

Supporting Employee Mental Health After Mass Shootings

The stress, grief, anger and fear that arise in people following a mass shooting may impact how your employees show up for work. Your response in these moments is valuable for fostering a psychologically safe work environment. These five recommendations can help you create a supportive space and build a culture of caring, healing and unity.

1. If you haven't done so already, acknowledge and normalize your employees' experiences.

Leaders across the organization, from C-suite executives to managers, can set a tone of empathy and support. Reach out to employees through CEO communications, town halls, staff meetings or other discussion forums. Emphasize your commitment to a company culture of safety, inclusion and compassion, and validate the anger, grief, fear and despair your employees may be feeling. You shouldn't be looking to "fix" these emotions but rather to let employees express their feelings in a way that will help them move forward.

When violence is rooted in racism, homophobia, or other hateful discrimination, be direct and name it. Acknowledge the fear and pain experienced by employees who identify with the groups targeted.

2. Make space for employees who want to talk (and those who don't).

Just as there won't be any single reaction to mass shootings, there won't be a single best way for employees to express their feelings, convey their needs and move forward. While some people find comfort in a group conversation, others may find that painful. Allow employees to opt out of meetings where incidents are being discussed and offer other one-on-one or small group check-ins.

Keep in mind that mass shootings can elicit strong reactions and stoke divisions within your workforce. If your company is offering group conversations to process these events, begin by setting clear ground rules for psychological safety and **civil discourse**.

- Establish first and foremost that these conversations are intended as a space for employees to come together and offer mutual support.
- Remind employees about your organization's anti-discrimination policies. Plainly state that discriminatory or dehumanizing language will not be tolerated.
- Require mutual respect at all times. Employees with opposing views on gun rights or safety policies should not be labeled or treated as wrong.
- Encourage employees to listen to and show understanding for each other's positions before jumping in with their perspectives.
- Establish common values and guide the conversation to reach back to these values.
- Have supportive resources readily available for employees who may need them.

3. Support communities impacted by targeted violence.

Employees who identify with communities specifically targeted in mass violence incidents – including, most recently, Black and Asian employees or working parents – may need additional support. Mobilize employee resource groups or affinity networks to make recommendations and lead on support. Smaller organizations may consider activating temporary support groups or providing specific outreach to affected employees.

Consider how your company might take action to support communities and families directly affected by mass shootings. Company-matching pledges, for example, can help employees feel united in their support, bridge workplace divisions and combat feelings of hopelessness through action.

Want to go further?

- For companies interested in advocating for **safer firearm policies**, the National Safety Council has collected a number of policy positions that may help guide your action.
- Companies might also educate employees about **safe gun storage** in the home and other gun safety strategies.

4. Empower managers to support their teams.

Managers should be encouraged to check in with employees and offer tailored support to meet the needs of their teams. Empower managers to engage in caring conversations, and give them the authority to offer accommodations such as paid mental health days, extended deadlines on assignments or other support that will provide employees time and space to process their feelings.

It's important to train managers to recognize signs of emotional distress like a troubling change in appearance, behavior and mood. This might show up at work as a drop in performance, being late for work, social withdrawal, irritability, excessive vigilance, a heightened startle response, or difficulty concentrating or sleeping. Make sure managers know where to refer employees to internal resources or professional support.

Our **Conversation Guide for Managers** provides helpful tips to build your managers' confidence to hold these discussions.

5. Reduce the risk of emotional distress during active shooter drills.

If your company chooses to hold an active shooter drill, collaborate with a mental health professional to minimize emotional distress. The Kentucky Department of Education offers a model for this approach:

- **Plan** your exercise thoroughly and inclusively. Announce to employees ahead of time when drills are scheduled to take place. Try to avoid holding them immediately after a highly publicized mass shooting or another event of extreme violence.
- **Prepare** employees for what to expect with an overview of the training's contents. Provide clear warnings before showing or reviewing disturbing material. And let employees know they can ask for support or remove themselves from the training if needed.
- **Practice** the drill as planned and reviewed with your employees. Do not surprise staff with unannounced simulations.
- **Process** the training experience in collaboration with a mental health practitioner. Use this time for employees to share their emotional reactions if they choose and to review supportive mental health resources, including Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services, community services and crisis lines.

RESOURCES FOR EMPLOYEES

Supporting employees in crisis

- The **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** offers 24-hour, toll-free, confidential support for people in distress.

1-800-273-TALK (8255)

TTY: 1-800-799-4889

suicidepreventionlifeline.org

- The **Disaster Distress Helpline** provides 24-hour, toll-free crisis counseling and support to people experiencing emotional distress related to natural or human-caused disasters.

1-800-985-5990

samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline

Resources for parents on gun safety and gun violence

- American Psychological Association: **Guide to Talking About Gun Violence**
- **End Family Fire**: A partnership between Brady and the Ad Council to encourage safe gun storage in the home.
- National Association of School Psychologists: **Talking to Children About Violence: Tips for Parents and Teachers**

Identity-based mental health resources

- **National Alliance for Mental Illness**: A collection of resources addressing the unique mental health needs of people from Asian American and Pacific Islander, Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ communities, and people with disabilities

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