
CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS

SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION FOR SCHOOL-RELATED TRAUMA

Critical Incident stress is a normal reaction to an abnormal event. A Critical Incident is any incident that may cause people to experience unusually strong emotional reactions which have the potential to interfere with their ability to function (or think clearly) after the event. Even though the event may be over, you may now be experiencing some emotional or physical reactions.

It is very common, in fact quite normal for people to experience “aftershocks” when they have gone through a traumatic event. Sometimes these aftershocks (stress reactions) appear immediately after the incident, but they may appear a few hours, days, or even weeks later. Critical incident stress reactions may last only a few days, but some symptoms can often last longer, depending on the severity of the traumatic event and other factors.

With the understanding and support of loved ones, stress reactions usually pass fairly quickly. Sometimes returning to the “new normal” takes more time. Occasionally the traumatic event is so disturbing that professional assistance (from a counselor, clergy, EAP, etc.) may be necessary. Sometimes the memories of certain images, sounds or smells can continue to trouble those who have gone through a trauma. This does not imply weakness or craziness. It simply indicates that the particular event was just too powerful for the person to manage by themselves.

STRESS and TRAUMA

- The word “stress” comes from Latin and means force, pressure, or strain
- As we experience increased levels of distress, or multiple trauma’s, we can begin to lose our mental or physical efficiency
- Without stress there would be no change, growth, or production

- Not everyone will experience these different stress responses, but we do know that usually:
 - 1/3 will experience little or no stress reaction
 - 1/3 will experience moderate symptoms
 - 1/3 will experience severe symptoms

- Symptoms may show up immediately after the incident (acute reaction), or show up after a few days or weeks have gone by (delayed reaction); new symptoms may pile on to others (cumulative stress reaction) and can feel more difficult to deal with
- No one is immune to critical incident stress, regardless of past experience or current role
- Stress is a normal or natural response, designed to protect, maintain, and enhance our lives
- A stress reaction can have physical, emotional, behavioral, cognitive and spiritual elements

The following page provides some very common signs and symptoms of stress reactions -

SYMPTOMS + STRESS REACTIONS to CRITICAL INCIDENTS

Everyone reacts differently to stress, trauma, and grief. It is very common, in fact, quite normal, for people to experience some of the following reactions:

PHYSICAL

- > fatigue
- > nausea / vomiting
- > muscle tremors
- > twitches
- > elevated BP

> chest pain *
> difficulty breathing *
> shock symptoms *
> rapid heart rate *
** these symptoms indicate the need for immediate medical evaluation*

- > thirst
- > headache
- > jumpiness
- > visual difficulties
- > grinding of teeth
- > weakness
- > dizziness
- > profuse sweating
- > chills
- > fainting
- > etc. (something that is different...now)

COGNITIVE

- > nightmares
- > confusion
- > poor attention
- > difficulty making decisions
- > intrusive images
- > poor concentration
- > can't make decisions
- > memory problems
- > hypervigilance (hyper-watchfulness - can lead to sleeplessness)
- > forgetful
- > difficulty identifying once familiar people or objects
- > poor problem solving
- > abstract thinking issues (loss of time, place, etc.)
- > disturbed thinking
- > blaming someone
- > heightened or lowered alertness
- > etc. (something that has changed...since)

EMOTIONAL

- > anxious
- > guilty
- > irritable
- > grief / sadness
- > nervous
- > uncertain
- > denial
- > distant / 1000-mile stare
- > emotional shock
- > anger / sudden rage
- > fearful
- > severe panic (rare)
- > loss of emotional control
- > depression
- > inappropriate emotional response (crying or laughing at the wrong time...)
- > apprehensive
- > feeling overwhelmed
- > feeling agitated
- > resentful
- > etc. (something that is different...now)

BEHAVIORAL

- > change in activity level
- > change in speech patterns
- > withdrawn
- > emotional outbursts
- > suspiciousness
- > job performance changes
- > change in usual communications
- > increase (or loss) of appetite
- > alcohol consumption
- > inability to rest/sleep
- > avoiding eye contact
- > acting distant/ antisocial
- > hyper-alert to surroundings
- > non-specific bodily complaints
- > 'startle' reflex intensified
- > pacing
- > erratic movements
- > change in sexual functioning
- > etc. (something that has changed...since)

SPIRITUAL

- > sudden changes in religious practices
- > questioning of spiritual beliefs
- > bargaining with one's God or Divine Power
- > loss of spiritual connection
- > sense of unworthiness or guilt

What if someone needs more help in dealing with a critical incident or related stress?

Additional resources in your community include:

- ◆ CISM team
- ◆ Doctor or Local Clinic
- ◆ Red Cross
- ◆ Counseling
- ◆ Workplace EAP
- ◆ Clergy