

SUPPORTING COLLEAGUES
AFTER SIGNIFICANT LOSSES IN
NATURAL DISASTERS



KONTERRA
RESILIENCE

SUPPORTING COLLEAGUES AFTER SIGNIFICANT LOSSES IN NATURAL DISASTERS

Natural disasters such as fires, earthquakes, hurricanes, cyclones, and tornados can have a devastating impact on individuals and communities. When colleagues have suffered significant losses, it can be difficult to know what to say or do to provide thoughtful and compassionate support. This resource contains information to help you:

- Understand what they may be experiencing 3
- Express care and concern 4
- Provide practical support 5
 - As a manager..... 5
 - As a colleague or friend..... 5

Understand what they may be experiencing

People affected by natural disasters may face a mix of challenges including:

- **Emotional impact:** Waves of shock, grief, anxiety, or feelings of being overwhelmed are common. They may also experience survivor's guilt or anger.
- **Physical strain:** Loss of sleep, exhaustion, and other health issues related to stress or injury. Physical strain of forced displacement.
- **Spiritual impact:** Questioning "Why bad things happen to good people", or how a higher power could allow this to happen.
- **Relational disruptions and grief for community:** Natural disasters often affect entire neighborhoods and communities, disrupting important relationships and support networks, altering or destroying the landscape, and compounding an individual's sense of grief and loss.
- **Practical challenges:** Displacement, loss of belongings and documents, financial strain, and navigating time-consuming and mentally draining recovery processes like insurance claims, organizing accommodation and transportation, and replacing functional belongings like kitchen supplies.
- **Work-related challenges:** Difficulty concentrating, reduced productivity, or needing time away to address personal matters. Impacts to physical workplace and the communities they are working with or within.

Recognize that everyone processes traumatic experiences differently. Some may want to talk about their experiences, while others may prefer to keep their focus on work. But don't underestimate the power of reaching out to express care and concern, and letting them know you are there to listen, should they find that supportive.

Express care and concern

When reaching out to a colleague who has experienced a significant loss, here are some tips for communicating your support in a way that is empathetic and non-intrusive.

Acknowledge the situation

- "I heard about what happened, and I want you to know I'm thinking of you."
- "I'm so sorry for what you're going through. Please let me know if there's any way I can help now or in the future. It doesn't matter if it's today, tomorrow, or three months from now. Let me know, and if I can't do it, I'll try to help find someone who can. "

Validate their feelings:

- "This must be so difficult for you. I'm here if you ever need to talk."
- "The impact(s) of these events is huge. It's completely understandable to feel _____ right now." Try to use the persons own words to validate their feelings (e.g. overwhelmed, exhausted, stressed).

Ask about or offer specific support: Suggest concrete ways you're willing to help. For example:

- "I can help monitor your inbox this week if you need some time."
- "I can spend time with the kids on Saturday morning so you can attend to details."

Be mindful of their privacy: While expressing empathy and concern, refrain from asking for details. Listen and ask about their story if it is clear they wish to share, but don't press for details.

Remove any pressure to respond to your message: When reaching out, make it clear they don't need to reply immediately, or at all. For example:

- "I know you have a lot going on. Please don't feel any need to respond to this message. Just know I'm here for you whenever you need."

Provide practical support

Supporting colleagues in practical ways can make a significant difference as they navigate recovery. Consider the following:

As a manager

Offer time and flexibility:

- Encourage them to take time off to address personal matters and support them in doing so without guilt or fear of repercussions.
- Provide flexibility for remote work if applicable.

Assist with workload management:

- Adjust deadlines or redistribute responsibilities temporarily to alleviate pressure.
- Be flexible in terms of work hours, workload, and responsibilities, especially during the initial month following the disaster.

Encourage supportive team dynamics: Encourage and enable other colleagues to offer practical and emotional support.

Encourage use of support services and benefits:

- Reach out to HR within your organization to get a better understanding of all of the benefits that may be available to the staff members.
- Make sure the employee is aware of any Employee Assistance counseling or external support resources that are available to them.
- Encourage the use of these resources without any stigma or pressure.

As a colleague or friend

Assist with workload:

- Offer to help with specific tasks or projects.
- Coordinate with your manager or team to adjust deadlines or redistribute responsibilities temporarily.

Contribute financially or organize fundraisers:

- Consider setting up a fundraiser or donation drive to support their immediate needs. (Check with HR or your manager about whether this would be allowed—some organizations have policies prohibiting this).
- Pool resources as a team to provide gift cards for essential items or services.
- Contribute to a local organization and encourage them to seek support (e.g., “I wasn’t sure if you’d be comfortable taking money from me, but I made a donation to the Red Cross in your area. I hope you’ll reach out to them.”)

Help with daily needs:

- Offer to prepare meals, provide transportation, or assist with childcare if appropriate. Offer specific support, and prompt them with ideas of things they may need: “What supplies do you need right now? Can I bring you toiletries, games or entertainment for the kids, dinner?”
- Connect them with local resources or services for housing, counseling, or legal assistance.

Alert them to potentially helpful local resources: Compile a list of local resources may be helpful, especially if you’re in a better position to do extensive online research than they are.

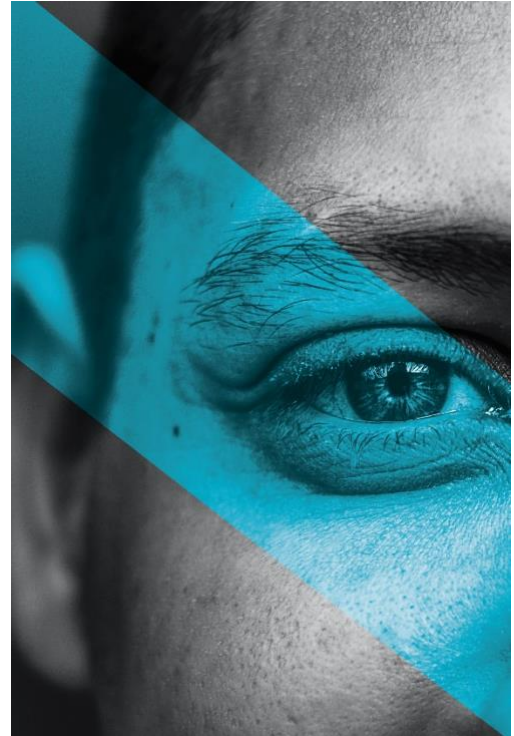
Check in over time: Those affected may receive a lot of support early on, but recovery is a long process and support tends to wane over time. Grief, healing, and recovery are not linear, and making it clear that you recognize that recover will be a long journey can be very supportive. Set reminders for yourself to check in and provide support over time can help ensure people don’t feel forgotten as recovery progresses.

ABOUT KONTERRA

At KonTerra, we specialize in supporting clients that operate in complex and high-stress environments where organizations and their staff face difficult challenges.

When staff work in high-pressure roles or locations with elevated exposure to threat, suffering, graphic content, or conflict, they are at risk of experiencing overload, attrition, and stress reactions such as burnout. The KonTerra Group works directly with individuals, leaders, and teams to equip them with tools to better understand and manage the challenges they face.

Providing support in a meaningful way is only possible with the right people. The experience and sensitivity of our counselors, trainers, and coaches allows us to work with clients in a way that is unique. Our specialists all share two attributes which equip them to deliver excellent support: all are veteran mental health clinicians (master's or doctoral-level); and experienced supporting staff in high-stress and high-stakes environments and roles.



Services delivered by our uniquely positioned professionals include:

- Individual Counseling and Coaching
- Virtual and Onsite Training and Educational Events
- Staff Wellbeing Assessments
- Manager Support and Consultations for Organizations and Leaders
- Critical Incident Response Services

If you are interested in learning more about any of the above services, please contact your KonTerra Account Manager or email: info@konterragroup.net.