

RECOVERY AFTER A ROBBERY: A GUIDE TO HELP OWNERS AND MANAGERS SUPPORT THEIR EMPLOYEES

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If your store, business, or office has experienced an armed robbery, your employees may suffer from trauma symptoms. In addition, staff not present during the robbery may also have emotional reactions. In order to effectively support your employees in recovering from the traumatic experience and returning to normal, a business owner or manager needs to know what to say or do to promote healing.

As Americans, we are preprogrammed to believe that a bank or store robbery means someone is going to get hurt. We've watched movies or television shows where a robbery takes place and (almost always) someone is shot and often killed. The evening news only reports a robbery when it's a large or unusual heist OR when someone is hurt or killed. Most other robberies that took place in the city that day are not even mentioned.

Even though the vast majority of robberies do not result in injuries, much less death, employees in a robbery often think:

“I'm going to get killed.”

“I'm going to die.”

“He's going to hurt me.”

“He's going to hurt us.”

“My friends/co-workers/customers may get hurt.”

“They're going to kill us.”

Humans have a primitive bio-chemical response for dealing with dangerous situations. This automatic response prepares the body to fight or flee from a real or perceived threat. The fear causes a chain reaction in the brain, releasing chemicals that cause a racing heart, fast breathing, energized muscles, and other physical reactions. In addition, the part of the brain that controls rational thoughts is bypassed. The more an employee *thinks* he will suffer injury or death, the greater his traumatization.

It's important to remember that everyone responds differently to a traumatic event based on each individual's coping ability, values, life experiences, personality, support systems, fears, expectations, and beliefs. Your employees may experience the same feelings at the same times, or one person's feelings may be different from the others.

Ideally, your company should provide the opportunity to meet with a crisis counselor who specializes in trauma recovery. Crisis counseling within 12 to 48 hours after the incident will help the impacted employees to normalize their feelings, educate them about their feelings and other symptoms, and help in lessening (or avoiding altogether) subsequent trauma symptoms. This will cut down on employee absenteeism, lost productivity, attrition, and workman's compensation claims.

Even if you don't have access to a crisis counselor, as an owner or manager, there are things you can do to aid your employees' emotional recovery.

AFTER THE ROBBERY

1. Make sure managers, including upper management or the owners of the business, check in with the affected employees.

An important part of recovery for impacted employees is the *perception* that management cares and supports them through the healing process. Therefore management needs to make their communications to the employee in an empathetic manner.

The day of the robbery, managers should call or visit the business to enquire about the well being of their employees and help put the business back in order. (You may not be able to speak with the employees until after law enforcement is finished with their interviews.)

Your conversation should express dismay that the employee was affected, allow her to talk about her experience if she wants to (sometimes employees feel “talked out”), encourage her to take care of herself, and offer to be of assistance if the employee needs to talk in the future.

Although you might need to discuss time off, in this conversation do *not* discuss other business. This isn't the time to ask the employee if he'll still be able to meet his sales goals. That kind of discussion will only give the impression that you value money over the well being of the employee.

2. Give the affected employees the option to go home or return to work the next day.

Some employees want to return to work right away because that helps them feel more in control. Others may need a few days away from work.

Many businesses close for the rest of the day because interviews with law enforcement and their investigation, plus returning the store to order, may take hours. Also the employees may be too exhausted or upset to continue working. Be aware that hurrying employees to reopen the store within a few hours of the robbery may send the message that money is more important than their well being.

Some companies have policies that cover employees in case of a robbery. For example, the company can offer affected employees three paid days off. These days may be taken right away or at a later time if symptoms arise some time after the event.

3. Educate employees about how they might be affected.

A robbery may cause emotional injuries to all who experience the incident. The victim of a robbery may initially experience any or all of the following thoughts and emotions:

- Denial
- Disbelief
- Feeling the experience is surreal
- Shock
- Fear
- Anxiety
- Guilt
- Hopelessness
- Helplessness
- Anger
- Agitation
- Panic

Afterwards the victim may feel:

- Sadness
- Grief
- Overwhelmed
- Confusion
- Despair
- A sense of unfairness
- Anger
- Fear
- Helplessness
- Anxiety
- Guilt
- Numbness
- Outrage
- Alone
- Vulnerable
- Depression

These feelings are a normal response to a frightening event. It is important for the victim to allow herself to feel her emotions. Be aware that she can cycle through different emotions. Sometimes these cycles might take minutes, or they can take hours, days, or weeks. Or people may become “stuck” in one or more of the same feelings.

Traumatic events can layer on the psyche. If the employee has experienced other traumas in his life, those memories, feelings, and symptoms may resurface, so he’s emotionally hit with a doubly whammy.

In addition to feelings, the employee may experience symptoms of extreme stress or post-traumatic stress that may occur right after the incident and last for days, weeks, or even months:

- Nausea
- Difficulty with focusing and concentrating
- Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep
- Sleeping too much
- Not eating OR overeating
- Emotional and/or physical fatigue
- Irritability
- Tearfulness
- Hopelessness
- Jittery
- Headaches
- Feeling lost
- Overwhelmed
- Weight loss OR gain
- Survivor guilt
- Numbness
- Overly critical
- Forgetful
- Making “stupid” mistakes
- Shorter attention span
- Flashbacks
- Overly sensitive
- Denial
- Flashbacks
- Diarrhea
- Rapid heart
- Nightmares
- Intrusive thoughts
- Muscle tension
- Feeling unsafe or vulnerable
- Mood swings
- Changes in sexual functioning
- Preoccupation with the incident
- Feeling uncoordinated
- Depression
- Heartburn
- Helplessness
- Tremors
- Increased Blood Pressure
- Difficulty making decisions
- Worry about others
- Difficulty in solving problems
- Profiling people/customers who look/dress like the robbers
- Hyper-alertness

4. Call in a crisis counselor to support and educate the affected employees as well as other employees who weren’t involved, but still have feelings about it.

If your company has a contract with an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), they may provide crisis/grief counselors who, upon request, can come to your jobsite. Counseling is confidential to those who participate. The EAP may also have a confidential hotline, allowing the employees to speak with a counselor. They may also have handouts you can give to your employees. Provide the number to all affected employees.

If your business doesn't have an EAP, you can contact Crisis Care Network (888-736-0911) or www.crisiscare.com to contract with them for a counselor to come out to your company.

Or, find a local psychotherapist who specializes in crisis/trauma counseling and hire them to come to the jobsite.

5. Monitor the employee's emotional state by asking specific questions.

Most people are programmed to answer the question, "How are you doing?" with "fine" or "okay." The answer to the question, "Are you all right?" usually is, "I'm fine" or "I'm okay," even if the employee is far from "okay." Instead, ask questions about possible symptoms. "How did you sleep last night?" or "Are you having flashbacks?"

If you were also involved in the robbery, or have been robbed in the past, use your own experience to normalize your questions. "I'm having a tough time falling asleep. How are you sleeping?" Or, "I remember the first few nights after I was held up at gunpoint, I couldn't fall asleep. How is it for you?"

6. Avoid the *what if* syndrome.

It's common for victims to speculate about other things that could have gone wrong. "What if he'd shot me?" "If I had been killed, what would happen to my children?" The more the employee imagines all the ways she could have been impacted, the more she becomes upset and stressed. These fear fantasies further traumatize the victims.

Employees who were not present at the robbery can also do this. "What if I'd been there?" "What if I'd gotten hurt?"

This kind of mental stress is controllable. In a calm, compassionate manner, remind the employee that her fear fantasy *didn't* happen. Just pointing out how she is continuing to traumatize herself is often enough for the employee to make the mental effort to curtail her negative thinking.

7. Stay away from fearful thoughts of the future.

It's very easy for employees (both those present in the first robbery and those who weren't) to fear it happening again. As long as an armed, uniformed security guard is present at the site, most employees feel secure. But they dread the day when the guard leaves. If there isn't a security guard, or if the guard is no longer present, employees can remain afraid of another robbery.

While you can't promise employees there won't be another robbery, you can coach them how to react if one occurs. Aside from what specifically to do at your business, i.e., whether to press the panic button, the best thing an employee can do during a robbery is remain calm. To do this the employee needs to take a deep breath and say to herself, "Remain calm, and do what ever they want. Everything will be over in a few minutes." The deep breaths and positive mental commands will also help the employee minimize the traumatic response.

8. Be aware trauma symptoms take time to recover from and may surface (or resurface) weeks or months later.

The employees may experience these reactions immediately after an event, or days, weeks, or even months later. The symptoms may last for a few days, a few weeks, or even longer. The symptoms and feelings of trauma may come in waves; reminders can trigger a new wave. Each day doesn't get progressively better. The employee can have a good day, then a bad day.

9. Have manager and HR regularly follow up with the affected employees.

Call every day in the first few days, then every couple of days. Start the conversation with, “I just wanted to know how you’re doing.” Don’t start the conversation with asking when they’re going to return to work. If you need that information, ask him toward the end of the discussion.

After a few days, the trauma symptoms should start to ease. If, after four or five days, the employee still has strong trauma symptoms, suggest he contact the EAP to see a counselor, or meet with a local counselor who specializes in trauma recovery.

10. Realize affected employees may have an anxiety reaction when they return to the business where the robbery occurred.

Employees can re-experience the trauma when they first return to the jobsite. This may cause anxiety, even to the point of thoughts such as, “I need to get out of here.”

If the employees are educated as to what to expect, and given empathetic support when they first return, the employees will better weather the transition back to work.

It’s best for an employee to not take more than a few days off from work. If an employee has reservations about returning, it might help to ease her into the environment. Start by encouraging her to come in for a short shift, instead of her full shift. Give him “light” or “adjusted” duty.

Give the employee a shift that feels more comfortable for him. Some employees may be afraid to close, especially if it’s dark outside.

Employees should seek professional assistance if:

- They feel they need or want to speak with a counselor.
- Disturbing behaviors or emotions last more than four to six weeks.
- Disturbing behaviors or emotions make it difficult to function normally, whether at work, school, or in family life.
- Others are concerned about their behaviors or emotions.