

Business Unusual: Life at Work Since September 11

by Jill Bachman, MSN, RN, CEAP
Education/Outreach Coordinator, Peer Assistance Services, Inc.

For most Americans, September 11, 2001 marks the date that our lives were forever changed. Months later, many people are "back on track" and appear to have embraced their familiar routines. In spite of our individual experiences, it is safe to say that the majority of us have been profoundly touched by the tragedies. We are confronted with questions about purpose, security, progress, patriotism and many other topics. That these tragedies occurred to people as they were working has significant implications for American employees. The victims weren't at war, or performing high-risk jobs, they were doing ordinary things. And the effects continue beyond September 11. Postal workers are affected by the fear and threat of anthrax. Airport security staff face losing hard-to-get jobs. Health care workers struggle to grasp the extent of the new disaster plans they must implement.

Changes have occurred on numerous workplace fronts. By far, the two most significant concerns in the workplace are issues about safety and job loss. Prior to the attacks, the slowing economy was already impacting employment with downsizing and layoffs an everyday occurrence. It is speculated that the overall hiring slowdown will continue for at least the first quarter of 2002. Nurses are not expected to be as directly affected, since the shortage continues.

Other work-related impacts have been evident such as concerns about and reduction in work travel, rethinking the meaning and value of work on one's life, and responding to Americans who have become the targets of hatred because of assumptions made about their connection with terrorists. In addition, no matter how close people or organizations are to the attacks or the resulting military effort, there is the very real effect on employee spirit and sorrow.

Just as it took Americans a while to laugh and joke, employees have wondered when they could start complaining again. Some people feel as if their ordinary complaints about work have become inappropriate, especially when we consider the murdered victims who have no choice to complain. The tendency is natural to hold back and evaluate our actions anew in light of such massive events. But there is a certain level at which complaints are the "social lubricant" in the workplace. Have you noticed that important bonding never occurs at the water cooler as people rave about how great things are? Like the return, slow though it was, to humor, so there needs to be a return to the routines in the workplace. Following are some ideas that can help us move on to a new level of normal at work.

1. Talk about your feelings, but judiciously, as events unfold. We know this is projected to be a long process and there are likely to be many turns in the road. Be sensitive to the effect your expressions have on others, especially clients, and choose with whom and where you decide to talk about your emotional issues carefully.
2. Recognize that the range of people's responses to this crisis is as unique as the people themselves. Be gentler and more tolerant of reactions that seem unusual for the person. Don't expect people to get over it as quickly as you might. Understand that these reactions may

have been exacerbated by the recent holiday season, which often heightens people's unresolved issues. Be aware of the intensified effect on helpers such as emergency workers and mental health counselors.

3. Recognize problematic responses, such as reduced productivity, absenteeism, irritability and numbness or withdrawal from work life. Refer yourself, a colleague or an employee to an employee assistance program (if available) or a mental health counselor if you see reactions that seem to be extreme or affecting a person's work. An employee assistance program is designed to help the work organization as well as individual employees with issues related to work performance and productivity.
4. Take care of yourself. Pay more attention to your own health because your ability to be resilient and effective may depend on it. Take advantage of stress management classes and other similar activities. Don't forget exercise and good nutrition.
5. Examine your own coping style. Are you using alcohol and drugs to an unhealthy degree? In times like this there is a natural tendency to want to numb the pain and sadness, but alcohol is a depressant and does nothing to help us cope effectively.
6. Understand your own views about control. Do you know what is it exactly that you have control over, and what is beyond your control? Where do you have influence? Many people have expressed the feeling that they have no control since September 11. Perhaps many of us only had the illusion that we had control, in the absence of such tragedies. All of us have some control in our lives, if only of the choices we make and the attitudes we choose to adopt.
7. Search for other resources to help you maintain control. Participate if you can in the design and feedback of your company's emergency response plan. Many communities have published booklets on emergency preparedness for the family and community. The actions spelled out in those documents are useful no matter what the emergency is- snow, tornado, or unexpected power outage.
8. Since September 11, more employees than ever have sought refuge from workplace stress in religious groups and activities. The recent interest in workplace spirituality is about following spiritual principles that are part of one's belief system and applying them at work. People interested in developing such groups should check to see what their company's written guidelines are, and avoid overt religious behavior that creates divisiveness and conflict.

Nothing will be the same again, but it was probably an illusion that everything was the same in the "good old days", prior to September 11 or the last layoff or the downturn in the economy. In order to manage the changes ahead of us, whatever they are, we need to be as diligent about caring for ourselves as we are about helping others.