

Responding to a Critical Incident

The intensity of a critical incident is difficult for many, with media coverage at its peak often leading to feelings of helplessness, fear, worry and anxiety. Following the aftermath of an incident, there are many things that family members, friends, community members and organisations can do to support people affected. This tip sheet provides some general information that can be useful.

Common Reactions to Expect

Physical: excessive alertness, fatigue/exhaustion, being easily startled, disturbed sleep and general aches and pains.

Cognitive: intrusive thoughts and memories of the event, visual flashbacks of the event, nightmares, poor concentration and memory, disorientation and confusion.

Behavioural: avoidance of places or activities that are reminders of the event, social withdrawal and isolation and loss of interest in normal activities.

Emotional: fear, numbness and detachment, depression, guilt, anger and irritability, anxiety and panic.

Coming to Terms with an Event

Recognise that you have been through a distressing experience and give yourself permission to experience some reaction to it. Don't be angry with yourself for being upset. Do not try to block out thoughts of what has happened. Gradually facing what has happened can assist you to come to terms with a traumatic experience.

Learning to accept the impact of an event can help with recovery. The Stages of Grief outlined below can help you identify what you might be experiencing:

- **Denial:** feelings of numbness and acting like nothing has happened
- **Anger:** a completely normal emotional response
- **Bargaining:** asking a lot of 'what if' questions, wishing we could go back and change things
- **Depression:** feelings of hopelessness and can come in waves
- **Acceptance:** grief comes in waves and it is possible to accept what has happened, but this takes time.

Keep reminding yourself that things will get better, and you do have the ability to manage. Give yourself time to adjust. Resilience is the norm, but it can take a while to bounce back.



How to Look after Yourself

Critical incidents can cause different responses in each of us, which need to be managed by our own individual self-care. This may include: -

- Limit exposure to media and footage of the critical incident.
- Get enough sleep, exercise regularly and eat well.
- Avoid using drugs and alcohol to cope.
- Maintain social contact with your close network.

How to Support Others

Provide an environment, as far as practical, removed from stressful situations or exposure to sights, sounds and smells of the emergency.

Promote calm by listening to people who wish to share their stories and emotions, without forcing them to talk.

Promote connectedness by helping people contact loved ones. Offer practical help to people to address immediate needs and concerns. Link people with available services.

Promote empowerment by letting people meet their own needs. Help people help themselves.

Promote hope by reassuring that their feelings are normal but be willing to help if they ask.

Remember to Listen, but keeping in mind:

Don't try to get the person to put the event in perspective before they are ready by saying things like "it could have been worse".

Don't give generic advice like "just try and forget about it", or "you have to get straight back on the horse" – these things may be impossible for the employee to do straight away and are likely to cause extra stress and confusion.