

Helping People to Deal with the Traumatic Effects of Organizational Downsizing and Change

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Introduction

Unfortunately, organizational downsizing and change is continuing to have an impact upon employees across the nation. To help employees to deal with the emotional effects, organizations frequently ask counsellors to design group interventions or debriefings in order to help employees to cope with the downsizing and/or other significant changes. This article provides an overview of some of the emotional effects that employees may experience and discusses how a modified critical incident stress debriefing agenda may be used to address employee needs. Individual counselling interventions are also described.

The Traumatic Response

Employees frequently describe a sense of horror, shock and fear when they hear of significant downsizing and/or organizational change. Although employees may not meet diagnostic criteria [based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV-TR (2000)] for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Depression or any other mental disorder, they may nevertheless display some generalized symptoms consistent with those who have experienced and/or perceived a traumatic event to have occurred. For example, employees may speak of physical reactions such as headaches, neck or back pain, chest pain, stomach aches, lack of energy, a change of appetite, difficulties with sleep, restlessness, shaky feelings and panic attacks. Emotional reactions may include: irritability, anger, rage, a heightened level of suspicion, losing trust in those previously trusted, anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, denial and feelings of futility for the future. Cognitive reactions may include: blaming others; negative, magnified, catastrophic thinking; poor attention, concentration and memory; and difficulty making decisions or solving problems. Finally, behavioral reactions may include: withdrawal, avoidance, emotional outbursts, suspiciousness, and an increase in alcohol or drug consumption, pacing and immobilization (Mitchell, 1997). In cases where employees may have been affected by extremely traumatic events such as bank robberies or murders, Critical Incident Stress Debriefings may be conducted in an attempt to prevent traumatic symptoms from increasing in severity and duration.

Critical Incident Stress Debriefings

Critical Incident Stress Debriefing agendas (Mitchell, 1997) typically engage employees in seven phases. Phase I begins by providing employees with an introduction to the group's meeting agenda. Phase II provides a statement of the official facts of the case, specifically noting the details of what happened and the current state of affairs. Phase III asks group participants to express their thoughts associated with the event. Phase IV engages employees in a discussion of their emotional reactions. In Phases V and VI, the group leaders provide psycho-educational information with regards to the normal symptoms that participants may experience along with some suggestions of how they may cope with these symptoms. Finally, Phase VII closes the session by reorienting participants back to their regular lives.

Critical Incident Stress Debriefing agendas make a lot of heuristic sense as interventions for people who may have experienced and/or perceived events to be traumatic. Unfortunately, however, research results on the effectiveness of Critical Incident Stress Debriefings are mixed. For example, some studies have found that a single-session debriefing may actually hinder the natural recovery process (Bisson et al., 1997; Mayou et al., 2000, Raphael et al., 1995). Implications of these findings suggest that trauma symptoms gradually decrease over time and that people should be encouraged to use natural supports and to talk to friends, family and co-workers at their own pace instead of attending mandatory debriefing sessions with co-workers they may not be comfortable opening up to. In addition, appropriate follow up should occur with the option of individual counselling for those who need it, as opposed to only offering a single session of debriefing. Finally, it is important to refer individuals for treatment when severe distress has not abated within three months. Consequently, at minimum, those using debriefings need to ensure that employees are not forced to attend debriefing sessions, that the agenda is modified to meet the specific needs of the employee group and that appropriate follow-up services have been arranged for those needing one-on-one treatment.

A Modified Debriefing Agenda for Group Counselling

The following modified debriefing agenda was used within a large organization that needed to layoff a significant number of staff members. Laid off staff members and those staff members who were

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not laid off were invited via email to attend debriefing sessions by the Human Resources department. Interested employees signed up via return email with the Human Resources department. Employees were not forced or coerced to attend any of the sessions. Each debriefing session lasted for approximately two hours.

Each session began with an introduction to the session agenda, after which the Director of Human Resources provided a factual update on the downsizing process, procedures, and reasons for the layoffs. The Director of Human Resources then left the room and employees were asked to express their reactions (thoughts and/or feelings) associated with hearing the factual update. Typically, employees within a group are unable to stick to reporting just their feelings or just their thoughts; in most cases group reactions to such information combines both thoughts and feelings. For that reason, employees were asked to express their thoughts and/or feelings to the information provided by the Director of Human Resources. Approximately, two thirds of the time was spent on allowing employees to express their reactions to the information. This was done to ensure that ample time was given to allowing employees to fully express themselves and to hear and learn from the other group members. This also allowed the participants to vent enough emotion for them to be ready for the psycho-educational (the cognitive) component of the session.

During the psycho-educational portion of the session, employees were provided with some information on how they may be able to talk to others (not at the session) about the layoffs. Specifically, information on how they may discuss the event as a loss was provided. At this point, an analogy of losing a significant other to divorce or death was used. An example of appropriate things to say to others (i.e., I am so sorry for your loss, how can I be of assistance?) and what not to say to others (i.e., there are plenty of other potential partners/jobs) was discussed. Next, some psycho-educational information with regards to William Bridges' (1994) work on managing transitions, working in an increasingly common world of work without set jobs, creating self-employment options and developing niches for themselves was overviewed. This was done in an introductory manner to provide some quick information about the changing world of work and to announce that the organization was going to be putting on some career planning workshops for any employees that may be interested in exploring their career options in greater detail.

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The next psycho-educational topic within the agenda pertained to personal stress management. Here participants were encouraged to acknowledge and not distance themselves from their emotions and to engage in self-care activities (e.g., ensuring they get quality sleep, rest, relaxation, and exercise, engage in pleasurable activities and monitor their thoughts to prevent themselves from catastrophizing or magnifying the effects of the situation to the rest of their lives). Finally, lists of additional support services (both psychological and career planning) were provided to participants. The need for individual counselling for monitoring and follow up was discussed.

Individual Counselling Interventions

Many of the individuals from this organization did engage in individual counselling as a follow up to the group counselling sessions. There were three main needs or themes that became apparent from this counselling. First, many employees spoke of the need to deal more comprehensively with their feelings of shock, loss, and fear after being laid off. Many of the people laid off had worked for this organization for up to 35 years. These employees expressed a need to make sense of the reasons for being laid off. Having worked for this organization for all of their working lives obviously enhanced the need for these employees to deal with their intense feelings of loss and to make sense out of their individual circumstances.

Once these employees were able to get past their strong emotions and make sense of their individual circumstances, they all began to ask two questions: 1) Now what am I going to do? or What am I going to do with my time? and 2) How am I going to fund it?

Issues of what am I going to do with my time are fairly common to career practitioners. Consequently, many of these discussions evolved into career/life planning sessions. Discussions around the second question of how they were going to fund it required them to consult with the Human Resource department and financial professionals regarding pension calculations and other financial details. It was interesting that many of these people, due to combined pension benefits, began to accept that it was a good thing they were laid off because their net pay from combined pension plans was so close to their employed net earnings. People making these calculations and seeing how little per hour they were actually working

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for, became quite excited about their ability to fund new ways of spending their time. Alternatively, others saw great opportunities in starting into new careers and making more in net pay than they would have if they had not been laid off.

Employees who appeared to adjust well to being laid off obtained the following outcomes. First, they were able to process their feelings of loss and make sense of their individual circumstances for being laid off without personalizing their layoffs (i.e., not assuming they were worthless or inadequate and thus laid off). Next, they were able to answer the questions of what they were going to do with their time and how they were going to fund their future plans. Those who made the transition successfully remained symptom free of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Depression and all other mental disorders, thus, offering some applied support for providing group and individual counselling for those who choose to make use of it, during difficult times.

Summary

This paper has presented some of the symptoms employees may face when confronted with difficult situations such as downsizing and organizational changes. The role of critical incident stress debriefings in managing these symptoms was discussed. A modified group counselling agenda was presented where participation was voluntary and ample follow up services were provided to the employees. Ultimately, this process appeared to work well in allowing people to achieve, what appeared to be, critical tasks in successfully managing their transition. Specifically, they were able to process and make sense of their feelings of shock and loss and they were able to obtain some support in order to answer some critical questions regarding what they were going to do with their time and how they were going to fund their future plans. It appeared that attending to these critical needs increased their ability to successfully manage this transition without developing severe symptoms of Depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or any other mental disorder brought on by the stressors of organizational downsizing and change.

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