

Critical Incident Stress Management

Coping with Trauma in the Workplace

Coping with a critical incident can be one of the most challenging tasks you and your team ever have to face.

While the incident itself is difficult enough to cope with, the residual effects can be powerful and longer lasting if not handled effectively. Getting things “back to normal” is no easy task. While you may never forget the event, you can learn strategies to help everyone cope and begin the process of moving forward.



What is a Critical Incident?

Tragedies, the death of a colleague, serious injuries, or threatening situations – these events are known as *critical incidents*.

A critical incident is any event that causes an unusually intense stress reaction. The distress people experience after a critical incident limits their ability to cope, impairs their ability to adjust, and negatively impacts the work environment.

Examples of critical incidents include:

- Physical violence or threats of physical violence
- Employee accident or injury in the workplace or while on duty
- Witnessing a serious accident or crime
- Intimidating, threatening or abusive language and/or behavior
- Sudden illness or death of a coworker or customer
- Natural or man-made disasters that impact the ability to fully function in the workplace

Understanding Reactions to Trauma

The damaging impacts of tragedy can be lasting and powerful for everyone involved. Even though the event may be over, an

affected person may continue to experience strong emotional and physical reactions. It is very common, and in fact quite normal, for people to experience these types of “aftershocks” in the wake of a traumatic event.

Typical responses to critical incidents include:

- Denial and numbness
- Fear and anxiety
- Anger
- Grief and sadness
- Headaches and body aches
- Fatigue and difficulty sleeping
- Difficulty concentrating

These reactions are called “critical incident responses”. Each of the responses listed above are normal and expected coping mechanisms following a traumatic event.

Things to Remember About Trauma

Everyone responds differently to trauma. Try not to judge yourself or others. This is an important time to honor your own feelings and experiences as well as those of others.

Experiencing a critical incident may trigger memories of other trauma you have experienced. This is normal and will pass in time.

It can be helpful to consider the positive results that can come from experiencing a trauma or loss. The experience can lead to a reassessment of what’s really important, an opportunity to make changes and to be more appreciative of those around us whom we love.

For many people, surviving a crisis can help build self-confidence. Knowing that you have the strength to manage through a very difficult situation can lead to believing in yourself.

While we may question the appropriateness of “grieving” at work, it is necessary in order to put closure on the incident. People grieve in different ways and those differences need to be supported and respected.

Take Care of Yourself

When you have experienced a trauma, it can be a shock to your whole system. The following are some ideas to help you cope with any physical or emotional symptoms you may be experiencing:

Exercise regularly. It can help work off some physical stress symptoms, leaving you feeling calmer and better able to relax. If you’re feeling lethargic it can help energize you and clear your mind.

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Eat well-balanced and regular meals, even if you don't feel like it. Good nutrition is very important when you are feeling stressed.

Get plenty of rest. Avoid caffeine, especially if you are having trouble sleeping.

Don't label yourself as "crazy". Remind yourself you're having normal reactions to an abnormal situation.

Don't try to avoid or deny recurring thoughts or feelings about the incident. Flashbacks and dreams are normal and will decrease over time.

Avoid the use of drugs or alcohol, including prescription and over-the-counter drugs to numb the emotional pain. It will only complicate and delay your recovery.

Structure your time and set priorities. Stick to your normal routine, but give yourself permission to skip the extras for a while.

Don't make any major life changes or decisions. Do make as many small decisions as possible to reassert your sense of control.

Do things that you enjoy. Take mini-breaks, go out to dinner or watch a movie.

Give yourself permission to feel sad and share your feelings with others.

Don't be afraid to set limits with others when you don't feel like talking. You don't have to discuss the incident or your feelings when you don't want to.

Talk with people you trust: your family, friends and coworkers. Church, family, friends and other community resources can be valuable sources of support. Don't be afraid to reach out. People do care.

Write down your thoughts and feelings. This can be especially helpful if you're having trouble sleeping or when you wake from a troubling dream.

Ask for help if you need it. If you are having trouble coping on your own, help is available from many sources.

Professional assistance from a counselor or other mental health specialist may sometimes be necessary. This does not imply that you are weak or "crazy". It simply means that the particular event was just too powerful to handle on your own. At work, go to your manager or human resources department for help.

How to Help Coworkers

Take care of yourself first. Then help others. Although there is no "right" way to handle these events, there are general responses that many people have found helpful.

Be an Attentive Listener

- Listen carefully and acknowledge others' feelings as being normal.
- Be sensitive to individual circumstances and different points of view.
- Don't respond with "It's not that bad" or "You're lucky it wasn't worse".

Instead, say that you are sorry such an event occurred and you want to understand and help.

- Don't take emotional responses like anger or irritability personally.
- Respect an individual's need for privacy. If someone doesn't want to talk about the incident or their feelings, don't insist or force.
- Keep communication open. Be available and accessible.

Reach Out at Work

- Organize support groups, such as a peer buddy system, at work to help one another during this difficult time.
- Offer a listening ear to someone who hasn't asked for help but may need it.
- Give encouragement, support and understanding with on-the-job issues.
- Speak with your manager for help and resources.

Help is Just a Phone Call Away

In the event of a critical incident in the workplace, Business Health Services (BHS) is available to provide confidential support and assistance.

Get started on the road to recovery today.

Call BHS toll-free at: **800-327-2251**



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