Dealing with Critical Incidents

Your perception

The nature of our work means that we may become directly involved in traumatic situations with little or no warning. Each incident will affect different people in different ways. Usually we can deal with this by talking informally with colleagues. Often people look back on their role as something positive, feeling they have played a useful part and learned from it. Some don’t even give the experience a second thought. Occasionally though, people can be hit (often quite unexpectedly) by a traumatic stress reaction.

This hand out explains what to look out for and the help available.

How does this affect me?

Even if you feel you are pretty resilient, the experience may affect you more than you think or are prepared to admit, even to yourself.

When the incident involves death or significant injury, the personal impact can be greater, particularly if a colleague, friend, child or other vulnerable individual is involved. Reactions will vary from person to person and incident to incident.

Possible reactions

Your feelings may include

Sadness
- For deaths and injuries of every kind

Guilt
- For not having done more
- For having survived

Anger
- At what has happened
- At whoever caused it or let it happen
- At the injustice of it all
- At the lack of understanding of others
- At the inefficiency of the ‘system’.

Shame
- For not having reacted as you would have wished
- For having appeared ‘needy’

Fear
- Of ‘breaking down’ or ‘losing control’
- Of a similar event happening again

Memories
- Of past, similar event
- Of feelings of loss or of concern for others in your life
Disappointment
- Which can alternate with hope

These reactions may be worse if there has been a death; a feeling of wanting to have done more; the incident followed closely on top of other stressful events in your life; or you feel that you have little support from colleagues, friends and family.

Physical and mental reactions

**Physical reactions** include: tiredness, sleeplessness,’ racing’ heart, nausea, headaches, neck and backaches, muscular tension, tightness in the chest and throat, changes in eating habits and sexual interest.

**Mental reactions** may be loss of concentration and/or motivation, poor memory, nightmares, flashbacks (vivid images or unexpectedly reliving the experience), hypervigilance (always on your guard), or being easily startled.

You may find yourself withdrawing from those closest to you, unable to express your feelings or let them help. Irritability, loss of sense of humour and impatience with self and others are very common. Your family and friends may be distressed and confused, feeling left out as they try to understand how they can help you. You can help them and yourself by letting them know what you want or need.

It is important to remember that your reactions are part of a natural process, that your body-mind is primed to heal itself, and that letting your feelings come out in the open can help to reduce the time it takes to recover.

After the incident

There are some strategies you can use to make things easier to bear post-incident. Your mind’s defence mechanism may not let you feel the full impact of an incident straightaway; the event may seem unreal, almost dream-like. You may be in shock. Your feelings will slowly unfold as the days go by.

**How can you help yourself?**

- Keep yourself occupied with other things, whilst being careful not to ‘overdo’ it
- Accept your reactions – it says nothing about you as a person – it happens to others too
- Talk about your feelings to friends/colleagues, who were also involved in the incident
- Return to the scene of the incident and confront the reality of it all
- Accept any support that is being offered, be that practical or emotional
- Balance time on your own with time in the company of friends, family, colleagues
- Accepting their pain is often part of the healing
- Remind yourself that you are still essentially the same person
In addition:

- Don’t bottle up your feelings, tell someone
- Don’t avoid talking about what happened
- Don’t be too hard on yourself, give yourself a bit of ‘slack’, whilst you adjust to what has happened
- Don’t expect the memories to go away immediately, it may take some time
- Do try to re-establish your normal social and work routines as quickly as possible
- Do drive with greater care; your concentration may be impaired
- Do be more careful in general – accidents are more likely to happen at this time

Look for additional help, if you…

- Have difficulties handling intense feelings
- Continue to experience physical reactions
- Have to keep highly active in order to cope
- Continue to have nightmares or sleep badly
- Feel isolated or have no-one to turn to
- Are aware that your relationships are suffering
- Develop sexual problems
- Are having accidents
- Your work performance is suffering
- Are smoking/drinking to excess since the event
- Continue to rely on/are taking medication to excess
- Are suffering from depression or exhaustion
- Cannot control your memories of the event

Restoring the balance long term

Take good care of yourself. Your health (physical and psychological) is your most valuable resource.

- Eat regularly and healthily
- Take regular exercise (particularly aerobic)
- Ensure you are getting enough sleep
- Take leave (and avoid the work phone if possible)
- Avoid drinking too much alcohol
- Seek help if you are feeling unwell
- Pay attention to your work-life balance
- Invest in relationships with friends and family
- Volunteer to help make a positive contribution
- Take up a hobby/re-invest time in an existing one
- Stretch yourself physically/academically
- Deal with problems resolutely, rather than avoid.