Critical Incident Stress

You have been involved in a significant or critical event. Even though the event may be over, you may be experiencing, or may experience later, some strong emotional or physical reactions. It is very common, in fact quite normal, for people to experience emotional aftershocks, or critical incident stress, following such an incident.

Critical incident stress is the physical, mental, and emotional reactions that go along with living and working day to day in the midst of pain, chaos, filth, and loss. No matter how well-trained, conditioned, or streetwise we may be, it is hard to escape this kind of wear and tear.

Critical incident stress may appear immediately after the event, a few hours, or a few days later.

A NORMAL REACTION... OF NORMAL PEOPLE... TO AN ABNORMAL EVENT...

What is a traumatic event or critical incident? Any incident which causes us to experience unusually strong emotional reactions which interfere with our ability to function, either at the scene or later.

Critical incidents may include, but are not limited to, incidents of serious threat to significant others or to self, line of duty death or injury, multiple homicides, injury or death of a child, multiple injury/fatality accidents, and community wide disasters such as floods, hurricanes, or fires.

Incidents or situations do not have to be major disasters to cause stress. Cumulative stress ("Burnout") is often a mix of home and work stress, building up over time, which eventually erodes personal resources.
Signs & Symptoms of Stress

Common signs and symptoms of a stress reaction are listed below. These may last a few days, a few weeks, or a few months depending on the severity of the event.

**Physical**
- fatigue
- nausea
- muscle tremors
- chest pain
- difficulty breathing
- elevated BP
- rapid heart rate
- weakness
- headaches
- visual problems

**Thinking**
- confusion
- poor attention
- poor decision making
- altered alertness
- poor concentration
- hypervigilance
- poor problem solving
- nightmares
- intrusive images

**Relational**
- isolated
- resentful
- lonely
- lack of intimacy
- lashing out
- social withdrawal
- intolerant of others
- nagging

**Emotional**
- anxiety
- guilt
- grief
- denial
- fear
- uncertainty
- depression
- intense anger
- irritability

**Behavioral**
- change in:
  - communication
  - sleep
  - appetite
  - alcohol use
  - suspiciousness
  - withdrawal
  - emotional outbursts
  - antisocial acts

**Things to try**

- Talk to people - talking is very healing
- Reach out - people do care!
- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible
- Avoid using alcohol to relax
- Do things you enjoy doing
- Avoid making major life changes or decisions
- Get plenty of rest
- Eat well-balanced and regular meals
- Exercise to reduce physical stress
- Share this information with your significant others

**For Family Members & Friends**

- Listen carefully
- Spend time with the person affected
- Offer your attention and listening ear
- Reassure them that they are safe
- Give them opportunities for private time
- Don’t take their anger or other feelings personally
- Familiarize yourself with signs and symptoms of stress and it’s impact on families
Critical Incident Stress Management

Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) is a comprehensive approach to traumatic stress management. It encompasses a wide range of programs and intervention strategies designed to manage stress in emergency service personnel and to assist them in managing and recovering from the significant stress they encounter in their daily work.

CISM includes pre-incident education, significant other support programs, defusings, debriefings, on-scene support services, follow-up services, individual consults, peer support, informal discussions, and crisis intervention training.

Critical Incident Stress Debriefing

A Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) is a structured group meeting or discussion in which personnel are given the opportunity to discuss their thoughts and reactions about a significant or traumatic event in a confidential, structured format.

Based upon core principles of crisis intervention and education, a CISD is designed to mitigate the impact of a critical incident and to assist personnel in recovering as quickly as possible from the stress associated with the event.

A CISD is conducted by a specially trained team composed of peer support personnel from the emergency services and mental health professionals. A CISD is not psychotherapy nor is it a substitute for therapy.

Stress Management

Stress management is an ongoing process of dealing with the stress in our everyday lives. It involves making thoughtful choices about your stress: what to keep and what to let go.

Experienced personnel know that emergency service can take it's toll on health, marriages, families, and careers. Stress may result in careless, or even fatal, errors or feelings of numbness, isolation, burn-out, and anger.

You can learn how to manage your stress and enhance your wellness. Components of an effective stress management program include good nutrition, proper exercise, effective relaxation, and maintaining your perspective.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF
SO YOU CAN
TAKE CARE OF THE JOB.

Available Resources

Contact Dr. Clark, WSP Department Psychologist, for more information on developing a personal stress management program or to discuss CISM.

The WSP Peer Support Team is designed to complement the services provided by the Department Psychologist. Peer support provides a way to “talk-out” problems with specially trained coworkers who understand and want to help. Peer supporters use active listening skills, help clarify issues and explore options, support a person through their problem-solving process, and refer to appropriate professionals as needed.

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