

Information for family and friends of those affected by a critical incident



What is happening to my family member or friend

Your family member or friend has been involved in an emotionally-charged incident, often known as a critical incident. The following information is provided to assist you to support the person you care about after such an event.

Emergency services personnel may be exposed to critical incidents at any time during their careers. A critical incident is any event that has a stressful impact sufficient to overwhelm an individual's usual coping strategies. Critical incidents can be sudden, shocking and outside the range of ordinary human experience, however they may also be an event that has a specific personal significance to an individual. Sometimes this exposure may result in strong emotional and/or physical reactions. These reactions are relatively commonplace and normal. Research shows that up to 87% of emergency

services personnel will be affected by critical incident stress at some time in their careers. Work experience or years of service do not necessarily make emergency services personnel immune to the impact of critical incident stress.

A number of factors can contribute to an individual's reaction to a critical incident. These factors are related to the nature of the incident and the personal relevance of the incident. An emotional reaction to an incident is not a sign of inadequacy or psychological problems, rather it is an indication that, for that particular person, the incident was out of the ordinary or had specific significance.

Things to remember

The reactions to such an event can include physical, emotional and behavioural changes. Signs such as agitation, tearfulness and sleep disturbance are not uncommon. For more details, see 'Information to help you cope with a critical incident' that has been given to your family member or friend.

These signs can occur at the time of the event, within hours, days, or even within weeks. Some people do not experience any changes at all and this is not unusual or uncommon. The signs will normally subside and disappear in time. There are things that can be done to help reduce them.

Things that may help your family member or friend

- Don't be afraid to ask what you can do that they would find helpful.
- You may not understand what your family member or friend is going through at this time, but offer your love and support.
- Encourage, but do NOT pressure them to talk about the incident and their reaction to it.
- Talk can be the best medicine. Your primary 'job' is to listen and reassure.
- Encourage them to have some periods of physical exercise in the first few days after an incident (this should be consistent with normal levels of exercise and medical advice should be sought if there are any difficulties with exercising).

- Exercise alternated with relaxation should alleviate some of the physical reactions.
- The reactions they are experiencing are not unusual after such an event. Recognise this and reinforce it with them.
- Encourage them to avoid over use of drugs or alcohol, including caffeine and cigarettes.
- Keep as normal a routine as possible.
- Encourage them to spend time with others or help them organise time alone if needed.
- Don't make any big life changes or decisions.
- Encourage them to get plenty of rest and maintain a healthy diet.
- Recurring thoughts or dreams are normal - encourage them not to fight them - they should decrease over time and become less painful.

When professional assistance can help

If the signs of stress your family member or friend is experiencing do not begin to subside, if they intensify, or if you are concerned in any way, encourage them to seek further assistance. The Tasmanian Emergency Services Critical Incident Stress Management Program offers 24 hour telephone contact to emergency services personnel, as well as face to face follow-up after initial contact if required.

Information about the CISM Program

The CISM Program began in 1988 and is responsible for managing the impact of critical incidents on emergency services personnel, both career and volunteer. The program consists of peers (career emergency services personnel) and psychologists.

A cornerstone to the success of the program has been our commitment to integrity in service delivery and confidentiality. Confidentiality will only be breached if there is an imminent and real threat of harm to the emergency service worker or any other person, or if there is a legal requirement to do so.

The program members train regularly throughout the year to review progress, keep abreast of new research and continually improve their skills.

The program provides the following services:

- Education/information sessions about the program and critical incident stress management to emergency services personnel.
- Telephone contact to check on personnel after incidents.
- Defuses and on scene support.
- Group and individual debriefing, where deemed appropriate by the Clinical Consultant.
- Follow up assistance by either telephone or face to face contact with a peer or psychologist.
- Advice to partners, family and friends is provided on request.