

From witnessing suicides to being assaulted by passengers, trauma is an inevitable part of the job for many London Underground employees. So how does the organisation help them to cope?

Support network

REPORT CATHERINE EDWARDS PHOTOGRAPHS GETTY/ZEFA

"IT WAS 9.55AM ON TUESDAY 6 DECEMBER 1986. I WAS COMING INTO Hammersmith station at about 30 miles an hour when I saw a girl climb down on to the track – I thought she was picking up something she'd dropped..."

Despite braking, Martin Keegan, a train operator on the Piccadilly line, was unable to stop and the girl died. The coroner later recorded a verdict of suicide.

With 35 deaths a year and many more injuries and "near misses", the

possibility of killing or maiming someone comes with the job for train operators on London Underground (LU).

Keegan's incident happened only 10 months after starting at LU. He couldn't talk about it for several days afterwards. "I kept thinking, 'What if?' What if I'd been two minutes later or two minutes earlier?" he recalls.

Keegan says he was not made aware of any counselling service to help him to deal with his experience. "I just had to pick myself up and start again." He went back to full operational duties after only three days and,

STRESS MANAGEMENT

If you've been to King's Cross underground station lately you'll have noticed the major building work going on, but have you thought about how difficult it must be for LU staff to work in this type of environment?

To combat the high levels of stress that staff may be experiencing at the station, LU is planning to take a version of its stress management programme out to King's Cross itself.

The programme is currently run at the counselling and trauma unit based near Victoria and takes the form of a group workshop, run along cognitive behavioural lines. It aims to help employees to make changes to their working practices, to handle situations better and generally build their resilience to stress.

"There is an interesting metaphor for stress," says Alison Dunn, LU's head of counselling and trauma. "You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf them so that you are less likely to go under."

Managers are encouraged to refer staff to the workshops (two hours per week over a six-week period) if they are off sick with stress, or show signs of being stressed. Within 72 hours of someone being referred, a psychology assistant phones to assess their suitability for the group. If their stress levels are particularly high, they may be given one-to-one sessions instead.

Comparing absence figures for the three months prior to the sessions with the three months following has revealed some remarkable results.

For example, the total absence of a group of three train operators dropped from 158 days to zero, while for seven customer service assistants absence dropped from 288 days to seven. LU is now intending to look at results after six- and 12-month periods to get a more realistic picture.

The stress management programme is part of a wider "stress plan" initiated in April last year after LU's 2002-3 health report showed how big a problem stress was. The plan also resulted in a toolkit, which includes a guide to dealing with stress, a relaxation CD, and information on suitable questions for back-to-work interviews. A dedicated email address has also been set up so that managers can email their queries and get a guaranteed response within 24 hours.

The RMT union has some doubts about the process, saying that constant monitoring by managers via phone calls and home visits can make employees feel under pressure to come back to work too soon.

But Aidan Harris, LU's workplace violence champion, argues: "The other side of the coin is the claim from some managers that frequent phone calls to staff at home prevent them from 'swinging the lead' and malingering. There are probably a few valid cases from either side. The key point we emphasise is that we want to break away from the days of mistrust and suspicion. Contact to home must be reasonable. Its purpose is supportive."

in the end, what helped him to recover was being reassured by the girl's mother that he wasn't to blame.

"That felt like two tonnes had been lifted from my shoulders," he says.

Now, in his job as an instructor operator, Keegan can pass on his experience to new trainees, as well as support fellow drivers through the Piccadilly line's trauma support group (TSG).

Since 2001, each line on the underground has had its own TSG made up of train operator volunteers, who are recruited, trained and supported by the counselling and trauma unit at LU. Their role is to go out as soon as possible after a "one under" – tube jargon for a person being hit by a train – and offer emotional first aid to the driver involved. The idea for these groups originally came from train operators on the Central line in 1994.

In his role as a TSG volunteer, Keegan says some drivers want assistance and some don't. "When they do, we take them to the television room at the depot, where they can talk to us about what happened – if they are able to. We make them tea or coffee and get them a taxi home if necessary," he says.

Alison Dunn, head of counselling and trauma, who is speaking at the CIPD's Annual Psychology at Work Conference this week, explains that this kind of support in the immediate aftermath of an incident is crucial, as drivers can often be left sitting on their own because everyone else has a job to do, such as guiding the emergency services or evacuating the station. Instant support is also important to help someone move forward.

"For the first few hours people go into shock," she adds, "so they need this basic care. Counselling comes at a later stage when the physical shock wears off."

LU now goes to great efforts to ensure drivers can access counselling services. Not everyone needs counselling and, for those who come forward, the severity of their symptoms varies. Some people need one or two sessions simply to hear that their reactions are normal and to get advice on managing the symptoms. At the other extreme are those who develop post-traumatic stress disorder. They are referred to LU's in-house psychologist, who conducts a more in-depth assessment and suggests a range of methods for counsellors to use to help the person recover.

One such technique is EMDR (eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing), developed in 1989 by Dr Francine Shapiro, which involves focusing on the traumatic incident while moving your eyes from side to side.

"No one is 100 per cent sure why it works," says Dunn, "but we know it's to do with stimulating alternate sides of the brain while someone focuses on a trauma. It enables a process that has become stuck to become unstuck."

Most drivers do recover and go back to work, but this is always done on a case-by-case basis. Some are initially given alternative duties; others go back to driving straight away, but with an instructor operator to help them to get their confidence back.

While Keegan is full of praise for the support that LU gives its train operators, there have been some problems. In particular, key staff absences, Dunn says, temporarily halted the recruitment and training of new TSG volunteers, although existing volunteers continued to be supported. These problems have now been resolved.

Allegations have also surfaced of a cut in budget for the service. An RMT union safety representative, who asked not to be named, says many drivers think that this has meant there are too few volunteers trained in trauma support: "When an incident does happen there isn't always someone available to go out straight away – in some cases it can take two or three days."

However, Dunn strongly refutes the claim that funding for the scheme has been reduced and points out that helping drivers to recover after a one under is only half the story. LU is also working on various initiatives to reduce the number of incidents happening in the first

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more CIPD resources on stress visit www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/health/stress

Samaritans have provided training on mental health awareness, such as how to approach people who look as if they could be contemplating suicide

place, and has discovered that, far from there being a single cause, each station has its own set of factors.

"Mile End station used to be the number one hotspot – one reason was its close proximity to the mental health unit at St Clements Hospital. So we've installed Samaritan posters and a dedicated phone line for Samaritans on the platform," Dunn says.

LU has also improved lighting and CCTV camera angles so that staff can be more aware. Since this was done there has not been a single incident at the station, and similar work is now being carried out at other hotspots on the network. For example, Samaritans have provided training for station staff on mental health awareness, such as what signs to look out for and how to approach people who look as if they could be contemplating suicide.

As well as helping to reduce the number of one unders, LU's 7,000 station staff also have their own, very different, type of trauma to face. Last year there were 1,600 incidents of workplace violence against front-line staff, ranging from minor verbal abuse to serious physical attack.

Aidan Harris, workplace violence champion, says that LU is now much more committed to tackling the problem. "If you go back 20 years or so it was seen as a police problem, but the strategy now is to make people feel better supported from the outset – to make it clear that the company does care, and that violence to staff is unacceptable," he says.

In the past, Harris explains, prosecutions were made, but often the results weren't publicised to staff. Now »

a monthly newsletter informs employees of progress with prosecutions and workplace violence initiatives.

Part of this culture shift involves making staff feel more willing to report an incident, however minor. LU is currently piloting new ways of reporting using different types of form, which will also capture better, more measurable data.

“The problem with the existing reporting system is that it is not particularly victim-centred, because it is left to the supervisor to report the incident,” adds Harris.

While reporting has gone up, Rosalie Powell-Evans, occupational health programme manager at LU, admits: “There is some research that suggests we are only hitting the tip of the iceberg; this makes it very hard to produce any accurate measurements of success.”

But increased reporting does highlight problems at a local level. Powell-Evans explains that this enables LU to address why, for example, at a particular station, 80 per cent of all incidents occur over ticket disputes. Staff can then be encouraged to look at the problem and review skills involved in handling customers.

Interestingly, the fact that a higher proportion of incidents is being reported has not led to a similar increase in time lost to absence, suggesting that the new support structures are helping.

Training is also important. LU brought in Dr Phil Leather and his team at the Institute of Work, Health and Organisations (I-Who), based at the University of Nottingham, to do a needs analysis.

An initial survey found that exposure to verbal abuse and intimidation was much higher than

incidents of physical attack – but that staff were just as affected by the former. Perhaps what really hit home for senior management at LU was the consequence of such exposure. The survey revealed that, as well as triggering health issues such as stress, exposure to violence – whether verbal or physical – led to a serious decline in job satisfaction, made employees feel less committed to the organisation, and, perhaps most importantly, created a major shift in attitudes towards customers.

“Employees went from being concerned about customer care to doubting and being suspicious of the public – they saw it as an ‘us and them’ situation,” explains Leather.

He adds that, while the existing training was having some impact, it wasn’t transferring effectively back to the workplace.

As a result, a new training programme has been developed by Leather and his team. This aims to help LU staff not only to recognise the triggers of aggression, but also to recognise how they can become a trigger themselves if they approach a situation in the wrong way.

“For example,” says Leather, “say I bought a ticket from Nottingham, which is supposed to include a London Underground journey, but it won’t let me through the tube barrier. If I tell a member of the gate-line staff that it’s not working, and they turn around and say, ‘You’ll have to pay an excess fare because gate codes don’t lie,’ I’m likely to take umbrage to that.

“So, while systemic things such as delays, overcrowding or lifts that don’t work can be the first trigger to aggression, the way you deal with a situation can take the heat out of it.”

The training, which will be rolled out at the beginning of next year, uses “vicarious role-play”, using a video, in which professional actors act out scenarios and delegates are asked to comment. One shows a female member of LU station staff responding to a man who complains about delays on the Piccadilly line. Delegates on the training course are then asked to give their thoughts on how well this reaction was managed and how it could have been tackled differently.

The course also includes modules aimed at helping managers to understand post-incident reactions; providing the immediate emotional first aid in the same way as the TSG does after one-under incidents.

“It really depends on the type of incident,” says Harris. “A lot of people will say, ‘Well, that’s happened and I just need 10 minutes to chill,’ and if the supervisor approaches it correctly he or she will say, ‘That’s fine – take 10 minutes, but I’m here to talk if you need to.’” Referral to LU’s counselling services can then be made if necessary.

The training will be delivered as part of the annual training agenda by in-house trainers, who are currently being re-skilled by people from I-Who.

TRAUMA COUNSELLING AT HSBC

London Underground is not the only organisation that has to deal with trauma. With 154 hold-ups in 2003, bank staff are no strangers to violence in the workplace. At HSBC the issue is taken very seriously. When a raid occurs there is no question of staff being heroes – they should think only about getting themselves and anyone else out of danger by handing over the money.

The high-street bank supports staff through a confidential counselling service, Open Line. Jane Fawcett, who manages the Open Line trauma team, explains that they are alerted soon after an incident occurs. Counsellors from the team then go out on the following day to offer support to both employees and their managers.

“There is a whole range of emotions, but one of the most important things for an individual is to be reassured that their responses are perfectly normal,” says Fawcett.

“People usually feel pretty rough. We try to help them with what they’ve got to do – and advise them on what not to do.”

They also work closely with managers, advising them on what to expect from staff after an incident. This initial support is followed up on the phone with both individuals and their managers.

Counsellors from Open Line can refer people for more specialist help, but, Fawcett says, long-term effects are rare.

She says: “People are actually enormously resilient – you don’t believe when you’re feeling really horrible after an event that you’ll recover, but in fact most people do.”

“A lot of our trainers are used to hard-skills training – you press button A, then you press button B and you get result C. But this is softer skills training – there’s a lot of emotion in this area. You’re looking at people’s behaviours: how they respond to something and how they’re reading something. So we’ve got to give our trainers the skills to put across the right messages,” explains Harris.

In tune with LU’s holistic approach to tackling trauma, Harris adds that the organisation is also trying to prevent some of the initial customer frustrations that can turn into aggression, by providing more information about service delays and disruptions.

“We have to accept that because of under-investment over a number of years there is a backlog of work to be done,” says Harris. “We are going to be a big building site for the next 10 or so years and we need to be able to prepare people for that.”

LU has undoubtedly been through some challenging times in the past few years and has had its fair share of criticism. What it has learnt is that, if it wants to keep its customers on board, it needs to pay greater attention to staff and provide them with the necessary support in what can often be a difficult working environment. **PM**

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