



Respond » Connect » Reflect

Guidance for managers

Supporting staff to respond, recover and restore

This guidance is designed to help managers (school, early childhood and Ministry of Education) respond to staff reactions to the tragic event in Christchurch in a professional and effective manner.

Your goal is to support adults to recover well, thrive and flourish. Focus on fostering a sense of security, hope, recovery, and positive action.

These tips are based on the principle of exercising leadership:

1. to provide a safe environment for staff
2. to respond to the safety and support needs of staff.

There will be some adults directly affected through the death of a relative or friend. Some adults may be overwhelmed by the media stories. Some may have experiences of violence in communities they have been part of. Some may have been exposed to complete or part footage of the event, or the manifesto, either through coming across them on social media or in some cases seeking them out on the internet. Some may have shared all or part of the video or manifesto in some way.

The importance of collective values

The events challenged beliefs about our environments, communities and places we live. Now will be a good time to reassess and reaffirm collective values across your community.

This values base is the very place where response, recovery and ongoing wellbeing lies.

Faith-based values, such as salaam (peace) have become entwined with spiritual, social and cultural values, particularly tikanga Māori values. Some communities have focused on whanaungatanga (belonging), manawanui (tolerance), manaakitanga (care), and aroha (love).

Calling upon collective values such as these has helped both adults and children frame their thinking and actions. It has helped us make considered choices and actions towards recovery. Working from a common values base is also how communities can safely examine alternative and diverse world views.

Contents

- What reactions are normal?
- Support and encourage employees' own resilience and natural coping resources
- Supporting staff who have viewed the video or manifesto
- Providing on-site professional support
- Additional support for individuals
- What are your staff likely to expect from you?
- How you can provide support for your staff
- Looking after yourself as a manager

What reactions are normal?

Staff will react to the events in Christchurch and to the media coverage in different ways and at different times.

Their response will depend on a huge variety of factors, including their experience of the event, their past experiences, their faith or spiritual connections, their own resilience, the extent of support from their whānau, friends and colleagues, their health and the level of practical/operational support offered by their employer.

Shock, distress, tears and being upset are natural responses. They're not necessarily indicative of a traumatic response or the likelihood that an employee will develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

For most people, the immediate feelings will dissipate over the days and weeks following the incident as their coping strategies and support networks help them come to terms with the experience. However those who have lost friends, relatives and colleagues, or whose lives are going to be disrupted for a longer period, will face greater challenges.

People will react in a variety of ways. It's not appropriate to assume that everyone has the same response at the same time or the same need for support. For some, the real impact of the incident may be weeks or even months after the event.

Even though people will react in different ways, the following reactions are normal given the severity of the events:

- preoccupation with the events
- anger and irritability, emotional tension, conflict with other staff
- anxiety
- increased emotions – feelings seem to be of a greater intensity than is usual, or conversely, numbing, which prevents awareness of feeling
- over-talkativeness, or its opposite, isolating from others
- sleep disturbance, with or without nightmares
- recalling past events or feeling down
- grieving
- difficulty concentrating and/or with memory
- confused thinking, difficulty making decisions, reduced productivity
- less effective communication
- difficulty problem-solving
- absenteeism.

These reactions should gradually decrease over time, but it's quite normal for them to persist for a period of weeks, or months and/or return if there is another change or challenging situation. They're not a sign of a staff member not coping, but are normal.

If symptoms as above aren't lessening, or get worse, then extra help may be required.

Staff who are failing to show any, or limited, signs of being affected shouldn't automatically be considered 'in denial' or to be repressing their emotions. They may be dealing with the incident effectively in their own way and using their natural resilience.

Support and encourage employees' own resilience and natural coping resources

Immediate support you provide for staff should be pragmatic and practical. Deal with immediate physical and social needs. This doesn't need to be provided by mental health professionals.

Support should focus on helping employees problem-solve, connect with their natural support resources and foster their resilience and hope for the future.

While some staff may eventually need professional support, the majority of those affected will find their own resources adequate.

When you communicate with staff, focus on their resilience and ability to adapt rather than focusing on mental health concerns or negative impacts.

Support staff to identify and prioritise any of their needs. An action plan is very helpful.

Te taha tinana – physical wellbeing

- Communicate messages about safety and ensure physical needs are met in the school or workplace environment. All people need their basic needs met.

Te taha whānau – social wellbeing

- Encourage social support in the school and within the community. People who don't fare well are often those who don't or can't engage with their networks. They need support to re-establish or build a social network.

Te taha wairua – spiritual wellbeing

- Encourage, allow and make time and space for staff to reflect. Some staff might prefer meditation. Some may find it helpful to pray or increase participation in faith-based activities. Some will find spiritual connections in their community.
- Now will be a good time to reassess and reaffirm collective values. Let staff take the lead on how they may wish to do this. If you already have a clear set of collectively agreed values, allow space for staff to discuss: why these values, how do they guide us, what do they look like (our behaviours)? Make these values visible in the environment. Boost your recognition and acknowledgement of those behaviours.

Te taha hinengaro – mental and emotional wellbeing

- Communicate about the sharing of the video (see tips later on).
- If staff are upset, provide comfort and ask about the things that need prioritising now, what will help, and their supports. Motivating staff to problem solve, and engage with others is likely to have the largest immediate effect.
- Support and encourage staff to manage stress reactions. It's important that staff know how to access resources about stress and practise how to reduce arousal, eg breathing skills, self-talk, and social connection. Use exercise to minimise the risk of developing physical health problems (eg, respiratory disease and heart attacks) and the risk of longer term stress responses.

- Access the 'Working well toolkit' from the Mental Health Foundation: <http://tinyurl.com/working-well-guide>
- Support healthy thinking. Help people recognise unhelpful thoughts and then rephrase more helpful ones.

Supporting staff who have viewed the video or manifesto

- It's important to help people understand their behaviour. They can understand it in terms of wanting to seek information and know/comprehend what was going on in a heightened environment, or receiving information from others that they automatically clicked on.
- Talk about this as an action taken in a time of heightened concern and limited information regarding what was occurring.
- Talk about this as something that they can learn from (growth mindset).
- Listen, and show empathy and compassion.
- Encourage people to seek help from someone they trust and who won't judge them.
- People are often exposed to inappropriate content through the internet and social media. Acknowledge that platform providers have a responsibility to make the internet safer.
- Encourage people to seek help if they feel distress, fear, guilt or shame that feels unmanageable.
- Explore with them their own values and things that are important to them.

Providing on-site professional support

There may be a strong desire to provide support for staff as soon as possible after a major shock or change. Be aware that making staff talk immediately about their experience, whether they want to or not, can actually increase their stress.

Your initial focus needs to be on providing immediate practical support.

Don't assume that all staff will be similarly affected by the change or event, or need help at the same time and are at the same risk for developing a distress disorder. Outside interventions should meet the needs of individual staff rather than be based on perceptions of what a staff member or group might need. A one-size-fits-all solution will not be appropriate and staff participation should be voluntary.

Staff should be encouraged to hold on to their responsibilities and keep usual routines. Interventions should focus on the expectation that staff can adapt and are resilient, rather than thinking they're not coping or emphasising any negative impacts of an event.

Additional support for individuals

You'll need to remain aware of employees who need additional support and work with them to prioritise what further support they need.

Some staff may experience the following symptoms, which will affect their interactions with colleagues, children and students:

- repeated flashbacks or unwanted memories
- sleep and appetite disturbance
- appear to be emotionally numb
- overly anxious and/or depressed
- are irritable and angry, often over small things
- are experiencing psycho-physiological problems (stress- related physical health issues, such as heart palpitations, or difficulties breathing).

For some staff these experiences will decrease in time. For others these experiences may continue and become problematic and affect their ability to work. Give all staff opportunities and ways to seek additional support from you as their manager. You'll need to keep yourself informed about current support options for staff experiencing problems and keep a monitoring eye on all staff.

What are your staff likely to expect from you?

Staff need and will respond to your leadership and the ability of your leadership team to respond to the challenges of the current situation and promote a sense of safety and care. This can be done through:

- accurate and regular information about what's happening in their work
- helping staff develop confidence that they can problem-solve any issues arising from the event, either themselves or as part of a group. This will support their natural resiliency
- being aware that staff may be stressed and less flexible in their approach with others or students or children. If you're in a school or early learning service, remind teachers about the skills and approaches they can use to support behaviour
- resisting the urge to use punitive measures when dealing with children or students. Children and young people need positive adult support as well
- fostering and supporting any natural social support structures (colleagues, whānau, friends, faith organisations). This is where people turn to seek support and where they feel safe to talk.

How you can provide support for your staff

The role of managers is not only to encourage staff to take responsibility for their own recovery, but employees will also want to know that you care about them. Be visible and available, but don't intrude.

Support systems

- Give practical support which may include flexibility with hours or leave to allow staff to deal with practical issues, providing support to whānau members, catching up on sleep.
- If your employees have children for whom school or an early learning service hasn't reopened, consider whether they can bring them to work.
- Encourage staff to use support systems established within the organisation.
- Create/support activities that re-establish a sense of control, such as holding regular structured meetings to share information.
- Make sure the supporters are supported.
- Recommend that employees use the Employee Assistance Programme <https://www.eapservices.co.nz/>

Communicating

- Spend time with staff collectively and individually.
- Listen, rather than talk.
- Be careful with advice – your role is to be available and supportive.
- Keep in contact by phone if the employee is not at work. If you have a large number of staff, consider having a phone tree for communicating.
- Keep staff up-to-date with operational issues affected by any future events.
- Ensure updates and information are disseminated as regularly as possible.
- Consider having a short briefing at the beginning and the end of the day. It's better for you to schedule and structure opportunities for them to discuss their concerns in a positive way than for employees to disrupt work by either talking informally at great length or by avoiding one another altogether.

Work tasks

- Arrange for additional staff to be brought in to assist as necessary.
- Wherever possible, keep existing reporting or management arrangements.
- Where possible, reduce workloads, delegate tasks, relieve or share routine responsibilities. A team approach helps.
- Allow employees to provide input regarding rearranging their work environment.

Physical needs

- Check on how the person is sleeping. Encourage staff to access '*Tips for getting a good night's sleep*'.
- Encourage breaks, regular movement and physical activity – individual or group activities.

Emotional needs and connections

- Consider whether cultural/spiritual/ritual processes need to be initiated for staff and/or the workplace, eg involvement of kaumatua/kuia, a blessing for the staff/site.
- Allow people to be upset.
- Affirm that it's acceptable for staff to be affected by the violence in the community.
- Allow staff to express concerns if they have any.
- Show your interest in the person and their family, not just the situation.
- Show interest and concern for people's pets. Pets are a very important support in people's lives. They provide comfort and security where this might not exist, help people to manage their feelings through distraction, and can encourage daily activity.
- Avoid trying to be a counsellor – focus your efforts on practical care and listening.
- Encourage employees to support each other.
- Encourage staff to make decisions about their own wellbeing.
- Where appropriate, include wider community groups.
- Encourage peer support.
- Expect delayed reactions from staff – this is normal but staff still may benefit from help to recover.

Looking after yourself as a manager

Remember that you are human too, and being a manager or supervisor doesn't make you immune to a stress reaction. Get support yourself. See *Tips for adults – supporting you to respond, recover and restore* and *Tips for getting a good night's sleep*. Dealing with distressed staff can be exhausting. Providing support requires self-care and opportunities to unwind.

To do good work and provide quality support it's important to:

- take regular breaks and don't feel guilty
- stop when you've had enough
- talk about the day before you go home (if it has been difficult) and talk about your day with your whānau and friends. They're important supports
- take extra care to avoid accidents
- make sure you get as much rest and sleep as possible
- when away from work, spend some time doing things you enjoy with people you like
- take exercise to relax
- eat well and regularly.

Two channels of professional support are available:

1. *Employee Assistance Programme*
2. *Additional principal support through the Ministry of Education.*