

# the ADVISOR

RESOURCES FOR SUPERVISORS, MANAGERS, AND HUMAN RESOURCES PERSONNEL

## Managing Stressful Events

A stressful situation in the workplace may create extra challenges for management. A crisis or other disruption may make it difficult for employees to manage their emotions or cope as they normally would. The result may be frayed tempers, conflicts, and an unhappy team or unpleasant work environment.

Situations that may be stressful beyond what is normal in the workplace include:

- ▶ A project that pulls people away from their usual work, has a challenging timeline, or is high profile or unexpected
- ▶ The resignation or departure of a manager or key team member, especially if it results in other

employees needing to take on additional duties

- ▶ Extreme weather conditions or other external events that hinder work tasks or affect the team's ability to meet deadlines

While some team members may find times of extra stress or crisis exhilarating, others may long for their usual routine or struggle to cope. A recent study found that 57% of employees see accomplishing their basic responsibilities as their most important priority. Removing individuals from their usual work to focus on a special project or assigning extra tasks in addition to their regular duties may leave them feeling overwhelmed or uncertain.

When your team is dealing with unusual levels of stress, it's important that you take steps to mitigate it. You may not have a quick fix for the stressful situation, but you can work to manage its impact on your team. Helpful actions to take include:

- ▶ Stay connected with employees. Seek them out, say hello, and acknowledge their efforts. Be present and approachable.



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- ▶ Be fair and consistent in how you treat employees. Avoid the perception that some staff members are receiving preferential treatment.
- ▶ Listen to and empathize with employees who may need to vent and repeatedly seek reassurance. Validate their feelings and let them know that you have heard their concerns.
- ▶ Thank people who exhibit positive attitudes or help others. Express appreciation when team members take on extra responsibilities or tackle difficult problems.
- ▶ Be visible and available. Manage by “walking around,” not by hiding in your office. If there is “all hands on deck” work to do, pitch in — even if it’s something as simple as helping to ship packages.
- ▶ Help employees set reasonable deadlines for completion of specific tasks. If someone needs more help, do what you can to make sure they receive it.
- ▶ Hold employees accountable for unacceptable workplace behaviors during the stressful event. If a tight deadline means you can’t address the behavior immediately, do so as soon as the crisis is over.
- ▶ Keep in mind that personality

conflicts may be magnified during a stressful situation, so keep an eye on potential areas of friction. Be sensitive to the needs of employees with mental health issues or those who may be more susceptible to stress.

- ▶ No matter how stressful things become, ensure that employees adhere to their break schedules and that reasonable accommodations continue to be made for staff members with disabilities.
- ▶ Schedule a time to debrief after the situation is over. Talk about what worked, what didn’t, and what strategies the team could implement to improve functioning prior to the next high-profile event. If the situation extends through several days or even weeks, have periodic meetings to check in with the affected employees.

In a stressful situation, it’s important to express trust in your team. Focus on what can be accomplished with the resources you have available and create a safe environment that will allow innovative solutions to thrive.

The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service is available 24/7/365 both during and after a stressful event. Call anytime to access helpful resources and discuss management concerns. LifeMatters services are also available to help manage your own stress.

# How Do I Say That? Pressure Situations

Some employees may have difficulty coping with the stresses of a tight deadline or other pressure situation. If some of your employees seem overwhelmed, try these tips:

## 1. Consult with Human Resources.

While HR may not be able to provide immediate assistance during a crisis, it can assist with longer-term issues, such as reviewing staffing needs, clarifying policies, or scheduling training on stress management. In addition, the LifeMatters Management Consultation Service can provide suggestions for managing workflow issues and team conflicts.

**2. Schedule a meeting.** If your whole team is affected, call a brief meeting to check in, answer any questions, and provide encouragement and support. Let your team know that you understand what they are experiencing.

**Sample language:** “This is a tough situation, and I know it’s stressful for everyone. Thank you for everything you’re doing to meet our goals.”

**3. Check in one-on-one.** For some employees, a general meeting may not be enough. If one of your team members is struggling, check in personally



and offer support and encouragement.

**Sample language:** “I can see that you’ve been working hard, and I want to let you know how much I appreciate it. There’s a lot going on and I know we’re stretched thin.”

**4. Listen.** Focus on what your team is saying, both individually and one-on-one. Offer resources where you can, but avoid making promises you can’t keep.

**Sample language:** “I want you to know that I hear your concerns. If you have any suggestions on how to improve this situation, I’d like to hear them.”

**5. Focus on performance.** One of the best ways to get your team through a stressful situation is to keep them focused on the task at hand. In addition, focusing on performance and what your team can control may decrease the potential for interpersonal friction due to competing priorities or interests.

**Sample language:** “Let’s take things one step at a time and stay focused on our objectives.”





**6. Make a referral to LifeMatters.** Remind your team that LifeMatters is available to provide support during times of stress. Refer employees who are struggling with performance issues to LifeMatters.

**Sample language:** “I know this situation has been challenging. LifeMatters is available to help you cope with how you’re feeling, and can offer helpful resources and practical suggestions. You can call anytime.”

**7. Follow up.** Schedule another meeting after the stressful situation is over. Give employees time to vent, but also discuss how to better handle or even avoid a similar situation in the future.

**Sample language:** “What could we do differently next time? I’d like to hear your ideas.”

The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service can help your team weather a stressful situation. Call 24/7/365.

## Management Consultation

LifeMatters is available to help with:

- ▶ Confronting an employee about performance issues
- ▶ An employee’s personal problem
- ▶ Suspected drug or alcohol use on the job
- ▶ Interpersonal conflicts between team members
- ▶ Establishing clear, attainable expectations for performance
- ▶ Addressing crisis situations, such as a violent incident, the death of an employee, or a natural disaster
- ▶ Your own personal concerns
- ▶ Any other work-related issue

LifeMatters offers professional management consultation when you need it, as often as you need it. Call anytime.

Call the **LifeMatters®** by Empathia Management Consultation Service toll-free anytime. **1-800-367-7474**

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