

Information to help you cope with a critical incident

What is a critical incident?

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 your 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 the individual and may result in strong emotional and/or physical reactions.

These reactions are relatively commonplace and are normal. In fact up to 87% of all emergency service personnel are affected at some time during their careers by critical incidents. Work experience, years of service or experiencing similar incidents do not necessarily make emergency service personnel immune to the impact of critical incident stress.

There are a range of strong emotional effects associated with traumatic events which are common. Learning to recognise these reactions and emotions that occur following an abnormal event can help you to understand and feel more at ease with these feelings. This in turn can help you adjust to what has happened.

Common reactions to critical incidents

Each person's experience is different, however there are some common reactions among people caught up in a critical incident. It can be reassuring to know that these reactions are not unusual.

Some common reactions and feelings are:

SHOCK

- Disbelief at what has happened.
- Numbness - the event may seem unreal, like a dream.
- You may be slow to comprehend what has happened.

FEARS

- Of death or damage to yourself or your family.
- Recurrence of the event.
- Personal vulnerability - it may be difficult to admit that you are vulnerable.
- You may experience panic and anxious feelings.
- Other apparently unrelated fears may appear.

ANGER

- Outrage at what has happened or at who 'caused it, or allowed it to happen'.
- Anger at the injustice and senselessness of it all.
- Anger at other emergency services personnel, the public or the media for not acting properly or quickly enough.

HELPLESSNESS

- Feeling of helplessness because of the inability to prevent some things from happening.

SHAME OR GUILT

- For having been exposed as helpless, emotional and needing others.
- For not having reacted as you would have wished.

- For not having reacted as others have.
- If you have made a mistake.

SADNESS

- About personal loss.
- About human destruction.
- For the loss of the belief that the world is safe and predictable.

Effects on behaviour

TENSION - you may be easily startled or agitated.

SLEEP DISTURBANCES - you may be finding it difficult to sleep or you may be having thoughts that prevent sleep, for example, replaying the incident.

DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES - you may be dreaming about the incident or other frightening events.

DEPRESSION - you may feel depressed about the event or past events, or guilty about how you behaved.

INTRUSIVE MEMORIES AND FEELINGS - your concentration may be affected by memories, flashbacks and feelings about the event. You may be trying to shut these out. This may lead to numbing of feelings and thoughts.

You may also experience episodes of reliving the critical incident, known as flashbacks. These can include visual images and other sensations associated with the event such as smell, taste or pain.

SOCIAL WITHDRAWAL - you may have a strong desire to be alone (or you may fear being alone).

PHYSICAL SENSATIONS - you may be experiencing a range of physical sensations including tiredness, heart palpitations, tremors, breathing difficulties, headaches, muscle tension, aches and pains, loss of appetite, nausea, diarrhoea or constipation.

DELAYED EFFECTS - any of these effects may occur months or even years after the event when something triggers them.

The effects usually only last for a short period of time and gradually diminish. Many people have no reactions to critical incidents and this is perfectly normal too.

While these symptoms are not unusual, they can be very distressing for you and your family.

What can you do to help yourself?

- Rest more.
- Have contact with friends.
- Try not to fight recurring thoughts, dreams and flashbacks.
- Accept that you are reacting normally.
- Rest if fatigued.
- Arrange your day to include time alone, or in company as needed.
- Maintain your usual schedule as much as possible.
- Eat balanced meals regularly. Eating a little, often, may help.
- Do some physical exercise particularly in the first few days (check with our GP if you have difficulty exercising).
- Express your feelings as they arise.

- Talk to people who care about you.
- Talk to a CISM team member if your feelings are intense or prolonged. They might suggest you speak with one of the team psychologists.
- Avoid excessive use of alcohol, cigarettes, caffeine and other drugs.

When to seek professional help

- If you feel you cannot handle the intense feelings or physical sensations.
- If, after a period of time, you continue to feel numb and empty and are concerned about these feelings.
- If you continue to have nightmares and poor sleep.
- If you have no person or group with whom to share your emotions and you feel the need to do so.
- If your relationships seem to be suffering badly.
- If you smoke, drink or take drugs to excess since the event, or your work performance suffers.
- If you are suffering 'burn-out'.

Where to seek professional help

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.

Anyone can make direct contact with the program on our 24 hour contact number 0427 181 207.

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 yourself or any other person, or if there is a legal requirement to do so.

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.