping.

Take a check on how your team view the workplace; is it a good place to work? There’s no point sending staff to EAP if they have to come back to a workplace with a lot of conflict and no support.

Key Point 4: Humans are social

Research shows that much healing and recovery comes from people being together, sharing and supporting each other. That needs leaders who can allow discussion about what people are feeling, and sharing emotions. Morning teas, shared lunches and other events can be good for this.

In some workplaces, staff are like a group of friends; in those cases, allowing time for them to get together and share is an important part of healing. In other cases, the workers’ networks are outside of the workplace, so it’s important to let them keep up those supportive connections.

Practice the Five Ways

The [Five Ways to Wellbeing](#) is a useful starting point for assisting your team to care for their wellbeing. Help them to practice the five elements in their daily lives, and be a role model in doing this yourself, including having a good work-life balance. Take time out to rest and recover.

Your workplace can be a place for Connecting, holding events for staff to have fun, and do some Giving, with acts of kindness to others. There’s a [Work Toolkit](#) for a longer term way of implementing these in your workplace.

Some other things to remember

- You don’t have to be a social worker or a counsellor. But you do need to be an understanding human being, who sees and hears what is happening in your team.
- Read more about the psychological and emotional changes that people experience after a disaster, this gives you more background– there’s a range of [resources](#).
- Listen to suggestions, respond to constructive feedback, and look for creative, low-cost ways to support your team, with options like flexible work for specific circumstances
- Where can they get help? Discuss the type of assistance, like whether EAP is available through the company, and also how to access the range of services and support in the community
- Changing situations? As people’s needs change, keep-on keeping an eye on wellbeing.