

WHAT IS A CRITICAL INCIDENT

Updated July 2011

A “Critical Incident” or a “Traumatic Event” is defined as:

An event outside the range of usual human experience which has the potential to easily overcome a person’s normal ability to cope with stress. It may produce a negative psychological response in a person who was involved in or witnessed such an incident.

Critical Incidents in a workplace environment include, but are not limited to:

- Aggravated Assaults
- Robbery
- Suicide or attempted suicide
- Murder
- Sudden or unexpected death of a work colleague
- Hostage or siege situations
- Discharge of firearms
- Vehicle accidents involving injury and/or substantial property damage
- Acts of self harm by persons in the care of others
- Industrial accidents involving serious injury or fatality
- Any other serious accidents or incidents

Emotional Reactions to a Critical Incident

It is very common, in fact quite normal for some people to experience emotional or stress reaction after a critical incident. Sometimes the emotional reactions occur shortly after a critical incident and sometimes they are delayed for some time. The severity of the reactions and the time frame over which they occur varies from person to person.

Sometimes the stress reactions last for a few days and then subside. Sometimes the reactions usually pass more quickly. When severe stress reactions persist, professional assistance from a Counsellor is beneficial in assisting the person manage the condition.

WHAT IS A CRITICAL INCIDENT

Updated July 2011

Some very common signs and symptoms of a stress reaction in a traumatized person are:

PHYSICAL	THINKING	BEHAVIOURAL	EMOTIONAL
Nausea	Slowed Thinking	Substance Abuse	Anxiety
Upset Stomach	Difficulty Making Decisions	Excessive Checking & Securing	Fear
Tremors (lips, hands)	Difficulty Solving Problems	Angry Outbursts	Guilt
Feeling Uncoordinated	Confusion	Crying Spells	Grief
Profuse Sweating	Disorientation	Social Withdrawal	Depression
Chills	Difficulty Calculating	Suspiciousness	Sadness
Diarrhea	Difficulty Concentrating	Increased or Decreased Food Intake	Feeling Abandoned
Dizziness	Memory Problems	Marked Changes in Behaviour	Worry About Others
Chest Pains (should be checked by doctor)	Difficulty Naming Common Objects		Wanting to Limit Contact with Others
Rapid Heartbeat	Seeing Event Over & Over		Wanting to Hide
Increased Blood Pressure	Distressing Dreams		Anger
Headaches	Poor Attention Span		Irritability
Muscle Aches			Feeling Numb
Sleep Disturbances			Startled
			Shocked

Adjusting to the Experience

Adjusting to the Experience, the human mind and body usually has good self healing mechanisms which help people get through these emotional reactions. These processes can be significantly assisted by the emotionally affected person engaging in the following:

Acceptance

- Recognizing their own reactions and acknowledge that they have been through a highly stressful experience.

Support

- Seeking out other people's physical and emotional support.
- Talking about their feelings to loved ones and close friends who will understand what they are going through.
- Sharing with others who have had similar experiences.

Going Over The Events

- Allowing the memories of the critical incident to come into their minds as there is a need to think about it and to talk about it.
- Facing the reality bit by bit, rather than avoiding reminders of it, helps them to come to terms with what has happened.

Expressing Feelings

- Expressing feelings rather than bottling them up. Talking about experiences and feelings are natural healing methods for these types of events.

Taking Care of Yourself

- During periods of stress, people are more prone to accidents and physical illness. It is important that they look after themselves during this period by:
 - Driving more carefully
 - Having sufficient sleep
 - Maintaining a good diet
 - Having adequate rest

The Positive Effects

- After traumatic experiences, people frequently become wiser and emotionally stronger. They are better equipped to cope with the everyday stresses of life. It is frequently a turning point where they re-evaluate the meaning and the value of life and appreciate the little things that often they had overlooked.

Two Services That Are Available: Defusing & Debriefing

A. Critical Incident Defusing

- On some occasions following a critical incident, some employees may experience severe emotional stress as a result of that incident, such that they require urgent assistance. In such cases it is not appropriate to wait for the Critical Incident Stress Debriefing service to be provided.
- Critical Incident Defusing is individual therapy offered by professional Psychological Debriefers (on site) to employees who are experiencing these severe forms of stress as soon as possible after the incident.
- The Defusing service should be followed by a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing service at an appropriate time.

B. Critical Incident Stress Debriefing

- Critical Incident Stress Debriefing is a group activity offered by professional Psychological Debriefers involving all employees who were directly involved in or who witnessed a critical incident. Management and other personnel not directly involved with the incident should not be involved in the Debrief activities.
- The Critical Incident Stress Debriefing services should be offered to all employees who were involved or who witnessed a critical incident. The Debrief is provided for the following purposes:
 - To provide a professionally guided review of impact of the incident on the person's life.
 - To enable ventilation of emotions
 - To provide reassurance and support
 - To educate about trauma reactions
 - To advise on symptom management
 - To minimize the potential for the development of psychological problems
 - To assist the person to return to normal levels of functioning
 - To identify individuals who may need additional counselling

The CISD Process

- Critical Incident Stress Debriefing is a group process for all individuals who were involved in, or witnessed the critical incident. The Debrief service is based on the Mitchell model and consists of the following Phases:
 - **The Fact Phase**
 - Elicits the facts – the **Who, What, When, Where** - from the Group
 - **The Thought Phase**
 - Leads the discussion into the personal perspectives of the incident and prepares for the next phase
 - **The Reaction Phase**
 - Brings the individual feelings resulting from the incident up to the surface as far as participants wish to do so
 - **The Educational Phase**
 - Brings the participants back to functional levels. Provides information on stress reactions occurring or likely to occur and practical ways of dealing with these reactions.
 - **Re-entry / Summary Phase**
 - Summarizes the pertinent points which were developed during the debrief, followed by distribution of Information Booklets for self and family.
 - **Post Debriefing**
 - Debriefers available for individual contact with any participants who may wish to discuss any issues privately.

CISD Awareness Briefings

- Managerial and Executive personnel who are responsible for organizing responses to critical incidents in the workplace are encouraged to attend a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing Awareness Briefing (1 hour in duration).
- The Briefing defines the traumatic incidents which are classified as critical incidents. Attendees are made aware of the effects of traumatic events upon personnel involved in those incidents and the role that Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) processes play in helping personnel deal with emotional impacts.
- A contingency plan for dealing with such issues is proposed where such plans do not exist so that Managers and Executives can be prepared for such situations.
- Additional Counselling Assistance After a Critical Incident – individuals may need additional counselling assistance in getting over such an experience. Their family and close friends may be good judges of when such additional assistance may be beneficial.

- **Individuals should seek additional professional assistance when:**
 - The intense feelings or physical sensations are too much to handle
 - If emotional levels are not returning to normal levels within a reasonable period of time.
 - Physical symptoms continue past a reasonable time.
 - Continuation of numbness and emptiness feelings.
 - Necessity to remain active in order to avoid thinking about the incident
 - Continuation of nightmares and disturbed sleep
 - Unavailability of other persons or groups with whom to share emotions
 - Relationships and work is being affected as a result of the incident
 - Increased intake of alcohol and/or other drugs following the incident
 - Any other ongoing changes in emotions or behaviour that are causing concern.