Special Issue
Managing Through Difficult Times
You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated. In fact, it may be necessary to encounter the defeats, so you can know who you are, what you can rise from, how you can still come out of it.

Maya Angelou
As the winter holiday season is underway the Ventura County Management Council Board would like to wish everyone a wonderful winter-time. But we also want to take a moment to stop and reflect on the recent difficulties our County has been facing. The mass shooting in Thousand Oaks and another year of wildfires has understandably brought up difficult feelings for those living or working in the County of Ventura. With so many of us in the County family, and those we are close to, experiencing profound loss the Board would like to reach out to all of you to offer our support.

While the recent challenges we mentioned are public ones, we also know that many of our staff may be suffering from personal and private challenges - not just now, but at any time throughout the year. The information we are sending out in this special issue of Kaleidoscope is provided by the County of Ventura Employee Assistance Program. This issue focuses on how, for benefit of themselves and others, County Managers can help recognize and manage hard feelings during difficult times.

Please take the time to care for yourself and to reach out for support when you need. We are strongest when we care for each other.

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Initial Reaction to a Critical Incident or Loss

When you have been exposed to a difficult experience such as a loss of a loved one, co-worker, or friend your own response can be troubling. An individual’s response can be influenced by many factors such as your previous exposure to loss, the availability and continuation of emotional support, as well as other stressors in your own life.

For many people, it is natural to experience some “after shock” or a stress reaction. These are normal responses and are the way we process a demanding life experience. Samples of some typical reactions are listed below:

**PHYSICAL**
- Nausea
- Grinding teeth
- Thirst
- Upset stomach
- Tremor
- Feeling uncoordinated
- Sweating
- Chills
- Diarrhea
- Dizziness
- Chest pains*
- Rapid heat beat*
- Increased blood pressure*
- Sleep disturbance
- Rapid breathing
- Headaches
- Muscle aches
- Lethargic
- Fatigue

* Requires immediate medical attention

**EMOTIONAL**
- Anxiousness
- Fear
- Guilt
- Grief
- Denial
- Depression/sadness
- Feeling lost or abandoned
- Numbness
- Feeling isolated
- Worry about self and/or others
- Wanting to hide
- Anger
- Irritability
- Hopeless
- Helpless
- Overwhelmed
- Reduced feeling of pleasure

**COGNITIVE**
- Slowed thinking
- Fearful thoughts
- Disorientation
- Memory problems
- Distressing dreams
- Blaming
- Ilogical thinking
- Memory flashbacks
- Intrusive thoughts
- Poor judgment
- Change in perceptions
- Loss of meaning or purpose
- Loss of faith
- Lost sense of security
- Loss of sense of control
- Difficulty in:
  - problem-solving
  - calculating
  - naming objects
  - making decisions
  - concentrating

**BEHAVIORAL**
- Crying spells
- Extreme hyperactivity
- Change in activity
- Withdrawal
- Increased/decreased:
  - intake of food
  - sleep
  - sexual activity
- Increased:
  - smoking
  - drinking
  - drug use
  - absenteeism
  - need for safety
  - conflicts
- Overly vigilant
- Avoiding or change in:
  - social patterns
  - communication
  - hygiene
  - self-care
  - productivity

The signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last a few days, a few weeks or a few months and occasionally longer depending on the above noted influences. With understanding and the support the stress reactions usually pass more quickly. Occasionally the circumstances around the loss can be so painful that professional assistance from a counselor may be necessary. This does not imply craziness or weakness. It simply indicates that the particular event was just too powerful for the person to manage by themselves.

Appreciation extended to Ventura County CISM Coalition for their contribution to above list.
How to Listen to Someone Who Is Hurting

County of Ventura Employee Assistance Program: 805.654.4327

Whenever people face bereavement, injury, or other kinds of trauma, they need to talk about it in order to heal. To talk, they need willing listeners.

Unfortunately, many of us shrink from listening to people in pain. We may feel like we have enough troubles of our own or be afraid of making matters worse by saying the wrong thing.

Sometimes we excuse ourselves by assuming that listening to people who are hurting is strictly a matter for professionals such as psychotherapists or members of the clergy. It is true that professional people can help in special ways and provide the suffering individual with insights that most of us aren't able to offer. However, their assistance, although valuable, is no substitute for the caring interest of supervisors, co-workers, friends, and others from the person's normal daily life.

It is natural to feel reluctant or even afraid of facing another person's painful feelings. But it is important not to let this fear prevent us from doing what we can to help someone who is suffering.

**Though each situation is unique, some guidelines can help make the process easier:**

**TO DO**

- The most important thing to do is simply to be there and listen and show you care.
- Find a private setting where you won't be overheard or interrupted. Arrange things so that there are no large objects, such as a desk, between you and the person.
- Keep your comments brief and simple so that you don't get the person off track.
- Ask questions which show your interest and encourage the person to keep talking, for example:
  - What happened next?
  - What was it like?
- Give verbal and non-verbal messages of caring and support. Facial expressions and body posture go a long way toward showing your interest. Don't hesitate to interject your own feelings as appropriate, for example:
  - How terrible.
  - I'm so sorry.
- Let people know that it's OK to cry. Some people are embarrassed if they cry in front of others. Handing over a box of tissues in a matter-of-fact way can help show that tears are normal and appropriate. It's also OK if you get a bit teary yourself.

**People respond differently**

Don't be distressed by differences in the way people respond. One person may react very calmly, while another expresses strong feelings. One person may have an immediate emotional response; another may be "numb" at first and respond emotionally later. Emotions are rarely simple; people who are suffering loss often feel anger along with grief.

Unless you see signs of actual danger, simply accept the feelings as that person's natural response at the moment. If a person is usually rational and sensible, those qualities will return once their painful feelings are expressed.
NOT TO DO

- Don't offer unsolicited advice. People usually will ask for advice later if they need it; initially it just gets in the way of talking things out.
- Don't turn the conversation into a forum for your own experiences. If you have had a similar experience, you may want to mention that briefly when the moment seems right. But do not say, "I know exactly how you feel," because everybody is different.

DO NOT SAY

It's natural to worry about saying the "wrong thing." The following is a brief but helpful list of three other things not to say to someone who is suffering.

- Do not be critical of the person. Do not say:
  - You shouldn't take it so hard.
  - You're overreacting.
- Do not minimize the person's pain. Do not say:
  - It could be a lot worse.
  - You're young. You'll get over it.
- Do not ask the person to disguise or reject his/her feelings. Do not say:
  - You have to pull yourself together.
  - You need to be strong for your children's sake.

These are helpful guidelines, but the most important thing is to be there and listen in a caring way. People will understand if you say something awkward in a difficult situation.

Once you have finished talking, it may be appropriate to offer simple forms of help. Check about basic things like eating and sleeping. Sharing a meal may help the person find an appetite. Giving a ride to someone too upset to drive may mean a lot. Ask what else you can do to be of assistance.

After you have talked to someone who is hurting, you may feel as if you have absorbed some of that person's pain. Take care of yourself by talking to a friend, taking a walk, or doing whatever helps restore your own spirits. Congratulate yourself on having had the courage to help someone in need when it wasn't easy.

County of Ventura Employee Assistance Program:
805.654.4327
What To Do If an Employee Seems Suicidal

As people in the world, we face difficult situations all the time. If someone seems sad or depressed, we may want to help but not know how. When it’s your employee who is going through tough times, you may have legal concerns to worry about too. It’s good to be as prepared as possible beforehand. For example, let’s imagine that one of your employees seems depressed and starts making comments around the workplace about hurting him or herself.

A condition causing an employee to become suicidal may be covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). In that case, it would be an unlawful discriminatory practice to take adverse employment actions based on the employee’s condition, and the employee may be entitled to a reasonable accommodation. If an employee makes a statement or does something that causes you to think that he or she may be suicidal, it is best to initially address the situation under the assumption that the employee has a condition covered under the ADA.

The first thing to do is to have a private conversation with the employee. Inform that EAP is a resource. Do not ask if the employee has a medical condition. Rather, ask the employee if there is anything you or the company can do to help. You can also ask if anything at work is causing or contributing to the employee’s problem and ask if the employee has any ideas for what could change at work to help. If the employee has reasonable requests for accommodation, then accommodate the employee. Later, follow up with the employee to ensure that the accommodation helped the problem. If not, it may be time to seek advice from your attorney to determine whether the employee is suffering from a condition covered by the ADA.

Although you generally do not want to ask about whether the employee has a medical condition (such as depression), you can listen if the employee brings personal problems up and wishes to talk about them. It’s better not to offer advice, but you can offer hope that the employee will find a solution to his or her problems. You can also let the employee know that counseling is available, for instance, through an Employee Assistance Program, a crisis intervention or suicide prevention resource in your community, or a suicide-prevention hotline. Be careful not to pressure the employee or to imply that counseling is required or in any way a penalty. Again, keep your conversation confidential.

As a final note, the only time it may be alright to ask your employee whether they have a medical condition is when asking is job-related and consistent with business necessity. For example, this may be the case when the employee’s ability to perform essential job functions is impaired because of the condition or when the employee poses a direct threat. However, it is a good idea to consult your attorney before making such an inquiry as it can be fraught with legal perils.

Call 911 if self-harm seems imminent at any time.

Be sure to document this entire process:
Keep written documentation of
(1) the employee’s complaint(s)
(2) that you asked how you could help
(3) that you did not ask whether the employee has any medical conditions
(4) that the employee suggested a certain accommodation
(5) that you provided the accommodation
(6) that you followed up with the employee to see if the accommodation worked.

Keep this documentation confidential.

A manager should inform HR and EAP as soon as an employee makes a suicidal statement, and to document what the plan is to keep the employee safe, and to reduce liability for the employer.
Personal Coping after a Traumatic Event

Thinking about our personal coping techniques is important when traumatic events touch our lives. Just the changes in our daily routines can be anxiety producing. Listed below are some normal reactions to such an event and some suggestions on how to take care of yourself if you are exposed to one.

**Normal reactions to a traumatic event include:**

- Fatigue
- Trouble concentrating
- Feeling on edge/jumpy
- Feeling confused
- Anxiety
- Flashbacks to event
- Anger or irritability
- Physical sensations
- Sleep disturbance
- Bothersome memories
- Fear or worry
- Nightmares
- Crying
- Guilt

All of these feelings and reactions are normal and natural responses to a traumatic event. Even though they may seem unusual, they do not alone suggest anything is wrong in the hours and days after an event. It is also normal to have no reactions; they may come later, or not at all. We are all individuals. We all cope and respond in our own ways. Most of these reactions will subside within 1-2 weeks.

Here are some suggestions to keep in mind:

- **Eat well-balanced and regular meals**
  (try even if you don’t feel like it.)

- **Use stress management strategies...**
  such as exercise, quiet time, getting enough sleep and remembering to do pleasant activities that give you a break from information about the event.

- **Make active decisions...**
  about when and for how long to listen to media reports. Watching stressful events over and over alone can make people anxious: it is OK to limit time watching or turn it off, and especially advised if young children are in the home. Filter the flood of news from all its sources including radio, TV and the internet.

- **Don’t use alcohol as a way to numb your stress.**
  This can interfere with healthy recovery and lead to too much drinking.

- **Be optimistic about challenges ahead.**
  Stay in touch with your sources of hope, and spiritual strength and renewal (nature, prayer, yoga, meditation, etc.).

- **Nurture good connections...**
  to those you care about. Spend time with people who support you. They can be comforting and help you to sit with uncomfortable emotions, or help you return to things you enjoy or find healthy comforts.

- **Express your feelings**
  with supportive people in your life when you want to. Everyone copes their own way. Be in charge of when you talk about the events. It is okay to say, “I don’t feel like talking about it right now.”

- **Return to your regular routines...**
  like work, exercise, hobbies and home activities. Routines can be calming and reassuring. Even if at first it is hard to return to things that might remind us of stressful events, they become easier over time if we don’t avoid them.

- **Recognize when you need help.**
  The memory may always be part of your life. Everyone moves at his or her own pace of healing after a major stress. If emotions feel overwhelming and too intense, if you have trouble focusing at or going to work, if you can’t sleep because of memories, fear or nightmares, or if you feel anxiety or irritability that is not improving, then consider getting assistance. The EAP is available to you as a free and confidential resource.

County of Ventura Employee Assistance Program: 805.654.4327
When a Co-Worker Is Grieving a Loss

County of Ventura Employee Assistance Program: 805.654.4327

Your co-worker’s return to work doesn’t mean his or her grieving is over—it may take months or years to come to terms with the loss. Some people stay in the shock stage of grief for months before they can begin to experience other stages.

**Bereaved co-workers may need:**
- Others to acknowledge their loss
- An opportunity to talk
- The freedom not to talk
- Non-judgment
- Relief from constant inquiries and concerned looks
- Help with personal chores and logistical activities
- Patience and compassion if they break down even months later
- Not to be abandoned after the first rush of sympathy
- Simple yet heartfelt statements like the following can allow you to:
- Acknowledge the situation
- Express concern
- Be open with your feelings
- Ask how the person feels, in a way that elicits more than a perfunctory response
- Offer to listen
- Offer assistance

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Simple yet heartfelt statements like the following can allow you to:</th>
<th>Example:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledge the situation</td>
<td>&quot;I know this must be hard for you.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express concern</td>
<td>&quot;I’m sorry that you’re going through this.&quot; &quot;I’ll keep you in my thoughts.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be open with your feelings</td>
<td>&quot;I’m not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask how the person feels, in a way that elicits more than a perfunctory response</td>
<td>&quot;How are you doing physically?&quot; &quot;How are you doing emotionally?&quot; &quot;How are you doing spiritually?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer to listen</td>
<td>&quot;If you would like to talk about it, I am here.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer assistance</td>
<td>&quot;Please let me know how I can help.&quot;</td>
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An important first step to counteract the awkwardness that many people feel is to do a quick emotional self-check before you interact with the co-worker who has experienced a significant loss. What are you feeling? Are you sad for them, because they are dealing with this? Are you sad for yourself, remembering losses you have faced? Maybe you’re even scared – if it happened to them, it could happen to you. All of these are normal, appropriate ways to feel. Recognizing where you stand emotionally can help you to determine when and how you are best able to reach out to support your co-worker.

**You may offer to:**
- appoint a person at work who can give information about how the person is doing and serve as the contact person for the staff.
- spend time with or call your co-worker at the time of day that is most difficult emotionally for him or her.
- coordinate an appropriate way to provide assistance.
- do some of their work during absences so work won’t pile up.
- donate sick or vacation time.
## When a Co-Worker Is Grieving a Loss continued

### Do
- Take your cues from your co-worker. Some people are very private, while others will want to talk more about their situation. Respect the person's need to share or their need for privacy.
- Let them know that you care.
- Listen without always feeling that you have to respond. Sometimes a caring listener is what the person needs the most.
- Expect your colleague to have good days and bad days.
- Keep your relationship as normal and balanced as possible.
- Offer to help in concrete, specific ways.
- Check before doing something for your co-worker no matter how helpful you think you are being.
- Encourage your co-worker to engage in activities that replenish his or her energies. Consider gifting something that would be nurturing for your co-worker (e.g., a massage, a spa treatment, tickets to a concert, etc.).

### Do NOT
- Offer unsolicited advice.
- Take things too personally. It’s normal for your co-worker to be quieter than usual, to need time alone, and to be angry at times.
- Be afraid to talk about the situation.
- Always feel you have to talk about the situation. Your colleague may enjoy conversations that don't involve the loss.
- Tell your co-worker, "I can imagine how you must feel," because you really can’t. (However, you can let him or her know you are familiar with some of the challenges of dealing with a loss in your own life. Then your co-worker is free to pick up the conversation from there.)
- Share “war stories”

### What to say...
- I'm sorry.
- Is there something practical I can do for you?
- I'm praying for you.
- I'm here for you.

### What NOT to say...
- It's God's will.
- God doesn't give us anything we can't handle.
- You just need to keep busy.
- I know how you feel.
- At least you still have your ______.
- Get a hold of yourself.

### What to do...
- Be available.
- Be compassionate. Be a friend, not a therapist.
- Accept their silence or need to be alone.
- Urge them to be patient with themselves.
- Write a note of support or encouragement.
- Include the co-worker in social plans. Let them decide whether to accept or decline the invitation.
- Acknowledge their tears and other expressions of grief without judgement.
- Maintain your support through the months ahead.
- Accept that you cannot make them feel better.

### What NOT to do...
- Be afraid of their suffering.
- Ignore or downplay the loss.
- Avoid mentioning the loss.
- Look the other way or change the subject.
- Be judgmental, e.g. believe that bereaved co-workers should express their grief in particular ways or be over their grief by a particular time.
Tips for Managing Grief in the Workplace

- Make contact with your bereaved employee as soon as possible after you learn of their loss. Offer your condolences. Listen and respect confidentiality. Expect sadness and tears.
- Be prepared. Know your organization’s policy on bereavement and personal time and be ready to explain the policy to the employee.
- Be as flexible and negotiable as possible in allowing your employee to have the time and space to deal with their loss.
- Arrange for back-ups and replacements necessary to cover the person’s work during their absence. Ensure that phone calls and e-mail messages are re-directed.
- Get information on services, funerals and memorials to the person’s colleagues in a timely fashion.
- If appropriate, help to organize some form of group acknowledgment to support the employee, such as issuing a card or flowers, or planning group attendance at a memorial ceremony.
- Ensure that support continues when the person returns to work. The first few days may be particularly difficult adjustment.
- Have back-ups or a buddy system in place when the employee returns to work to provide support and check in with the employee periodically to see how he or she is doing.
- Consider adjusting the workload. Expect productivity, but be patient and reasonable in your expectations.
- Be sensitive to the cycle of upcoming holidays or trigger points that might be difficult for the employee.
- Recognize that other cultures may have customs, rituals or ways of dealing with loss that differ from those to which we are accustomed.
- Watch for warning signs of prolonged grief and ongoing performance issues, such as poor grooming, severe withdrawal, substance abuse, or other uncharacteristic behaviors might be warning signs.

- Offer resources for professional help. As a manager, you are in a unique position to observe a need for help and to recommend assistance through a referral to your EAP or appropriate community resources.
For many of us, if we don’t feel all the “right” feelings we are supposed to feel during the holidays, we think there is something wrong with us. I’m here to tell you that this is just not true. While wonderfully festive and fun, the holidays can bring up so many feelings that aren’t incredibly pleasant for so many of us. Loneliness, disappointment, sadness, and even anger can arise during this time.

**If you're feeling stressed**

Give yourself permission to stop. To-do lists can be a mile long, expectations can be high, your presence can be demanded in many different places at once, and all that can feel very overwhelming! If you’re feeling this way, rest assured it’s natural, you’re only human! You can only do so much, please so many, and be in many places. Release the desire to be a superhero this holiday season, and strive to be the most well-taken care of version of you. You don’t have to do it all. You can say no. It’s ok to stop, and start again!

**If you're feeling lonely**

While holidays are historically a time for family, friends, and loved ones. Sometimes, loneliness sets in when we think that our lives don’t match the cheesy holiday version of what we think life should be. Some of us are missing family members, some of us are going through loss, some of us are struggling personally, and again that is all ok. Remind yourself that you can be your own best company. If you have down time or alone time, take advantage of it by starting to cultivate the very best relationship with yourself. Honor yourself and your intuition, and know that you don’t have to be with other people to be loved and accepted.

**If you're feeling overwhelmed**

While holidays are historically a time for family, friends, and loved ones. Sometimes, loneliness sets in when we think that our lives don’t match the cheesy holiday version of what we think life should be. Some of us are missing family members, some of us are going through loss, some of us are struggling personally, and again that is all ok. Remind yourself that you can be your own best company. If you have down time or alone time, take advantage of it by starting to cultivate the very best relationship with yourself. Honor yourself and your intuition, and know that you don’t have to be with other people to be loved and accepted.

**If you're feeling confused**

Write it out. Whenever you don’t know how to make a decision, or are searching for clarity, immediately reach for your journal. Journaling is a wonderful tool that has a myriad of benefits, and it can be comforting when searching for answers and getting stuck in your head. There’s magic when pen hits paper, and the inner workings of your soul come onto the page.
More Self-Care for the Holidays

If you're feeling frustrated
Move your body. Whenever I feel frustrated, and can’t seem to shake it, moving through it physically helps immensely. There is so much healing to be received through mindful, enjoyable physical activity. Hit up a class that you love, or if you are short on time, take a few moments in your home to literally shake it out. It may look and feel silly, but vigorous shaking off of the bad vibes or the frustrating feelings is effective!

If you're feeling angry
Find activities that bring you joy, and do them unapologetically. Sometimes the holidays can make us feel like we are giving and giving and giving, and then we feel depleted and sometimes angry and bitter. What better antidote to this than doing something for yourself that brings you pure joy? Make time for self-care this holiday, and don’t feel guilty about it! My joyful activity go-to lately has been dancing, and truly I am so much happier exiting class each and every time. Rather than stewing on the things that are making you upset, be proactive and incorporate joy.

If you're feeling distracted
Practice being present. The greatest present you can give this holiday season is your peaceful presence. We can be pulled into a lot of different directions during the holidays, which really can be stressful on the nervous system and our mental state. Rather than multitasking this season, try doing one thing at a time with purpose and intention. Many people often say that the holidays pass by so quickly. We can change that! Present moment living will allow you to fully savor the moments of the holidays, leaving you feeling satisfied and complete when the season ends.

If you're feeling disappointed
Practice gratitude. The holidays can remind us of what might be lacking in our lives. Rather than focusing on what isn’t present in your life at this moment, try to come back to what is, and really honor it. Life can change so quickly, don’t take for granted the good that is in your life right now. Be grateful for the gifts of today to prepare for the fortunes of the future.

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Most of the important things in the world have been accomplished by people who have kept on trying when there seemed to be no hope at all.

Dale Carnegie