

The Critical Incident



Something happens; it is sudden, random, senseless. It affects not only the victim(s), but also family, friends, co-workers, acquaintances, and those who have witnessed some aspect of the event. The incident can alter your sense of safety, wellbeing and competence. Your ability to function normally may be temporarily disrupted.

Individuals will react with different levels of intensity. However, most people will experience some form of reaction, which is outside the range of their usual way of coping. People may experience the following after a traumatic event:

- **Numbness.** You may withdraw from others, feel down, emotionally drained or “lost in a fog” and/or have difficulty concentrating.
- **Hyper arousal.** You may feel irritable or have flashbacks to the incident. You may be easily startled, feel nervous or have nightmares.

It’s not uncommon to go back and forth between these two states. You may feel numb one day and irritable the next. The traumatic experience may bring back situations from the past in which you felt helpless or out of control.

- **Close off the pain.** When a crisis occurs, the normal tendency is to put feelings and emotions aside. Your instincts tells you to try to keep the incident separate from the rest of your life.

This strategy may be necessary to keep you going in the immediate crisis. The problem is that it usually doesn’t work in the long run. Refusing to talk or think about what happened doesn’t undo it. Often the effects break through later.

What is a Critical Incident Response?

The critical incident response is a temporary stress reaction to a serious event. It is important to understand that you are having a normal response to an abnormal experience. Making a conscious effort to recognize the signs and symptoms of a stress reaction and working through them will ultimately help you to overcome the stress.

Physical Critical Incident Responses:

- Fatigue
- Nervous energy
- Appetite changes
- Neck and/or back pain
- Headaches
- Chest pain and/or heart palpitation
- Insomnia and/or nightmares

Emotional Critical Incident Responses:

- Feeling jumpy or easily startled
- Irritability
- Difficulty concentrating
- Intrusive thoughts about what happened
- Avoidance of people, places and activities
- Anger
- Feelings of helplessness
- Flashbacks

Productivity Critical Incident Responses:

- Inability to concentrate
- Making more mistakes than usual
- Trouble remembering things
- Tendency to overwork
- Staying home from work more often

Taking Care of Yourself

- **Relaxation techniques can be helpful.** Stress is completely normal at a time like this. Acknowledge that you may have a lot of unpleasant feelings. Learn some stress management strategies and use them frequently. Give yourself time to recover from the crisis.
- **Sleep is always important, but especially now.** Restlessness, nightmares and obsessing about the event can disrupt your sleep. Make sure you allow enough time for a full night's sleep. If you have difficulty sleeping for more than a week, consult your doctor.
- **Exercise can help clear the cobwebs.** A brisk walk is good for the body and has a calming effect on the mind as well. Mild exercises can help combat stress but don't over do it. Even if you exercise regularly, over exercising can lead to injury.

Traps to Avoid

- **Smoking is always a health risk.** Unfortunately, many ex-smokers become current smokers during crisis. Try to avoid using cigarettes as a crutch.

Traps to Avoid

- **Alcohol and other drugs.** Under extreme stress people may try to “self medicate” with alcohol, caffeine and/or other drugs, legal and illegal. When you are in pain, it is hard to tell what is enough. Perhaps the best idea is to try to avoid mood-altering substances as much as possible. They may cause far more problems than they solve. Instead of a drink, take a walk. Instead of taking pills, try talking to friends or to your spouse.

Positive habits:

- Get ample rest
- Maintain a good diet and exercise
- Take time for leisure activities
- Follow a structured schedule but allows some flexibility in case you are unable to follow through
- Find and talk to supportive peers and/or family members about the incident
- Spend time with family and friends
- Expect the incident to bother you
- Call your EAP

Negative habits:

- Drink alcohol excessively
- Use legal or illegal substances to numb feelings
- Withdraw from significant others
- Stay away from work
- Reduce amount of leisure activities
- Have unrealistic expectations for recovery
- Look for easy answers
- Make major life changes or decisions at this time
- Be hard on yourself or others



Your Employee Assistance Program

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