

The Compassion Factor

Grief counseling, mental health intervention and even religious support are all part of the equation [BY REBECCA PEPIN]

It might be recurring dreams, or nightmares, about the event or reconstructing the event in your mind, in an effort to construct a different outcome.

It could be feelings of confusion, impaired judgment and trouble concentrating or simply not being able to remember things.

Perhaps it is a sense of powerlessness, feeling numb, withdrawn or disconnected. It might go as far as questioning spiritual or religious beliefs. It might manifest itself in bursts of anger, rage or intense irritability.

Or depression, sadness, emptiness and hopelessness about the future. Experiencing a sense of injustice or feeling out of control.

Helplessness.

Trauma or stress reactions are normal responses to abnormal situations. It might be witnessing or arriving on the scene of an event. It could be a "near miss." It might be a relationship with

someone who is killed or knowing family of someone who is harmed. It might be overexposure to events in the media.

Most disaster survivors only experience mild normal stress reactions, and disaster experiences might even promote personal growth and strengthen relationships. According to the National Center for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, however, as many as one in three disaster survivors experience some severe stress symptoms.

And that makes coping with disaster a workplace issue.

In the wake of the September 11 attacks or after a workplace violence incident, there is a lasting effect that organizations — businesses, government and schools — must find a way to reconcile. During stressful times it is important for employers to provide compassionate responses to employees' concerns. Grief counseling,

South Carolina LEAP peer team members include (l to r) Sgt. Mark Gosnell, South Carolina Department of Public Safety; Chief Mike Nichols, South Carolina Department of Probation, Parole and Pardon Services; The Rev. Eric Skidmore, South Carolina Law Enforcement Assistance Program; Cpl. Gene Morris, South Carolina Department of Natural Resources; and Special Agent Alex Underwood, South Carolina Law Enforcement Division.



Sandy Andrews



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Beverly Coates, administrative assistant for SCLEAP, is the mother of slain Highway Patrol Officer Mark Coates. She is an active member of Concerns for Police Survivors (COPS), a support group.

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A LEAP OF FAITH

Certain images will forever be a part of the American psyche. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, deep emotions are stirred by the New York City skyline. The pain, and the resolve, intensifies with each step that draws closer to the place known as Ground Zero.

The rescue and recovery work in the heart of Manhattan is often described as overwhelming, awe inspiring and the most incredible example of teamwork and determination ever witnessed. The sights and sounds of Ground Zero touched many after those determined to tear down the American spirit attacked the United States.

In late October, South Carolina was given an opportunity to make a difference. New York's police officers were in desperate need of their South Carolina comrades, as well as those from other states around the nation, to help them cope with the unprecedented scale of the World Trade Center attack.

The Rev. Eric Skidmore, director of South Carolina's Law Enforcement Assistance Program, got a call for help from the New York City Police Department. SCLEAP was ready to answer the call. From the Palmetto State, SCLEAP Peer Teams, which consisted of three trained law enforcement officers and one mental health professional, headed to the Big Apple to support the NYPD.

SCLEAP encompasses four different agencies: State Law Enforcement Division, Department of Public Safety, Department of Natural Resources and Department of Probation, Parole and Pardon Services. Dozens of officers within these departments are specially trained in Critical Incident Stress Management, or CISM.

Laurin Mullins, agent-in-charge at Kershaw County's probation office, was among the peer team members who heeded the call. Although it was difficult for Mullins to put her feelings into words, she wrote about her experiences in a law enforcement publication, *The Informer*. She described how she was touched by the way those

helping out at Ground Zero reacted when workers found some human remains. To her, it felt as if the entire world stood still at that moment.

"Police officers saluted, firemen stood at attention, and construction workers placed their hats over their hearts," wrote Mullins. "At that point I understood in some way why so many different officers and firemen go back to the site day after day on their time off.

"They're searching for something that will give families peace in the midst of so much chaos. It is difficult to think that the searching will never end for so many, but it helps to know that many have the assurance that even South Carolina cares enough to support their efforts and assist in bringing some type of resolution to the horror that re-plays in their minds so often," she wrote.

Those trained in CISM learn to provide structure in a time of chaos, help those close to a tragedy disclose their emotions, and assist in releasing psychological tension in a cathartic manner.

When a violent event or disaster occurs on the job, one often feels threatened by his or her lack of control over the situation. CISM-trained peer teams can suggest actions to help combat the feeling of helplessness.

In New York City, many emergency workers

felt guilty. "They felt like they didn't do enough during the rescue, but looking back on it and through the counseling process we helped them realize they did everything they could," said retired U.S. Secret Service Agent Andy Gruler, who has a master's degree in social work. Gruler, who lives in Greenville, was part of the peer teams as a mental health professional.

A LIFELINE CLOSER TO HOME

Back in South Carolina, law enforcement officers are doing what they can to protect the people of this state. To do that, they put their lives on the line every day and face danger each time they go to work. The SCLEAP Peer Teams were born to support law enforcement professionals when disaster strikes one of their own.

"We get together and talk about the event, and we talk about what was the hardest part for us so that we can start the healing process," said Lt. Sandra McLeod of the South Carolina Highway Patrol, a peer team leader. "Years ago we didn't have this."

McLeod remembers when it was common practice to meet with co-workers in the median of a busy highway in the days and weeks following an accident or shooting. They would ask each other how they were doing.

It was a chance for the troopers to vent, but, at the time, many of them did not realize it was also therapeutic. In fact, McLeod was skeptical when someone suggested law enforcement officers should seek counseling after the death or serious injury of a comrade.

She remained doubtful even after she lost a close friend and co-worker in 1992. "Law enforcement officers will build a wall in front of us, and we will say, 'I'm not going to break, and I'm OK on the inside' when you're not," McLeod said.

The death of Trooper Merle Godbold hit close to home for McLeod.

Godbold was a member of the Highway Patrol in Kershaw County — part of McLeod's close-knit squad — when he was killed in the line of duty. A drunk driver struck his patrol car and

forced it into some trees.

It was not until McLeod expressed her feelings to a fellow officer that she realized how deeply her friend's death affected her and just how helpful it was to release those emotions.

SCLEAP's Skidmore observes the importance of the peer teams firsthand. "This is a very closed culture; they want to take care of their own," he said. "When they talk with another state police officer, another sheriff's deputy, another local police officer, they're going to hear things in a different way than if they hear it from a mental health provider. They might be skeptical about someone coming in from the outside and evaluating how they do their job and talking about how they should be reacting to a critical incident."

The program was started in 1997 and grew considerably within the state Highway Patrol in 2000 after Trooper Eric Nicholson was shot and killed in the line of duty. Nicholson pulled over a man riding a moped for a traffic viola-

tion in Greenville County. The driver shot Nicholson to death before the trooper could exit his vehicle. Today, the peer teams have 130 members statewide.

A specific formula is followed as CISM-trained members of the team accommodate the emotions and needs of officers. The first step is to introduce the team, explain the process, and set expectations. Next is a cognitive discussion of the events from each participant's perspective.

The debriefing takes an emotional turn as participants express their feelings and answer questions such as:

"What was your first thought?"

"What was the worst part?"

"What continues to play out in your mind?"

Participants are then encouraged to identify personal symptoms of distress and transition back to the cognitive level. The debriefing wraps up with a teaching phase to educate officers about what reactions are normal and ways to implement adaptive coping mechanisms.



Occasionally parents, especially those with young ones in elementary school, are experiencing grief for the first time with children in their lives. Counselors can teach them how to help their child through the process and recommend books and activities.

“Often folks try to cope in very maladaptive ways,” said Skidmore. “They might turn to alcohol, or they isolate themselves from everybody around them. Those are some of the things we want to help law enforcement officers avoid.”

One of the most appealing aspects of the peer team concept, according to Skidmore, is that those who reap its benefits are often the law enforcement officers who conduct the debriefings.

McLeod is now a firm believer in the peer team concept and a key leader of the program.

Another peer team objective is to comfort the entire law enforcement community, which often means reaching out to family members of fallen or injured officers. That can be the toughest — and at the same time most rewarding — part of being a peer team member.

“It’s very difficult, but it also helps you start healing because you can wrap your arms around that wife, those children and know that you are helping them. At the same time, they’re helping you because we truly are one big family,” said McLeod.

ASAFETYNET IN THE WORKPLACE

When people spend 40-plus hours together each week, a family-type atmosphere often tends to develop. While other workplaces might not foster the brother and sisterhood afforded in law enforcement, bonds are formed, albeit on a different level.

David Schools is senior vice president of Piggly Wiggly Carolina in Charleston. Employees at one of his Midlands’ grocery stores recently faced a terrible tragedy when an armed robber shot and killed a worker there. The woman, 37, was a wife and mother.

It was a devastating event for that store’s employees, but a decision Schools made years earlier would help them cope. The company had signed up with an employee assistance program, or EAP. Instantly, trained counselors were at the disposal of Piggly Wiggly workers, free of charge.

“We sent counselors in to the store for several days (after the shooting) during the entire time the store was open. We made sure that everybody who wanted to talk could do it,” said Schools. At least half of the 76 people who worked at the store took advantage of the service.

A survey of 588 U.S. employers by the Society of Human Resource Management, cited by Mark Attridge in the September/October Issue 2001 issue of *EAPA Exchange*, found that many businesses have EAPs. In Attridge’s article, “Making

the Business Case for EAPs: A Conceptual Framework,” he wrote that 54 percent of small companies (fewer than 250 employees) had an EAP, as did three in four medium-sized firms (251-1,000 employees), four in five large companies (1,001-5,000 employees), and 97 percent of very large employers (5,000+ employees).

Making free counseling services available to employees in the face of disaster inflicted by an outside source is not the only important function of an employee assistance program. It can also prevent tragedies like suicides and violent acts from happening within a company by fostering a caring, family-like environment.

First Sun EAP Alliance Inc. is based in Columbia, but serves the entire Palmetto State.

**A support network
created by employers
is a tie that binds
communities
together.**

The company also has contracts in 36 other states.

First Sun offers a variety of professional services including: individual, couple and family therapy; household money management; initial legal consultation; eldercare assessment and referral; and other prevention/early intervention services.

Training programs are also offered by First Sun such as conflict resolution, stress management, drug free workplace training and workplace violence prevention.

For a long time Schools felt that posting ads about counseling and other services would cause workers to feel the company was encroaching on their private lives. Maria Hartley with First Sun explained that that is a common concern, but “whether employers like it or not, people have personal issues. And, like it or not, people bring them to work,” she said.

Despite the initial reluctance to participate, Schools’ company implemented the program and has since learned that EAP services are mutually beneficial for the corporation and its employees.

EAPs can create a friendlier and more caring

work environment, which can in turn increase productivity and decrease absenteeism. That directly affects a company’s bottom line.

Other cost-savings come from lower turnover rates, avoided accidents and workers’ compensation claims, avoided medical and mental health care costs and ultimately result in happier employees. As for privacy, employees are free to access counseling and other EAP services without telling anyone, including the boss. A company will never know which worker used what service and why. According to Schools, his company is billed for services rendered, but the client’s name is not included.

FINDING A FAITH-BASED FOUNDATION

For some people in the work force, a time of need is a time to turn to God.

Three South Carolinians are working to make faith an important part of daily life in the corporate world. The Rev. Jim Hogan and the Rev. Dwayne Reece, both of Columbia, and the Rev. Mike Wolff from the Greenville-Spartanburg area work for a North Carolina-based company called Corporate Chaplains of America.

Corporate Chaplains is nonprofit and caters to businesses. An important requirement for being a corporate chaplain with the organization is experience in business.

“My time as a business leader strengthened my belief that employees are the number one asset of a company,” said Reece, referring to his tenure as a hospital administrator. “What we do as chaplains is we get to come in and serve and help workers: in essence, polish the assets.”

Hogan, who once worked as a Wal-Mart manager, said that he feels that although his employees knew he cared about them, there was always a barrier.

“You were still their boss, and they could not be completely transparent. Now (as a corporate chaplain) they can come to us with total confidentiality,” said Hogan.

John Pryor, the human resources director at Southeastern Freight Lines in Lexington, sings the praises of having a minister on-site. “It is a totally different environment. There is a relaxation and a peace of mind. There’s a trust at all levels,” he said.

The chaplains make themselves available to pray with employees and their families. They will meet in offices, homes and hospitals, wherever there is a need. But religion is never pushed.

Photo courtesy of LEAP

Reece, who is a Baptist, stresses that they take a nondenominational approach and help people regardless of faith or lack thereof.

Hogan, also a Baptist, will never forget the difference he made for one individual and his family when he visited with them in their home. “They didn’t care what my faith background was when I knocked on their door. They were just glad I was there and that somebody cared enough to come by,” he said.

COPING COMES TO THE CLASSROOM

While companies can often keep employees’ problems and workplace disasters relatively private, tragedies in institutions like schools affect the entire community. When children are involved, grieving is widespread.

Wanda Gibbs was known for a smile that could melt you on the spot.

“You can have a bad day, and she’ll just keep on smiling until you break, and then you’re like ‘OK, give me a hug. I love you.’ She had a smile. ... She had a real good smile,” said Wanda’s father, Lyman Gibbs.

Wanda was an outgoing second-grader at Brennen Elementary School. One morning in April 2002, a car hit her as she boarded the school bus outside her Columbia home. Wanda died about a week later. It was a tragedy that broke the hearts of Wanda’s family, loved ones, neighbors and friends.

Jewel Gibbs will always carry her little sister’s memory in her heart. “When I cry I hear a voice telling me not to cry ... ‘I’m still there,’” said the 9-year-old.

But those closest to Wanda were not the only ones touched by the loss of the young girl. As word reached Wanda’s school, a crisis response team was springing into action to be there for her classmates and friends. Richland School District One’s Coordinator of Guidance and Counseling, Peggy Perry, heads up the team.

“It is crucial for young children to have help immediately,” she said. “The key is to walk them through the tragedy. Let them talk and talk and talk and express themselves. The first time I responded to a school tragedy I wondered what I was going to say, but I learned that basically all you have to do is ask, ‘Does anyone want to talk?’ And it just pours out no matter what age.”

When more individual attention is necessary, Richland One counselors turn to one-on-one work with a child. They often engage in play therapy, during which time puppets are used to act out feelings. Perry, who was a counselor for more



In October 2001, South Carolina LEAP members traveled to Ground Zero in support of the NYPD.

than 22 years, said another way school leaders can help children vent is to provide them with paper and pen.

For older students, writing poems or essays might be a healing outlet. Younger children tend to draw pictures and jot down sentences.

When Wanda died, students and teachers at Brennen planted a tree in her memory outside the school. For Wanda’s special friend, Britanie Shealy, the Cherry Blossom tree was something tangible to help in the healing process.

“The students on the bus that Wanda rode, the students in her sister’s class and my class got to put the soil around the tree. Every morning that I go to school, I get to see this tree, and I feel good to know that she is in a better place, and I am happy to know that she will watch me every day,” said Britanie.

Another event that helped Britanie and the other children was a balloon release.

“What I remember most is when the school let 28 balloons float to the sky for Wanda. Even today when I get a balloon I will let it go up in the air to her,” said Britanie.

Each person deals with pain in different ways. “Anybody, no matter what age they are, goes through the various stages of grief. It’s important and healthy for them to go through the stages,” said Perry.

“Helping teenagers with that process can be a more demanding task. Oftentimes they want to do many of the same things as elementary students, but they ask ‘why’ more and have more mature thoughts. It’s important that you don’t minimize the situation.

“Don’t tell them it’s going to be OK if it’s not. Let them talk and reflect (on the tragedy they’re facing). Be honest with them and don’t deny their feelings.”

A school’s crisis response team does not just support students. A devastating event can have far-reaching effects — from the secretary to the

janitor to teachers and parents.

“It is so important for the school or district to provide support to the students, faculty and to the community,” said Perry. “Quite often, parents come in and want to talk about a tragedy.”

Sometimes the support from a spouse is not there at home if the person is a single parent, or they are not able to communicate well with their husband or wife. Occasionally parents, especially those with young ones in elementary school, are experiencing grief for the first time with children in their lives.

Counselors can teach them how to help their child through the process and recommend books and activities.

It’s also important for parents to be aware of signs a child might need further individual therapy. Those signs include loss of appetite, sleeplessness, irritability and isolation.

Britanie’s mother Barbara Lyell rushed home from work after hearing about the accident. “When I realized it was Britanie’s friend, I made sure I was there for Brit when she got off the bus. I could see the pain in her eyes. She just fell into my arms. We all needed support through this. (This accident) happened to our Brennen family. We all grieve,” said Lyell.

Experts agree that it is difficult to predict what type of trauma reactions people will experience following a disastrous event. Counselors and mental health professionals also say that it is important to allow people — and for people to allow themselves — permission to have reactions. Experts say that people must take care of trauma reactions both by themselves and by asking for help from others, as best they can.

Next to the home, most people spend the majority of their time at work or school. Whether it is a leader in law enforcement, the owner of a large corporation with hundreds of employees, or the principal of an elementary school, the bottom line remains the same: Looking after employees and the organization’s extended family is paramount.

A support network created by employers is a tie that binds communities together. Being surrounded by caring individuals willing to step in to help one another when disaster strikes can make co-workers or fellow students feel like a second family.

And what could be more comforting?

Rebecca Pepin is a free-lance writer and Columbia-based television journalist.