



Resilient Workforces: Addressing Mental Health in Times of Emergency

October 2025

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Employees

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Countries

498+ Thousand

Rating Count in app

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Satisfaction rate

Worldwide toolset

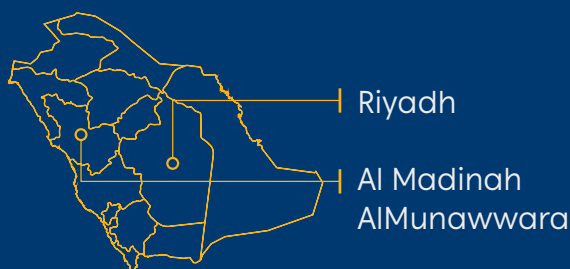
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- 00** Executive Summary
- 01** Introduction
- 02** Types of Emergencies and Their Nature
- 03** Psychological and Wellbeing Impacts on Employees
- 04** Organizational Impacts
- 05** Building Supportive Systems for Mental Health in Emergencies
 - Policy and Best Practices
 - Individual and Collective Resilience
- 06** Case Studies
 - New York City Health + Hospitals during COVID-19 (USA, 2020–2021)
 - United States Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA)⁹
 - Abu Dhabi Health Emergency Management (HEM) Policy
- 07** References

Executive Summary

Workplace emergencies, ranging from natural disasters and health crises to accidents, economic shocks, and security threats, present profound challenges for organizations and their people. These events **disrupt daily operations, create uncertainty, and place significant strain on employee mental health and wellbeing**. If unaddressed, the psychological toll of emergencies leads to heightened stress, anxiety, burnout, and disengagement, which in turn erode productivity, teamwork, and organizational stability.

Organizations that proactively integrate mental health into their emergency preparedness and response frameworks are **better positioned to withstand shocks, recover faster**, and protect both their workforce and long-term performance. Key strategies include strong leadership communication, preventive planning, resilience training, psychological first aid, flexible work arrangements, and access to professional and peer-based support systems.

Case studies from global and regional contexts demonstrate the value of such approaches. Initiatives like New York City Health + Hospitals' Helping Healers Heal program during COVID-19, Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority's Critical Incident Support Team, and Abu Dhabi's Health Emergency Management Policy **illustrate how embedding wellbeing into crisis response** strengthens resilience at scale.

The evidence is clear: safeguarding mental health during emergencies is **not only a moral responsibility but also a strategic necessity**. By building supportive systems, aligning with international best practices, and investing in psychosocial resilience, organizations can create environments that protect employees, sustain operations, and foster trust during times of crisis.



Introduction

Emergencies in the workplace can take many forms, ranging from **natural disasters** such as earthquakes, floods, and fires to **health crises** like pandemics or disease outbreaks. They may also include **economic shocks** such as sudden market downturns, layoffs, or organizational restructuring, as well as accidents, industrial incidents, and security threats, including violence or armed conflict. Each of these events can disrupt the normal flow of work and create conditions of uncertainty, stress, and instability for employees.

Addressing the impact of such emergencies on employee mental health and wellbeing is a critical responsibility for organizations. Emergencies often heighten stress, trigger anxiety, and increase the risk of burnout. Without appropriate support, employees may **struggle with their psychological health, which in turn affects their ability to perform effectively.** Supporting mental health during emergencies is not just about safeguarding individuals, it is about protecting the organization's capacity to recover and adapt.

The relevance of this issue extends directly to organizational resilience and performance. Companies that anticipate and plan for the wellbeing of their staff in times of crisis are better positioned to **maintain productivity, preserve trust, and ensure continuity of operations.** By embedding mental health considerations into emergency response and preparedness plans, organizations strengthen their ability to withstand shocks, recover faster, and sustain a healthier and more engaged workforce.



01

Types of Emergencies and Their Nature

Types of Emergencies and Their Nature

Workplace emergencies differ in cause and scale, but all have the potential to disrupt operations and affect employees' mental health. Understanding their nature helps organizations prepare responses that protect both staff wellbeing and organizational continuity.

01 Natural Disasters

Events such as earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, and wildfires can cause sudden and severe disruption. Beyond physical damage and safety risks, they often leave employees coping with fear, displacement, or loss of family and community support.



02 Health Crises

Pandemics, epidemics, and workplace disease outbreaks create widespread uncertainty and fear. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how prolonged health crises can increase anxiety, isolation, and burnout while challenging organizations to maintain effective communication and support.



03 Economic and Organizational Emergencies

Financial downturns, abrupt changes in market conditions, layoffs, or rapid restructuring generate insecurity about job stability. These events often erode trust, increase stress, and reduce morale, especially when communication from leadership is unclear.



04 Accidents and Safety Incidents

Industrial accidents, transportation failures, or workplace injuries can create immediate danger and long-lasting trauma. Even when employees are not directly involved, witnessing or being close to such events can lead to heightened stress and reduced confidence in workplace safety.



05 Security and Conflict-Related Emergencies

Threats such as workplace violence, terrorism, armed conflict, or cyberattacks affect both physical and psychological safety. They generate fear, uncertainty, and in some contexts, ongoing trauma that can extend well beyond the incident itself.



02

Psychological and Wellbeing Impacts on Employees



Psychological and Wellbeing Impacts on Employees

Emergencies disrupt not only the external environment of the workplace but also the internal psychological state of employees. Their effects often extend beyond the duration of the event itself, shaping mental health, behavior, and overall wellbeing in both the short and long term.

01 Stress and Anxiety

Emergencies trigger heightened stress responses. Employees may experience constant worry about their own safety, the security of their families, or the stability of their jobs. This sustained anxiety can interfere with concentration, decision-making, and overall performance.

02 Trauma and Emotional Distress

Direct exposure to disasters, accidents, or violence can lead to trauma and post-traumatic stress symptoms. Flashbacks, sleep disturbances, and emotional numbing are common consequences, which may hinder an employee's ability to return to normal work routines.

03 Burnout and Fatigue

When emergencies stretch over longer periods, such as health crises or economic instability, employees often face prolonged workloads and emotional strain. This leads to physical and mental exhaustion, reduced motivation, and a sense of helplessness.





Psychological and Wellbeing Impacts on Employees

04 Decline in Morale and Motivation

Uncertainty and instability weaken employees' sense of security and belonging. A lack of clarity or support from leadership can intensify feelings of disengagement, frustration, and loss of trust in the organization.

05 Psychosomatic Symptoms

Stress and anxiety often manifest physically, contributing to headaches, gastrointestinal issues, muscle pain, and other health complaints. These symptoms may increase absenteeism and affect overall wellbeing.

06 Disrupted Work-Life Balance

Emergencies blur boundaries between personal and professional responsibilities. For example, employees working remotely during health crises may struggle with caregiving duties, isolation, or lack of recovery time, deepening the impact on mental health.



03

Organizational Impacts

Organizational Impacts

The effects of emergencies extend beyond individual employees and shape the overall functioning of the organization. Disruptions to mental health and wellbeing often translate into measurable challenges in performance, productivity, and organizational stability.

Absenteeism and Presenteeism



Emergencies increase the likelihood of employees missing work, either because of direct exposure, health concerns, or caregiving responsibilities. At the same time, presenteeism, being physically present but mentally disengaged, becomes more common when staff struggle with stress, fatigue, or trauma. Both patterns reduce overall output.

Decline in Productivity and Engagement



Mental health challenges following emergencies weaken focus, creativity, and problem-solving. Employees may complete tasks more slowly or with more errors. Reduced motivation and disengagement often result in lower team performance and diminished service quality.

Staff Turnover and Retention Challenges



In environments where employees feel unsupported, emergencies can accelerate turnover. Staff may seek work in more stable or supportive organizations, leading to higher recruitment and training costs. Loss of institutional knowledge further weakens continuity.

Strained Teamwork and Communication



Stressful conditions amplify conflicts, miscommunication, and mistrust. Teams may struggle to coordinate effectively, particularly when emergencies force rapid changes in work arrangements or introduce new safety and communication protocols.

Increased Financial and Operational Costs



Beyond the immediate response to emergencies, organizations face longer-term financial pressures. These include healthcare and insurance claims, productivity losses, reputational damage, and the costs of rebuilding or adapting operations. Investment in wellbeing measures during crises often proves more cost-effective than managing long-term fallout.

04

Building Supportive Systems for Mental Health in Emergencies

Building Supportive Systems for Mental Health in Emergencies

How employees experience and recover from emergencies is shaped by the systems and practices in place within their organizations. A proactive approach that blends leadership culture, practical strategies, and policy frameworks can significantly reduce negative impacts on wellbeing and sustain organizational performance.

Organizational Culture and Leadership Response

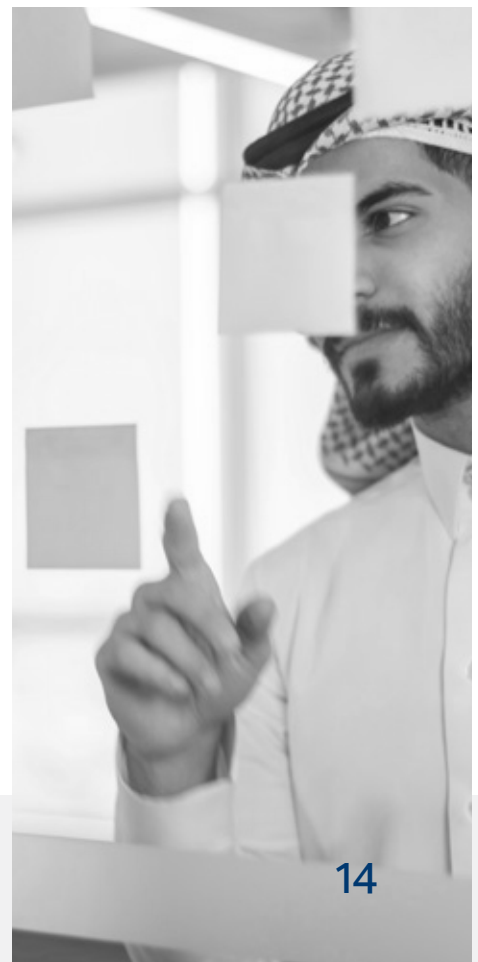
The tone set by leadership during a crisis has a strong influence on employee wellbeing. Clear, empathetic communication builds trust and reduces uncertainty. Leaders who acknowledge challenges, provide reassurance, and model calm behavior help employees feel supported and less isolated in times of disruption.

Preparedness and Preventive Measures

Organizations that plan ahead are better equipped to protect mental health during emergencies. Risk assessments, crisis response plans, and resilience training provide employees with tools to manage stress and adapt. Preparedness reduces feelings of helplessness and increases confidence in the organization's ability to respond effectively.

Practical Support Strategies

- **Access to Psychological Support:** Employee Assistance Programs, counseling services, and peer support groups can provide immediate relief and long-term coping mechanisms.
- **Flexible Work Arrangements:** Remote work options, adjusted schedules, or reduced workloads help employees balance personal and professional demands during crises.
- **Psychological First Aid:** Short-term interventions such as check-ins, active listening, and stress debriefing can mitigate immediate distress and prevent escalation.
- **Digital Wellbeing Tools:** Online platforms offering therapy, coaching, and mindfulness resources ensure continuity of support when in-person services are disrupted.



Policy and Best Practices

International guidelines, such as those from the World Health Organization and International Labour Organization, highlight **the integration of mental health into occupational safety and crisis management policies**. Embedding these standards into organizational procedures ensures that wellbeing is not treated as an afterthought but as a core component of emergency response. Regular policy reviews and staff training further strengthen these systems.

Individual and Collective Resilience

While organizational systems are critical, **individual coping strategies also shape outcomes**. Training in stress management, self-care, and adaptive thinking empowers employees to maintain balance. Collective resilience, teams supporting one another, sharing responsibilities, and maintaining cohesion, further reduces the psychological burden of emergencies.



05

Case Studies

Case Studies

New York City Health + Hospitals during COVID-19 (USA, 2020–2021)



The pandemic pushed healthcare workers to extreme levels of stress, fatigue, and grief. NYC Health + Hospitals, the largest public health system in the US, launched "Helping Healers Heal," a structured peer-support and counselling program:

- Peer Support Teams trained to recognize distress and offer emotional first aid on the spot.
- Confidential hotlines and counselling available 24/7.
- Creation of Wellness Rooms inside hospitals for staff to rest, decompress, and seek quiet space away from high-stress wards.
- Regular workshops on resilience, stress management, and coping with grief.

— Why it matters

By embedding mental health response directly into daily emergency operations, the program normalized asking for help, reduced stigma, and gave frontline workers a sustainable outlet during a prolonged crisis.

Case Studies

United States Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA)



— What they did

VTA, in cooperation with ATU Local 265, established a Critical Incident Support Team to assist frontline staff exposed to traumatic or dangerous events (e.g., collisions, assaults, onboard emergencies).

— Key components

- A dedicated response team trained to provide on-the-spot emotional support following critical incidents.
- Off-site counseling availability specifically designed for employees and family members through the **526 Resiliency Center**, a step taken to respect privacy and reduce stigma.
- Inclusive coverage for immediate responders and extended support beyond immediate exposure.

— Why it stands out

This model recognizes that emergencies are part of frontline transit operations. By offering both proactive intervention and confidential referral services, VTA created a structured, humane response to workplace trauma.

Case Studies

Abu Dhabi Health Emergency Management (HEM) Policy



Background

Abu Dhabi, as a regional healthcare hub, recognized the growing frequency of emergencies ranging from pandemics to large-scale accidents and natural disasters. The Department of Health (DoH) identified a need for a unified, resilient system that not only manages the operational side of emergencies but also safeguards the wellbeing of patients, staff, and the wider community.

The Initiative

In June 2024, the Department of Health released the Health Emergency Management (HEM) Policy, which became effective in August 2024. This policy provided a structured framework to guide the entire health sector in preparing for and responding to emergencies. Its approach was built on four key components:

Governance and Leadership

- Clear assignment of roles and responsibilities during crises.
- Coordination mechanisms to avoid duplication and ensure timely decisions.

01

Preparedness and Resilience

- Integration of risk assessments and emergency planning into healthcare facilities.
- Workforce training that included psychosocial preparedness and stress management.

02

Continuity of Care

- Ensuring that patient-centered services, including psychological and mental health support, continue uninterrupted during emergencies.
- Establishing backup systems for essential services (power, supplies, IT systems).

03

Recovery and Learning

- Post-emergency reviews to assess mental health outcomes for both staff and patients.
- Embedding lessons learned into policy updates and workforce development.

04

Mental Health and Wellbeing Dimension

Though the policy primarily framed emergency governance, it emphasized psychosocial support and staff resilience as part of continuity of care. By requiring healthcare institutions to build mechanisms for staff support, emotional readiness, and safe working environments, the policy positioned mental health as an essential pillar of emergency management.

Case Studies

Abu Dhabi Health Emergency Management (HEM) Policy



- **Examples of actions under this framework included:**
 - Establishing **wellbeing protocols** for healthcare workers exposed to prolonged or high-stress emergency environments.
 - Embedding **stress management training** and access to psychological support in preparedness plans.
 - Incorporating **psychological safety** into incident reporting and after-action reviews.

- **Why It Matters**

This policy represents one of the first **system-level responses** in the **Gulf region** to formally integrate mental health and wellbeing into health emergency management. By going beyond operational preparedness to include psychosocial resilience, Abu Dhabi set a precedent for treating mental health as inseparable from overall healthcare quality during crises.

06

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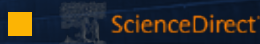
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