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Psychologist: Mental First Aid Should Be Incorporated Into Resilience Plans

By Carlton Purvis

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WASHINGTON -- First aid provided to victims of a disaster, whether natural or manmade, has a lasting impact on the time it will take for victims to recover after an event.

Just as immediate medical care can mean the difference between future complications and a swift recovery after an injury, immediate psychological first aid can mean the mean the difference in the time it takes for a company's employees to psychologically heal after the event.

Disaster recovery and resilience operations often focus on supply chain operations, infrastructure, information technology, and financial security, but without personnel, these operations can't function.

Plans to address the psychological well-being of employees should be a part of an organization's resilience plan, says Vivian Marinelli, licensed psychologist and senior director of Crisis Management Services for [FEI Behavioral Health](#) [1]. Marinelli presented on the human element of resilience planning at a Mid-Atlantic Disaster Recovery Association meeting on Thursday. FEI helps companies set up "psychological first aid stations" to help start the recovery process immediately after a traumatic event.

Traumatic events can alter a person's perception of the world, Marinelli said. People are creatures of habit and routine, common characteristics of most workplaces. Traumatic events can make people involved feel like they've lost control of that. The purpose of psychological first aid stations is to get people back on the path to normalcy as soon as possible.

"After an evacuation [or a traumatic event], people don't feel safe, so a simple way to give them some control is to ask them a question because you're trying to jumpstart their brain again. You're giving them some decisions to make," she said. "That in itself helps them to start regain control."

Psychological first aid stations are essentially a place for that process to begin. They can be set-up offsite at a designated rally point and manned by trained employees of a company's own staff or local volunteer groups. FEI can also provide companies with trained mental health professionals. After both 9-11 and Hurricane Katrina, FEI deployed psychological first aid stations as information hubs for victims and family members.

The sites usually include a medical first aid station, but their main purpose is to provide victims with an area to decompress and give information about the event. Volunteers also try to find out victims immediate needs outside of food, shelter, and first aid—like finding a way to contact family members, for example. The stations are designed to be deployed within 48 hours after an event and to support an area until outside resources are brought in.

The immediate psychological care people receive can help lead to a faster recovery for victims of event and help a company increase its overall resilience by increasing the resilience of its employees, Marinelli says.

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ASIS International, Inc. Worldwide Headquarters, 1625 Prince Street, Alexandria, Virginia 22314-2818 U.S.A.
703.519.6200 | fax 703.519.6299 | www.asisonline.org



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