

A Critical Incident is defined as a traumatic event that causes emergency service personnel to experience unusually strong emotional reactions which have potential for interference with their ability to function either at the scene or afterward. Even though the event may be over, the emotional and physical reactions can be manifested hours, days, weeks, and even months thereafter. It is common, and albeit quite normal, for people to experience emotional aftershocks in the aftermath of a Critical Incident.

The signs & symptoms of an emotional aftershock, or stress reaction, may last a few days, a few weeks, or a few months and occasionally longer depending on the severity of the Critical Incident. When a person has an established support system or group (family, peers, professional aid), the stress reactions usually subside in a shorter amount of time. There are times, however, when the Critical Incident is too painful that professional assistance is needed in the form of counselors or mental health professionals. This is not an indication that a person is “crazy” or weak, simply that the event provoked emotions that were too overwhelming for their normal coping strategies.

The following are some common signs & symptoms of stress reactions:

*Indicates need for medical evaluation

Physical

- Fatigue
- Nausea
- Muscle tremors
- Twitches
- Chest pain*
- Difficulty breathing*
- Elevated BP
- Rapid heart rate
- Thirst headaches
- Visual difficulties
- Vomiting
- Grinding of teeth
- Weakness
- Dizziness
- Profuse sweating
- Chills
- Shock symptoms
- Fainting
- Etc....

Cognitive

- Blaming everyone
- Poor attention
- Poor decisions
- Heightened or lowered alertness
- Poor concentration
- Hyper vigilance
- Difficulty in identifying familiar objects or people
- Increased or decreased awareness of surroundings
- Poor problem solving
- Abstract thinking
- Loss of time memory
- Nightmares
- Intrusive images
- Etc....

Emotional

- Anxiety
- Guilt
- Grief
- Denial
- Severe panic (rare)
- Emotional shock
- Fear
- Uncertainty
- Loss of emotional control
- Inappropriate emotional response
- Apprehension
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Intense anger
- Irritability
- Agitation
- Temper flare-ups
- Etc....

Behavioral

- Change in speech patterns
- Withdrawal
- Emotional outbursts
- Suspiciousness
- Change in communications
- Loss or increase in appetite
- Alcohol consumption
- Inability to rest
- Antisocial activities
- Nonspecific bodily complaints
- Hyper alert to environment
- Startle reflex
- Erratic movement
- Change in sexual functionality
- Etc....

DEALING WITH STRESS FROM CRITICAL INCIDENTS

(within the first 24-48 hours)

- Try to have periods of strenuous physical exercise, alternated with times of rest & relaxation. This will alleviate some of the physical reactions.
- Structure your time and schedule to keep busy. Stay to a routine that you are familiar with.
- REMEMBER, you are a normal person having a normal reaction to an abnormal event—don't label yourself as crazy or weak.
- Talk to people—talk is the most healing medicine for Critical Incident Stress.
- Be aware of trying to numb the pain through the use of drugs and alcohol. You don't want to compound your stress with a substance abuse problem.
- Try not to be alone too often—spend time with family and friends. Reach out to others.
- Help co-workers and others who were involved in the incident by sharing your feelings and “status checks”.
- Keep a journal of thoughts surrounding the event. By chronicling your emotions on paper you can identify and deal with them.
- Do things that you find enjoyable.
- Keep in mind others around you that are under stress from the event or from being around you.
- Avoid any big life changes or decisions during this period. Do make daily decisions that will give you a sense of control, such as meal choices, clothing and places to go.
- Try to get plenty of rest, but avoid oversleeping. Wake and retire at your normal hours, if possible.
- Eat well-balanced and regular meals, even if difficult to at times. Your body needs nourishment.
- Re-occurring thoughts, dreams, and flashbacks are normal—don't try and fight them. They will decrease over time and become less painful.

FOR FAMILY MEMBERS & FRIENDS

- Listen carefully. Encourage sharing, but avoid over-questioning.
- Spend time with the traumatized person.
- Offer assistance and a listening ear if they have not asked for help.
- Reassure them that they are safe.
- Help them with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, caring for the family. Keep in mind that as time progresses these chores become easier for them to do themselves, but immediately they may need some assistance.
- Give them some private time when needed—avoid “smothering” them.
- Don’t take their anger or other feelings personally, as they are likely reacting in this manner because of the post-incident stress.
- Avoid statements such “lucky it wasn’t worse” and “c’mon...get over it!”—such statements do not console traumatized people. Tell them that you are sorry the event occurred and you are there to hopefully understand and help them.