

# Preparing for the Olympic Games: a disaster preparedness program that emphasized training and respected cultural values helped employees feel safe during the Olympic Games and also familiarized them with the concept of an EAP.

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Employee assistance programs are often called upon to respond to workplace problems after they arise, yet they are often at their most effective when they deliver services that are largely preventative in scope. It should come as no surprise that when an international event such as the Olympic Games take place, prevention--in this case, disaster preparedness--becomes a necessity.

Although crisis preparation and intervention have proven to be effective in assisting victims of critical incidents (Flannery and Everly 2000), these are still new concepts in Greece. State-governed crisis services are scarce and have not emphasized the importance of incident preparedness, choosing instead to focus mostly on practical matters after an event. Psychological care for victims and witnesses of critical incidents has consisted largely of voluntary services delivered by mental health professionals and students.

The Olympic games were a unique opportunity to familiarize the Greek workforce with employee assistance programs, since stress levels associated with the possibility of terrorist attacks were high. There was a need to feel safe and be prepared for events over which one had no control.

The purpose of this article is to describe the crisis preparedness program that was developed for one of the largest mobile telecommunications companies in Greece. The program was one of the first delivered in Greece by a Greek EAP company adhering to international guidelines and covered approximately 700 employees positioned at different Olympic Games venues.

## THE CRISIS PREPAREDNESS PROGRAM

The emphasis of the preparedness program was on training, because training has been successfully incorporated by many companies in Greece and has been accepted as a valuable service by department heads and line employees alike. Unfortunately, only managers were able to participate in the training.

The preparedness program was segmented into a pre-crisis phase, an acute crisis phase, and a post-crisis phase. It included crisis management training (for managers only) and addressed on-site defusings, critical incident debriefings, and follow-up and referral mechanisms for assessment and treatment where indicated.

Specific goals were taken into consideration while developing the training materials. These goals were as follows:

\* Use as little general theory as possible;

- \* Focus on issues of central importance to the participants and address their pressing concerns;
- \* Normalize the stress response participants would experience in the event of a traumatic incident;
- \* Offer directives on self-help and helping victims without playing a counselor's role;
- \* Make cultural adjustments; and
- \* Increase participants' sense of self-mastery.

With these goals in mind (Everly 2000), the training covered a range of topics and provided answers to many questions, such as: What signs should I expect after a crisis and in the following days? What can I do to keep victims' distress from escalating? What can I do to reduce victim's distress? What can I do to help myself?

Clear directives were offered to participants and put in writing. A leaflet was handed out describing the emotional and physical impact of a critical incident and suggesting what victims should and should not do in the event of a disaster (Everly 2000). The same leaflet was to be disseminated to victims and family members in case of an incident.

Information with clear directives on controlling destructive rumors was also provided to participants. The training concluded with a step-by-step guide on the procedures to follow in case of a crisis, such as who would contact whom and what actions would follow.

In addition to these and other crisis management training strategies, participants were also introduced to the concept of EAPs. We ran what one might

Andrew Armatas is head of EAP services at Ergonomia, an Accor EAP company in Greece with an established reputation in occupational safety and health services. He can be reached via e-mail at [armatas@ergonomia.gr](mailto:armatas@ergonomia.gr). Ergonomia's chief executive, Ilias Banoutsos, can be reached at [banoutsos@ergonomia.gr](mailto:banoutsos@ergonomia.gr). call a "mini launching presentation," although there was no service to launch. We believed the training was a great opportunity to familiarize workers and managers with EAP services and their associated benefits. We also introduced new concepts, such as defusing and debriefing (Mitchel and Everly 1996), that would be available if needed.

## CULTURAL OBSERVATIONS

The importance of taking cultural differences into consideration when developing and providing training cannot be understated. From our experience, there were some interesting points worth mentioning, some of which may be seen as culturally related.

Clear directives may often be viewed as direct orders. Care was taken during the presentation so participants would not feel that one more person was telling them what to do. To bypass possible resistance, we first asked participants how they would instinctively act when dealing with crisis behavior and then discussed possible outcomes, often utilizing personal past experiences.

We would explain why something would not work and then offer a clear alternative. We also noted occasionally that a suggested action was "exactly how most people would act" to help ease any ill feelings.

In Greece, workers often have to wear many hats, and little if any attention is given to self-care. For that reason, we framed directives in such a way as to help participants protect themselves from unwanted behaviors and escalating emotions.

Participants expressed concern that the training would be (ab)used by the company and that they would be expected to fulfill a counselor's role in addition to their other responsibilities. Suspiciousness of the incentives behind such services was expected. Participants were reassured

that at no time were they to fulfill a counselor's role and that the idea behind these services was to give them the information they needed to feel adequately prepared and to let counselors do the counseling. To further ease their concerns, we provided directives on how to avoid assuming the responsibilities of a counselor. As a result, active participation increased, as did their sense of relief.

Culturally, there is a fine line between too much structure and a perceived lack of freedom. Too little structure often dismantles the group. While we attempted to maintain structure during the training, we encouraged participants to ask questions throughout rather than confining them to an allocated time. Specific break hours were suggested, but we adapted them to the needs of the group.

## FEEDBACK AND CONCLUSION

Thankfully, all went well during the Olympic Games and there was no need to implement the crisis management program. Feedback (through evaluation surveys) was excellent. This may reflect the quality of services delivered, but it may also reflect the novelty of the information presented and the need to receive it at that particular time. Participants also valued the sense that they were not alone, which was a positive experience for them.

The Olympic Games were a unique opportunity, not only to deliver an incident preparedness program but also to familiarize managers with EAP core concepts and functions. However, we are still in the beginning of this process. There is much to be done, many lessons to be learned, and lots of research to be conducted.

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