

Interagency Critical Incident Stress Management Program

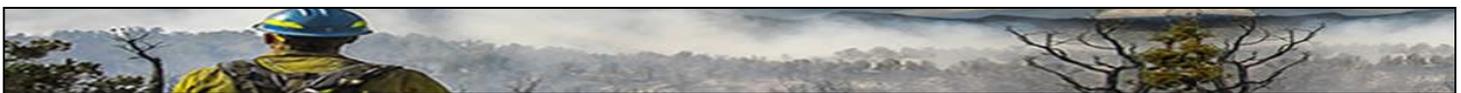
Reactions after a Critical Incident

Immediately After the Event

- Emotions following a critical incident are normally different or more intense than usual. Don't be afraid of them.
- Accept your emotions as normal and part of the incident survival and recovery process.
- Anxiety or "triggers" relating to being involved in a similar event in the past.
- Try not to second-guess your actions. Evaluate your actions based on your perceptions at the time of the event, not afterwards.
- Understand that your actions during the incident may have been based on the need to make critical decisions for action. Some of these decisions had to be made within seconds.
- Accept that you may have experienced fear. Fear is a normal emotion and should not be interpreted as weakness.
- Fear the safety of yourself or loved ones.
- Disbelief at what has happened; feeling numb, unreal, isolated, or detached from other people
- Sleeping can be difficult for a while, and you may have dreams and nightmares. This is normal. Unusual sleep and dreaming patterns usually return to normal within a few weeks.
- Increased startle response.
- Guilt and/or self-doubt related to the traumatic event.
- Anger or irritability at what has happened; at the senselessness of it all.

How to Handle the Next Few Days

- Remind yourself that your actions are a normal result of trauma and should decrease over time and become less painful.
- Avoid using alcohol as a primary critical incident stress management strategy.
- Try to get back into your normal routine as soon as possible; you may need to gradually introduce yourself to tasks that seem difficult.
- Be kind and patient with yourself; engage in enjoyable and relaxing activities.
- Continue to talk to your family, friends and colleagues about the trauma.
- Even if you feel a bit distant from other people, do not reject genuine support.
- Maintain your exercise routine. If you do not have a routine, start some daily light exercise.
- Do not take the activities of the systems personally. Keep the needs of the various systems (administrative investigation, criminal investigation, the press, etc.) in perspective.
- It is normal to have the incident play over and over in your head. Repetitive incident replay is a feature of the psychological process leading to recovery. Incident replay normally gradually subsides over a period of several weeks.
- Physical symptoms: muscle tension, fatigue, headaches, nausea, lack of appetite.
- Problems with concentration, or memory (especially aspects of the traumatic event).
- There may be some aspects of the experience that will be difficult, if not impossible, to forget.



Certain severe traumatic events, however, threaten both the physical and mental health of individuals. An unusually intense stress response may interfere with the body's immune system, rational thinking and one's emotions. Severe stress impairs a person's ability to respond to further challenges.

Extreme stress disrupts performance and threatens health. It may leave permanent psychological scars if it is not managed carefully. Keep an open mind. Allow your family, friends, and peers to help. If your reaction(s) continues to seriously disrupt your life, seek appropriate help.

Positive Recovery

Keep in mind that you are naturally resilient. If you do not feel good now, allow yourself some time to process the event. You will feel better over time. Positive recovery involves the following:

- You will accept what happened. You will accept any experience of fear and any feelings of vulnerability as part of being human. Vulnerability is not helplessness.
- You will accept that no one can control everything. You will keep a positive perspective.
- Learn about or become acquainted with the features of normal post-critical incident responses. This will help you to understand that much of what you're feeling is a normal part of the recovery process.
- You will learn and grow from the experience. You will be able to assess all future circumstances on their own merits. You will become stronger, more empathetic and more resilient.
- You will be aware of changes in yourself that may contribute to problems at home, work, and other environments. You will work positively to overcome these problems.
- Be especially aware of any personal suicidal thoughts or feelings. Although rare, suicidal thoughts have been known to occur following critical incidents.
- Prepare yourself for some negativity. There are few critical incidents that are not criticized by someone. *Stay grounded in what you know to be true* to minimize the damaging effects of unjustified and uninformed private or public opinion.

Family, Loved Ones and Friends

Following a critical incident, especially those in which and individual could have been killed, some spouses and loved ones come to realize the true dangers of firefighting. The dangers of now feel much more real and generate firefighter-safety anxiety. In such cases, the reality of the critical incident has overwhelmed the psychological defenses which previously protected the spouse, partner or family members from the anxiety associated with the risks of firefighting.

It is important to know that the critical incident does not have to involve actual death or serious injury, nor must it involve the actual loved one working in fire. Families can be affected by what happens to firefighters that are not their husband, wife, or partner due to the uniqueness and closeness of the culture.

Individuals involved in critical incidents can help lessen spouse/family anxiety by openly discussing the dangers of firefighting and how they manage the risks or threat of the actual incident.

Do not become a critical incident statistic. Seek appropriate professional assistance if your relationship becomes troubled following involvement in a critical incident.



Seeking Help

First responders may be reluctant to ask for help for fear of stigma; showing weakness, disciplinary action by their agency, not strong enough to the job etc. It is rare for firefighters, law enforcement and other to share their feelings of stress with one another and may be awkward for a comrade to even suggest someone seek help. A significant step in reducing this stigma is education, encouragement, and support from all levels.

Seeking assistance IS consistent with their image and in fact, demonstrates STRENGTH.

See your agency's Human Resources Department for information about Employee Assistant Programs.

While in most instances the symptoms of critical incident stress will subside in a matter of weeks, there may be a few individuals who will suffer prolonged or permanent emotional trauma that can adversely affect their mental and physical health, relationships, careers, and daily functioning.

Take notice if you are experiencing any of the following: you are uncomfortable in your own skin, you don't want to leave your safety zone; you have obsessive thoughts and compulsions to act on them. You feel profoundly depressed, hopeless, helpless, guilty, or have considered suicide. Your behavior has changed; you are more argumentative, engaging in fights, abusing alcohol or medication, or are taking increased unnecessary risks. Your mind cannot relax, you have repeated horrific nightmares, frequent intrusive explicit flashbacks, or you feel like you are not connected to yourself or your thoughts.