

Critical Incident:

A critical incident is a relatively sudden, untimely and unanticipated event or situation which is outside the range of usual human experience and which evokes unusually strong emotional reactions which have the potential to interfere with one's ability to function at the time the situation arises or later.

Many people experience a critical incident at some stage of their life. Sometimes a trauma may be experienced indirectly, eg as a bystander, or where friends or family are victims.

This leaflet is designed to help you to understand the typical reactions of others who have been in traumatic situations. It will give you some guidance in taking care of yourself so that recovery can be facilitated.

At the time of the incident you may have felt stunned or frozen, or felt that your sense of time was distorted or your perceptions very focused. You might have been angry, anxious or frustrated. Afterwards it is common to feel numb, in shock, unable to believe what occurred. Gradually the impact of the incident is felt, and the numbness wears off. At this time, you may experience intrusive thoughts of the incident, sleep is often disturbed, perhaps with nightmares, or you may experience 'flashbacks' where aspects of the event recur in imagination so vividly, you feel as if you are reliving the trauma. Self-doubts and 'what if's?' are common. All reactions are part of your body's efforts to come to terms with what you have experienced, part of the natural process to recovery. Talking to people that understand, whether friends, family, partner, counsellors, chaplains, colleagues or fellow survivors helps process the incident and provides emotional relief.

Remember,

- People react differently to traumatic events. They also progress through the effects of critical incident stress at different rates. Symptoms experienced may vary.
- Accept your own feelings and reactions to the incident as well as those of others. There is no wrong or right way to feel or think. Your reactions are valid.
- Most people do the best that they can at the time of a critical incident. Don't take too much responsibility for the incident or the way it went. Don't be too harsh on yourself.
- You have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event which no doubt will affect you in some way. Be aware that symptoms may develop. Be alert to the signs of critical incident stress in your general functioning.

Effects of Critical Incident Stress

Symptoms usually begin immediately or soon after the trauma. Sometimes symptoms are delayed for a period of months or in some cases even years after the incident although avoidance symptoms might have been present during this period.

Common effects:

- Nightmares, Insomnia; Flashback
- Intrusive thoughts of the incident; 'what if's?'
- Difficulties in concentration and memory
- Regression to earlier behaviours
- Apathy, no energy
- Inability to feel
- Decreased sexual interest, impotency
- Outbursts of aggression; Violent impulses
- Irritability; Hostility, rage
- Anxiety
- Startle reactions; hyperalertness
- Restlessness
- Shock or denial; Numbness
- Fear; Guilt; Grief
- Feelings of detachment from others
- Sadness, depression
- Mistrust
- Phobias
- Avoidance of reminders of the incident, of people or places connected to the incident

Effects on attitudes:

- A heightened sense of concern for the
- Well-being of loved ones
- Feelings of hopelessness and a sense of loss of control of one's life
- A sense of a foreshortened future
- Loss of trust in others, or in a God
- Loss of a sense of self as a worthwhile person; as invulnerable and immortal
- A sense that the world has changed; that it is not just or fair.
- Common concerns seem trivial

Physical Responses:

Nausea, vomiting	Diarrhoea
Dizziness	Fatigue
Heart palpitations	Rapid heart beat
Shaking, trembling	Sweating
Menstrual dysfunction	Loss of appetite
Muscular tension, headaches, aching neck and back pain	Chest pain (check with your GP)
Shortness of breath, Difficulty breathing,	Frequent low grade infections

Coping with the effects of critical incident stress

- Remember that these reactions will lessen in time; they are normal reactions to extreme stress.
- Keep, or return to, your usual routine as much as possible. Structure your time.
- Talk to family and friends; share your feelings and your concerns. This helps the healing process.
- Don't have rules about your progress, just go with how you feel.
- Avoid over-use of alcohol and drugs.
- Get some exercise or relaxation daily.
- Do something pleasant for yourself from time-to-time.
- Take some time and space to work through the event.
- Sometimes jotting down thoughts helps to process your experience cognitively as well as emotionally.

Delay making major decisions or life changes at this time; however making smaller day-to-day decisions increases your feeling of control over life.

- Keep up some social contact.
- Eat regular, balanced meals even if you don't feel hungry.
- Memories of what you have experienced will fade with time. Don't have unrealistic expectations that they will disappear early.
- Check on friends or colleagues who shared the experience with you. You may be having a good day and can be supportive. They can do the same for you at another time.
- Remember, you are not going crazy.
- Remember, help is available if you find that you are feeling too much pain.
- Remember that there is always hope, and that the world is waiting for you to get back into it.

When to seek help

- If numbness persists and you continue to feel detached from life.
- If you feel overwhelmed by intense emotions or physical symptoms.
- If your relationships are deteriorating as a result of your experience.
- If you are abusing alcohol or drugs.
- If nightmares or flashbacks persist.
- If intrusive thoughts persist and are discomforting.
- If you cannot get on with the job after a reasonable period.
- If you are unable to discuss, express or share your experiences, perhaps because you have no social supports.

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The University of Sydney

Counselling Service

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