

FEAP NEWSLETTER

A Series of Educational Articles from your Faculty and Employee Assistance Program

Critical Incident Stress – What it is and What to do

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A **Critical Incident** is any event that is unexpected, acute, abnormal stress exceeding the normal coping capacities of individuals. It is an **abnormal** event that causes **normal** people to experience **normal** and predictable stress reactions. In the wake of the terrorist action against the United States on September 11, we, as a people were all part of a national critical incident. This is an example of an abnormally stressful event in our lives. Others can be the death or suicide of a coworker or coworker's family member, the death or severe disablement of a client/resident/customer, a house fire, or an accumulation of abnormal events in the lives of employees. At times, the news we hear and see and our reactions may exceed our normal coping abilities. Each of us will have our own reactions to the critical event and to the news about losses.

Because of this, it is important to understand more about the common reactions to critical incident stress, to be able to recognize when the stress reactions are more severe and to understand what resources can help.

Critical incidents have been shown to produce some fairly predictable stress reactions or symptoms. We may feel irritable, sad or overwhelmed. We may feel angry. We may have difficulty sleeping and experience troubling fears or flashbacks. Our thinking may be affected because we are preoccupied and cannot concentrate. We may withdraw from others, either at home or at work and we suffer when critical incident stress and its symptoms are not addressed.

Common Reactions to Critical Incident Stress

Can be physical

- Nausea
- Tremor/shakes/chills
- Upset stomach, diarrhea
- Sleep disturbance
- Sweating
- Rapid heart beat
- Muscle aches
- Dry mouth

Emotional

- Sadness
- Anger
- Anxiety or worry
- Denial
- Depression

- Wishing to die
- Guilt or fear

Cognitive

- Confusion
- Difficulty concentrating
- Memory problems
- Distressing dreams
- Intrusive thoughts

And/or Behavioral

- Withdrawal/silence
- Suspiciousness
- Increased/decreased appetite
- Increased smoking/use of alcohol

Some important things to know about Critical Incident Stress reactions:

- Your reactions to this event will change and fluctuate over time. Don't expect yourself to "keep it together" all the time.
- As the particular critical event unfolds and new news becomes available, emotions will be triggered off and on several times each day.
- Go ahead and spend some time each day conferring with friends and family about the tragedy but also spend some time focusing on the normal aspects of life: your work, your

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family activities. Spending many hours reliving the event will re-traumatize you over and over. Our coping abilities are strong and resilient but can only tolerate so much.

- Don't feel guilty about living life. We can respect the losses and continue with living.

Dealing with Critical Incident Stress: Helpful Hints

- ❑ Talk to people; it can be the most healing medicine, but do so in small doses. Share your feelings, as you feel comfortable.
- ❑ Continue your normal routines as much as possible.
- ❑ Exercise. The physical outlet of emotional energy is very helpful.
- ❑ Get plenty of rest so your body has the energy to deal with stress.
- ❑ Consider keeping a journal to help express your feelings after the incident.
- ❑ Maintain healthy eating habits.
- ❑ Reduce time spent with persons or tasks that stress you, and increase the time spent with people and activities that sustain or nurture you.
- ❑ Utilize prayer or meditation.
- ❑ Practice relaxation techniques like deep breathing.
- ❑ Make no big decisions or life changes.
- ❑ Accept your symptoms as normal. Do not label yourself as "crazy".

What else can help?"

Your Faculty *and* Employee Assistance Program can schedule individual appointments with a licensed mental health professional to assess the symptoms, provide brief counseling and/or refer for additional help. These FREE and Confidential services are available 24 hours/day by calling 434 243-2643 for appointments or 1 800 847-9355 evenings/weekends.



The FEAP can also meet with groups of employees for stress debriefing sessions. A debriefing is a structured group session to help staff verbalize thoughts and reactions, support one another, and learn how to manage the resulting stress following a critical incident. Debriefings usually last from 1 – 2 hours and are led by trained facilitators through the FEAP. Material discussed in debriefings is confidential and debriefings are designed to accelerate recovery after abnormal events. Call 434 243-2643 to schedule a debriefing with your group.