What is a “critical incident”?

**Does returning to work during social distancing concerns count?**

YES! Yes it does. A critical incident is defined by the impact it has on individuals. It is an event that poses an actual or perceived threat to an employee’s well-being or someone close to that employee. It may also be an event that produces a strong emotional response that temporarily overwhelms an employee’s ability to cope. Fires, storms and other disruptive events obviously fall into the “critical incident” category. Other common reasons employers contact the EAP for critical response services are employee deaths, downsizing or closings, suicide by employee or employee’s family member or friend, crime in the workplace, such as robbery and workplace accidents.

What about this unprecedented coronavirus pandemic?? Anxiety, depression and fear of the unknown or what “might” happen can be just as harmful as some of these other events. Especially to those affected by the death of a loved one or acquaintance to COVID-19. It may be difficult to judge whether, and to what extent, managers and employees have been affected. As federal employees, we do not follow the mandates of our State government regarding the lift of stay at home orders. We could be told to report back to our offices at anytime. Does that mean everything returns to normal and life continues where it left off 40+ days ago? Not likely… So what do we do when we are told to return to work? The best we can! That’s it. We can only do the best we can as we all venture out into the world after lockdown. And we cannot forget to keep in mind the emotions those who have been working inside the office during this time. What is the new norm going to be? Things are about to get weird at work. In many places where offices have reopened, operations have not returned to business as usual. What can we prepare for or possibly expect when we return to office life? Several factors will need to be addressed. How these are dealt with is central to the success of post pandemic office.

— Returning to a clean environment. Cleaning crew coming in? Enough masks and sanitizer for everyone? And let’s hope someone remembered to clean out the refrigerator before closing up the office.

— For those without individual offices, now starts the madness of replanning work spaces, reducing numbers and marking out spacing with sticky tape. Returning to desk cubicles probably isn’t the answer.

— And most importantly, large numbers have been struggling with anxiety, depression and lack of motivation. Going back to work will trigger a huge range of emotions. Many with (or even without) existing health conditions are reluctant to regroup until vaccines are dished out. Our needs according to Maslow have been stripped back to basics.
Preparing to Return to the Workplace—Ready or Not

**Prepare:** Get ready to return to work and identify your return to work plan. This should include:

- Arrange to conduct a pre-occupancy inspection and arrange a pre-occupancy deep cleaning plan.
- Review any service which may present a health issue and establish how you can minimize risk.
- Test all emergency and life safety systems
* Agree who will return to work and consider the following:
  - Workplace distancing and space availability
  - Work routines to achieve workplace distancing

*** You also need to consider the consequences of increased anxiety caused by how the return to work may lead to workplace aggression and/or violence. And importantly, establish a protocol to respond to expected spikes in the outbreak. This will ensure a quick response if you need to send your team home, you can do this effectively without disruption to service.

**Inform:** Communication is Key! Establish a return to work program and establish who will communicate with staff.

Arrange a welcome back to work program for staff and managers, to inform them of the new workplace protocols. This includes:

- Workplace distancing protocol and building cleaning arrangements
- Travel and arrival arrangements
- This is particularly important for those who cycle to work or use changing facilities
- Relaxation of car share program, if in place
- Follow Government advice on use of public transport

- Workstation health and hygiene requirements
- Eating and drinking and use of fridges for personal food
- Ill-health reporting and staff support program
- End of day protocols, where an alternative team may be working on site
- Travel to and from client sites or meetings
- Vehicle hygiene requirements and checks
* And keep reinforcing your health and hygiene messages as ultimately, they will keep people healthy and safe.

**Prevent:** Ensure that health and hygiene is managed and maintained by:

Identifying key touch points in the workplace and providing appropriate sanitation stations to allow hands to be cleaned
- Washroom cleanliness
- Determining cleaning frequencies which need to consider an initial clean of surfaces and HVAC system
- Reinforcement of workplace distancing protocols

- Cleaning to consider core activities and staff provided with appropriate PPE and be visible to staff during the working day
- PPE is recommended for psychological control, rather than a safety measure
- Deliveries and waste arrangements included specific arrangements for PPE worn by cleaners and Staff

**Recover:** There is a lot more to consider to help you return to work safely, both psychically and mentally. If you require additional support, you can request support from your Employee Assistance Program!

- Recovery is a key stage.
- Leaders should monitor the effectiveness of the return to work program to ensure that it remains effective and is supporting those who have returned to work. It can also be used to restore confidence in the leadership and office.

↓ Review lessons learned from the outbreak and ask for feedback. Critique what you’ve learned and use this to improve.
- Finally, review what you’ve learned from the period of time people have been working from home. Are there positives to be had?

I believe this lockdown has reconnected families and given people time to look at what’s important to them, so it might be time to look at how teams work in a different way! 315-772-2597