



INFORMATION SHEET

Trauma-informed approaches to workplace incident response and investigation

Overview

This information sheet provides guidance for persons conducting a business or undertaking, and workers with responsibilities which involve responding to workplace incidents, including investigations.

What is trauma?

Trauma is the psychological harm that may result from witnessing or experiencing a distressing or frightening event. Such events may include serious workplace incidents, sexual harassment or assault, bullying, suicidal behaviours, or acts of violence and aggression.

The effects of trauma can manifest in various physical, cognitive, behavioural, and emotional symptoms, which may compromise an individual's ability to cope and change their perceptions of safety and security. The impact of trauma is varied; while some individuals may not display clear, observable signs of trauma, others may experience delayed symptoms.

Immediate trauma reactions may include numbness, anger, fatigue, forgetfulness, and disorientation. Medium-term responses may include sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, and feelings of guilt and withdrawal. Long-term effects may include post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, suicidal ideation or behaviours, and substance abuse.

Understanding a trauma-informed approach

Inappropriate organisational responses, particularly following a potentially traumatic event, can harm workers' health. The goal of a trauma-informed approach is to minimise the risk of harm, including the exacerbation of existing trauma-related symptoms or reactivation of past trauma (sometimes referred to as 'retraumatisation').

In workplace settings, re-traumatisation may occur as a result of inappropriate organisational responses to affected workers immediately following a potentially traumatic event, during an investigation process, or upon their return to work. The potential for re-traumatisation can exacerbate harm to workers' health. A failure to mitigate foreseeable risks of harm, so far as is reasonably practicable, may constitute a breach of the *Work Health and Safety Act 2020* and the associated regulations.

Trauma-informed approaches are guided by five key principles: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment.

Safety

The safety of the affected worker who has experienced a potentially traumatic event should be prioritised. This requires an understanding of the affected worker's unique circumstances and needs. Consulting with affected workers regarding potential sources of psychological and physical harm, and identifying measures to ensure their safety, is crucial. Consider the following:

- Does the affected worker feel comfortable disclosing their experience?
 - An investigation can proceed without requiring the affected worker to provide a detailed account of the traumatic event. Specific details may not be required to identify whether control measures have failed or harmful behaviours are still occurring within a specific work group or area.
 - The affected worker's statement should be taken only once. Repeated retellings of the traumatic event may increase the risk of retraumatisation and lead to confusion or doubt.
- Does the affected worker feel safe in their environment, whether that is their workplace, work area, workers' accommodation, home, or interview space?
 - Communication with the affected worker should take place in a location where the worker feels safe.
- Does the affected worker feel safe returning to the workplace, taking into account any potential for further interactions with the alleged perpetrator (if applicable)?
 - Are there common amenities, like gyms or dining facilities, that may lead to interaction between the affected worker and the alleged perpetrator outside of work hours (for example, at workers' accommodation)? Identify controls to manage this.
- Are there established incident response procedures that ensure the safety of affected workers?
- Have workers responsible for the incident response and investigation received adequate training to address any specific cultural sensitivities of the affected worker(s)?

Trustworthiness

It is important to consider the affected worker's sense of trust in the organisation, its systems, and any workers involved in the organisation's response and investigation into the incident. Consider the following:

- Does the affected worker trust the person they are communicating with to maintain confidentiality?
- Does the affected worker believe the investigator's relationship with the alleged perpetrator, or any potential sources of bias, could impact the interpretation of their statement and outcome of the investigation?
 - Choose a point of contact the worker trusts, and perceives as unbiased, to the extent possible.
- What insights gained from the incident can be shared to prevent recurrence while safeguarding the affected worker from any further harm and ensuring the confidentiality of all parties involved?
 - Discuss the nature of this type of communication with the affected worker in advance.

- Does the affected worker believe they will face negative consequences during the organisational response (for example, ridicule, dismissal of their concerns, being told to 'toughen up')?
 - Identify ways to manage this risk.

Choice

Providing the affected worker with choices, and accommodating their preferences so far as is reasonably practicable, can help minimise the risk of harm and facilitate recovery. Consider the following:

- Does the affected worker have input into how their concerns will be managed and resolved?
- If the affected worker wishes to refrain from an investigation, is it possible to accommodate this while ensuring health and safety risks are controlled?
- Ask the affected worker about their preferences regarding the gender, culture or ethnicity of the people they will engage with in the investigation process and accommodate those preferences where possible.
- Ensure the investigator arranges to take a statement from the affected worker at a time and place that is comfortable, safe and convenient for them.
- Has the investigator consulted the affected worker regarding their preferred outcomes, and accommodated those outcomes so far as is reasonably practicable?
- If the affected worker is still at the workplace after a potentially traumatic event, have they been provided with an option to return home or move to another preferred location?
- Has the affected worker been given the option to undergo assessment by their own trusted medical practitioner (if applicable)?
- Ensure that the affected worker is provided with adequate opportunity to arrange for a support person to accompany them during statement collection or when receiving the outcomes of the investigation.
- Are there reasonable adjustments or accommodations that could assist the affected worker?

Collaboration

Taking a collaborative approach can help affected workers safely participate in investigations after a potentially traumatic event, and enhance their sense of choice and control. While some things may be harder for a person after a traumatic event, it is important not to assume affected workers are unable or unwilling to participate in planning or decision-making. Consider the following:

- If applicable, has a 'return to work' program been developed in collaboration with the affected worker to ensure their input into the process, including the identification of potential risks to their recovery?
- Has the affected worker been consulted about potential modifications to their normal duties to facilitate their recovery?
 - Has the affected worker's medical practitioner been included in these discussions?
- Is there a commitment to maintaining an open, inclusive, collaborative, and transparent approach before, during, and after the investigation?

Empowerment

Traumatic events can leave workers feeling powerless and ashamed. While it is important to validate the affected worker's experience, embracing their strengths and taking an optimistic, empowering approach can help restore their sense of agency. Consider the following:

- Have resources aligned with the affected worker's preferences been offered?
- Was the immediate incident response consistent with the affected worker's wants and needs?
- Do the current systems, policies and procedures allow for flexibility to accommodate the preferences of the affected worker?
- Does the investigation process empower the affected worker while also seeking to understand the root cause of the incident?

Further information

Australian Human Rights Commission

- [Guidelines for working with a trauma-informed approach](#)

Blue Knot Foundation

- [Trauma-informed organisational development](#)

Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC)

- [Supporter's guide: For people supporting an adult survivor of sexual trauma](#)

Department of Local Government, Industry Regulation and Safety WorkSafe

- [Gendered violence: Sexual harassment: Information sheet](#)
- [Sexual harassment evaluation tool for mine sites](#)
- [How to take action as a bystander witnessing sexual harassment: Poster](#)
- [Mentally healthy workplaces codes of practice](#)