

## Tips for management – supporting teachers

"I've learned that people will forget what you said,  
people will forget what you did, but people  
will never forget how you made them feel."

*Maya Angelou*

### Introduction

These tips are designed to help managers respond in a professional and effective manner to support their staff. The tips are based on two main principles:

1. managers should exercise leadership to provide a safe environment for staff, children and students
2. managers should exercise leadership to respond to the safety and support needs of staff, children and students.

### Resources to help you plan for emergencies

#### Traumatic incident resources

*Managing traumatic incidents – a guide for ECE services and schools* (order code 700052)

*Managing traumatic incidents – the resource*. Includes planning information, templates, tips and resources to plan for and respond to emergencies (order code 700051).

Order hard copies through Down the Back of the Chair:

[www.thechair.minedu.govt.nz](http://www.thechair.minedu.govt.nz)

View online at:

[www.minedu.govt.nz/NZEducation/EducationPolicies/SpecialEducation/PublicationsAndResources/TraumaticIncidentManagementSupportForSchoolsAndECEServices.aspx](http://www.minedu.govt.nz/NZEducation/EducationPolicies/SpecialEducation/PublicationsAndResources/TraumaticIncidentManagementSupportForSchoolsAndECEServices.aspx)

#### Local preparedness information

The Christchurch City Council has contracted **Readynet** to support emergency preparedness. **Readynet** will assemble information (free of charge to all users, including schools and ECE services) about emergency contacts, sites and people in a format that can be easily retrieved during an event. This information can be shared with Emergency Services/Controllers through its warning system and provides alerts about emergency events in your area and reminders about updating information.

## **Providing appropriate support to staff**

When considering appropriate support for your staff, ensure that it is equitable and clearly communicated. Support can include, among other things:

- time release for dealing with EQ matters and family needs
- provisions and flexibility for staff experiencing additional family demands
- provisions for staff experiencing additional travel demands
- frequent communications to staff about leave entitlements, resources and additional support needs
- supporting and encouraging time to meet as a community – to have some time together to celebrate successes and to focus on planning activities for the future, such as things to celebrate and look forward to
- opportunities and ways to seek additional support from a manager.

## **The effects of the earthquake on staff**

Staff will react to the earthquake, the aftershocks and the impact on their lives and property in different ways and at different times. Despite lots of disruption, some staff may indicate that they are coping, while others who may have experienced less disruption may indicate that they are not.

Whether someone needs extra care and attention will depend on a huge variety of factors, including their experience of the earthquake and its effects, their own resilience, the extent of support from their family, friends and colleagues, their health and the level of practical/operational support offered by their employer after the earthquake.

## **What reactions are normal?**

Shock, distress, tears and being upset are natural responses to an incident such as the earthquake, but are not necessarily indicative of a traumatic response or the likelihood that the employee will develop Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome.

For most people, the immediate distress or shock following the earthquake 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 homes, or whose homes are going to be disrupted for a longer period, will face greater challenges.

People will react to the earthquake in a variety of ways. It is 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 number and severity of aftershocks:

- preoccupation with the earthquake
- anger and irritability, emotional tension, conflict with other staff
- anxiety

- increased emotionality – 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 of past events or feeling down; grieving
- difficulty with concentration and/or memory
- confused thinking and difficulty making decisions; decreased productivity
- less effective communication; decreased problem-solving capability
- absenteeism.

These reactions should gradually decrease over time, but it is quite normal for them to persist for a period of weeks, or months and/or return especially after a big aftershock or change. They are not a sign of ‘not coping’, but are normal.

Staff who are failing to show any, or limited, signs of being affected should not 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. If symptoms as above are not decreasing, then extra help may be required.

## **Support and encourage employees’ own resilience and natural coping resources**

Immediate support you provide for staff should be pragmatic and practical and deal with immediate physical and social needs. This does not 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.

- Communicate messages about safety and ensure physical needs are met in the school environment. All people need their basic needs met.
- Direct staff activity. Motivating staff to arrange and do things is likely to have the largest immediate effect.
- Support staff to identify and prioritise any of their needs. Helping staff develop an action plan is very helpful.
- Support and encourage staff to manage stress reactions. It is 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:  
[www.mentalhealth.org.nz/shop/item/view/8/199/](http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/shop/item/view/8/199/)

- Support healthy thinking. Help people recognise unhelpful thoughts and then rephrase more helpful ones.
- 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.

## **Providing on-site professional support**

There may be a strong desire to have on-site support for staff as soon as possible after a major aftershock 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.

Do not 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 pathologising or emphasising any negative impacts of an event.

## **Additional support for individuals**

You will 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 will 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 is happening in their work
- helping staff develop confidence that they can problem-solve any issues arising from the earthquake, 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 students and children in the classroom. Remind teachers about the skills and approaches they can use to manage children and student 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, family, 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.
- Spend time with staff collectively and individually.
- Accept the response you get and allow people to be upset. It may be worth having some tissues in your office.
- Affirm that it is acceptable for staff to be affected by the earthquake.
- Allow staff to express concerns if they have any.
- Show your interest in the person and their family, not just the situation.
- Give practical support which may include flexibility with hours or leave to allow staff to deal with practical issues, such as property repairs, discussions with the bank, providing support to family members, catching up on lost sleep.
- If your employees have children for whom school has not reopened, consider whether they can bring them to work.
- Listen, rather than talk.
- Be careful with advice.
- Check on how the person is sleeping. Encourage staff to access *'Tips for getting a good night's sleep'*
- Remember that pets are very important in people's lives.
- 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 communication.
- Don't try to be a counsellor – focus your efforts on practical care and listening.
- Keep staff up-to-date with operational issues affected by the earthquake.
- Arrange for additional staff to be brought in to assist as necessary.
- Re-establish normal routines as soon as possible after shocks.
- Wherever possible, keep existing reporting or management arrangements.
- Where possible, reduce workloads, relieve or share routine responsibilities.

- Encourage staff to use support systems established within the organisation.
- Ensure updates and information are disseminated as regularly as possible.
- Create/support activities that re-establish a sense of control, such as holding regular structured meetings to share information.
- Consider having a short briefing at the beginning and the end of the day. It is 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.
- Allow employees to provide input regarding rearranging their work environment.
- Encourage employees to support each other.
- Encourage staff to make decisions.
- Create teams and delegate tasks.
- 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.
- 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.
- Make sure the supporters are supported.
- Recommend that employees use the Employee Assistance Programme.

## **Looking after yourself as a manager**

Remember that you are human too. Being a manager or supervisor does not make you immune to a stress reaction. Get support yourself. See the handout for staff on tips for coping after the earthquake and tips for sleeping well. 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 is important to:

- take regular breaks and don't feel guilty
- stop when you have had enough
- talk about the day before you go home (if it has been difficult) and talk about your day with your family and friends. They are important supports
- take extra care to avoid accidents
- make sure you get as much rest and sleep as possible
- spend some time doing things you enjoy with people you like when out of work
- 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.