

Our Vision

Nambucca Valley ~ Living at its best

Our Mission Statement

'The Nambucca Valley will value and protect its natural environment, maintain its assets and infrastructure and develop opportunities for its people.'

1.0 Policy objective

Council recognises that in, conducting its business, employees may be at risk of involvement in situations with the potential to produce traumatic stress reactions. It also recognises that ineffective management of these reactions may lead to significant longer term psychological and/or other health problems.

This policy seeks to provide comprehensive guidelines for the prevention and reduction of these reactions. The policy provides guidance to all Council staff concerning their roles in the management of trauma reactions with regard to both intervention at and follow-up subsequent to a traumatic event or critical incident. It is recognised that appropriate education and training will be required to meet the aims of this policy.

2.0 Related legislation

Not applicable

3.0 Definitions

3.1 Traumatic Event or Critical Incident

A traumatic event or critical incident can be defined as: "an emotionally evocative event or situation outside the range of normal experience, where life or basic premises are threatened. Such events can dramatically shatter or gradually erode our normally held beliefs including our sense of self, our sense that we have control of our lives and our sense that the world is a fair, meaningful and comprehensible place".

Examples of events that may precipitate a traumatic stress or similar include:

- Situations where the person has experienced, witnessed or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death, serious injury or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others, serious vehicle accidents, serious personal assault, natural or man-made disaster, violent crime, diagnosis of life threatening illness or war and its associated acts
- Situations involving extended periods of danger where the person is confronted by a threat to their or others physical or psychological integrity, and
- Frequent exposure to difficult, interpersonal, line of duty events that involve human suffering, distress or confrontation interactions.

3.2 Traumatic Stress Reaction

Traumatic stress reactions are sets of psychological and physiological reactions which are normal responses to disturbing events. These reactions enable people to cope with such experience and, under favourable conditions allow the individual to assimilate the experience and re-establish their equilibrium. Although the responses are normal to the situation they can be very unpleasant, even terrifying.

Traumatic stress reactions can be grouped into four broad categories:

- 1 emotional reactions
- 2 psycho-physiological reactions
- 3 effects caused by learning/hearing of the trauma/event.
- 4 behavioural and interpersonal effects.

Managers and staff need to be aware that, for a small number of people the normal course of recovery may fail due to either individual or environmental factors. In cases where reactions are excessive or prolonged, there can be serious damage to psychological and physical health.

3.3 Defusing

Defusing is the first part of the set of psychological processes to decline trauma. It takes place in the period, between the occurrence of the traumatic incident and the second part of the process in the briefing session. In this interim period individuals involved in a critical incident may have shock. The object of defusing is to make some personal sense of employees' perceptions about the incident and to reduce the immediate emotional impact of the event. It has an educative role which allows the individual to understand and thus accept the symptoms they may display in the 24 to 72 hours after the event.

Defusing should only be undertaken by suitably trained personnel. Symptoms may be exacerbated when the defusing procedure is poorly conducted.

3.4 Debriefing

Debriefing is the process where employees who have experienced a traumatic incident are given a non-threatening and non-judgmental environment to express their feelings and reactions to an incident. This is usually conducted with homogenous groups of employees who have the same experience of the event ie same work team vs rescue team etc. The process is highly structured and explains the reasons for their reaction and how they can best deal with them.

Debriefings are not ordinarily conducted until 24 to 72 hours after an incident has occurred. Earlier, employees involved may still be experiencing shock and thus cannot benefit fully from the process.

Debriefings should be conducted by professionally qualified personnel. This is to minimise the risk of exacerbating traumatic reactions and to assist in identifying officers who may require the third step in the process—individual counselling.

3.5 Employee Assistance Program (EAP) Provider

The provider is the supplier of suitable qualified personnel to conduct defusing, debriefing and individual counselling sessions. The provider contracted to provide services is **Recover**. Employees can receive ongoing counselling through Council's EAP.

4.0 Policy statement

4.1 Mandatory Notification

To ensure that defusing and debriefing can be organised without delay, supervisors must, immediately upon being informed of an occurrence, notify the Manager Human Resources. This is to be done if Council employees are involved or witness the following events:

- Death of a staff member of Council
- Serious injury or threats to life of a staff member of Council
- Death of a member of the public where a situation involves Council staff, either through witnessing or actual involvement in the event
- A natural or man-made disaster.

All other incidents should be reported to the Manager Human Resources as soon as possible after a supervisor has been informed of the incident. This is to allow for an investigation of the incident and the subsequent development of an appropriate response.

4.2 Responsibilities

Managers and Supervisors

Supervisors who have had an incident reported to them should contact the Manager Human Resources and provide whatever details of the incident that are available. This should include names of the officers involved in the incident.

When supervisors have been notified of a possible incident, they need to ascertain basic facts about the incident (ie what happened and who was involved). This is not to be confused with defusing—it is to obtain basic information if at all possible. This can be achieved by conducting an information interview with the officer reporting the incident and, where appropriate, and given the circumstances of the incident, the officers who may have been involved in the incident. However, supervisors should not press the latter either for details if they are not freely given, or make any judgement about the incident to the officer being interviewed.

When, in a supervisor's judgement, it may be detrimental to the employee concerned for the supervisor to attempt to obtain this information, the supervisor may refrain from making these inquiries.

When, in the supervisor's opinion, an employee may be suffering from traumatic stress reactions but:

- there has not been any report of an incident, or
- where an incident has occurred, but defusing and debriefing was not deemed necessary by the provider at the time of the incident

the Manager Human Resources should be contacted.

A supervisor may need to temporarily adjust an employee's workload following a critical incident. This could be the case particularly in the period when the impact on the officer of an incident is still being assessed. Longer term adjustments to work loads should be subject to advice received from either the provider responsible for debriefing and/or individual counselling, and other parties ordinarily involved in the standard return to work process.

Other responsibilities may include:

- Providing assistance to ensure that subordinates attend defusing, debriefing and individual sessions as required
- Advising employees of the support mechanisms available
- Monitoring employees for traumatic stress reactions and, when necessary, reporting these to the Manager Human Resources.

Employees

It is the responsibility of all Council employees to assist in identifying and reporting possible traumatic incidents that involve Council employees. Employees should inform their supervisor, the affected employee's supervisor or contact the Manager Human Resources directly.

Employees should ensure that they attend all defusing, debriefing and individual counselling sessions as directed.

Manager Human Resources

When advised of an incident that requires mandatory notification, the Manager Human Resources will be responsible for:

- organising defusing and debriefing sessions including contacting the appropriate personnel to undertake the sessions (ie Employee Assistance provider) arranging suitable accommodation for the session and notifying relevant employees of details concerning where and when the sessions will be held
- ascertaining which employees should attend defusing and debriefing sessions. This may not only be the employees directly affected by an incident, but also include supervisors, peers and other parties less or indirectly affected
- notifying the Workers Compensation insurer as required.
- maintaining records of employees who have attended defusing, debriefing or individual counselling sessions
- monitoring an employees attendance at any individual counselling that has been recommended as a result of a debriefing session; and
- following up on any employees who did not attend the required defusing or debriefing session.

In response to other incidents, the Manager Human Resources should investigate the incident and liaise with the Employee Assistance provider as required.

The Manager Human Resources will inform the General Manager of all incidents reported as soon as notification has been received.

4.3 Defusing, Debriefing and Individual Counselling Sessions

Failure to ensure attendance equals failure in our duty of care, thus leaving the organisation open to legal costs, compensation costs etc. In addition, the cost of the absence from work of an officer for an extended period due to traumatic stress far outweighs the costs of having the officer attend counselling)

Attendance

When employees are advised or directed to attend a defusing, debriefing or individual counselling session, their attendance at these sessions is mandatory. Supervisors must release staff to enable them to attend.

Supervisors will be informed of the requirement for an employee to attend a session so that adjustments can be made to operational demands. This advice should be treated confidentially.

Employees attending defusing, debriefing or individual counselling in relation to a traumatic incident shall be deemed to be on duty.

When an incident has been reported and an employee involved in the incident believes that this critical incident procedure is unnecessary, the Manager Human Resources will liaise with the Employee Assistance provider. If in the opinion of the provider, debriefing sessions appear appropriate, the officers will be required to attend these. (One of the reactions to traumatic stress is denial of either symptoms or the incident).

Conduct of Defusing and Debriefing Sessions

Sessions should only be conducted by suitably trained personnel.

Participation in these sessions is restricted only to those employees who have been advised or directed to attend.

Sessions should be conducted in a quiet, secure area. This may entail Council providing an off-site venue for this session.

4.4 Monitoring, Reporting and Confidentiality

Monitoring

Employees involved in a traumatic incident should be monitored for evidence of traumatic stress reaction approximately three months after an incident has occurred. This includes monitoring of employees who may not have required defusing or debriefing at the time of the original incident.

Where employees themselves, their supervisors or their peers believe there are signs of traumatic stress regardless of whether the reactions are obviously work related, they should contact the Manager Human Resources. The Manager Human Resources will implement an appropriate intervention as required.

Where an employee fails to attend a defusing or debriefing session as directed, the Manager Human Resources will record this and take the necessary steps to ensure the officer attends a rescheduled session.

Three months after this session, the Manager Human Resources will conduct confidential follow-up interviews of all officers who attended defusing or debriefing sessions. Where required and in liaison with the provider, further appropriate assistance for the officer will be organised. In some cases it may be appropriate for the provider to perform the follow-up interviews.

Reporting

When an incident is reported, the Manager Human Resources will conduct an investigation of the incident and formally report to the General Manager.

Where an incident requires SafeWork NSW investigation, Council will provide the investigator with the assistance required.

Copies of all reports relating to an incident will be forwarded to the Manager Human Resources. Reports may be edited to conform with confidentiality requirements.

Confidentiality

All reports regarding an incident will be held by the Manager Human Resources. Reports will be written to comply with appropriate legislation.

Advice to managers or supervisors that a member of their staff is required to attend defusing, debriefing or individual counselling sessions, is confidential information.

Where an employee attends a defusing, debriefing or counselling session, they are bound to respect any undertakings of confidentiality given at the session (ie not disclose the contents of a session to others).

4.5 Education and Information

Implementation of appropriate educational measures and the provision of information prior to traumatic incidents about the likely reactions to an incident may assist in reducing the severity and time frame of symptoms.

Council will provide appropriate training, including the distribution of an information package on traumatic stress, to all staff.

5.0 Policy Review

The effectiveness of this policy will be reviewed after each critical incident and annually from the date of implementation.

6.0 History

The Trauma Management Policy was originally adopted as part of Council's Disaster Recovery Plan in August 2005.

A separate Policy document was created in October 2012 for the Human Resources Policy register.

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