



# Critical Incident Stress

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The purpose of this handout is to provide some brief information about Critical Incident Stress and to offer a few suggestions on ways you can deal with the stress.

## 1. What is Critical Incident Stress (CIS)?

It is a normal human reaction to a traumatic event. Each person may have a different reaction even though they experienced the same event. Even though the event may be over, you may now be experiencing or may experience later some strong emotional or physical reactions. It is very common, and in fact quite normal, for people to experience emotional aftershocks when they have passed through a horrible event.

Sometimes the emotional aftershocks (or stress reactions) appear immediately after the traumatic event. Sometimes they may appear a few hours or a few days later. And, in some cases, weeks or months may pass before the stress reactions appear.

The signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last a few days, a few weeks or a few months and occasionally longer depending on the severity of the traumatic event. With the understanding and the support of loved ones, stress reactions usually pass more quickly. Occasionally, the traumatic event is so painful that professional assistance from a counsellor may be necessary. This does not imply craziness or weakness. It simply indicates that the particular trauma was just too powerful to manage without help.

## 2. What happens after a Critical Incident?

Following a particularly stressful or horrible incident, there are any number of reactions a person can have. Some people may find themselves so disrupted by symptoms of stress that they cannot complete their work, while others appear unmoved and feel eager to return to work.

### The First 24-Hours After the Incident



Usually there is the desire to go home and rest. There may be an initial shock, and then numbness following a horrible event. Some people feel a strong desire to talk about what happened, or a wish to be left alone. All these reactions are normal. If there is to be a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing, it would be sometime after this 24-hour period. This allows the initial reactions to settle.

Critical Incident Stress is a normal reaction to abnormal events. You may notice physical reactions (upset stomach, muscle tension), changes in thinking, (lack of concentration, recurring images), different behaviours (avoiding family or friends, overly vigilant), and changes in emotions (despair, irritability). Often people are quite private about their reactions, plus not everyone reacts the same to a situation. If you are experiencing any of the above reactions after an incident, likely your reactions are normal. If you are unsure, check with your doctor.

### **3. What are some common signs of a stress reaction?**

A stress reaction can be divided into physical, cognitive, emotional and behavioural categories.

#### **Physical Signs\***

- Fatigue
- Nausea
- Muscle tremors
- Twitches
- Chest pain
- Difficulty breathing
- Elevated blood pressure
- Thirst
- Heart rate unusual
- Visual difficulties
- Vomiting
- Grinding teeth
- Weakness
- Dizziness
- Chills
- Profuse sweating
- Shock symptoms
- Fainting



## Cognitive Signs\*

- Blaming someone
- Confusion
- Poor attention
- Poor decisions
- Disturbed thinking
- Poor concentration
- Memory problems
- Hyper vigilance
- Intrusive images
- Poor problem solving
- Poor abstract thinking
- Nightmares
- Loss of time, place, or person orientation
- Heightened or lowered alertness
- Difficulty identifying familiar objects or people
- Increased or decreased awareness of surroundings

*\* If you experience any physical or cognitive changes that seem out of the ordinary, then you need to consult with your physician for a medical evaluation!*

## Emotional Signs\*

- Anxiety
- Guilt
- Grief
- Denial
- Severe panic (rare)
- Emotional shock
- Fear
- Uncertainty
- Loss of emotional control
- Depression
- Apprehension
- Intense anger
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Irritability
- Exaggerated emotional response
- Agitation



## Behavioural Signs\*

- Change in activity
- Withdrawal
- Change in speech patterns
- Emotional outbursts
- Change in sexual functioning
- Inability to rest
- Change in usual communications
- Antisocial acts
- Loss or increase of appetite
- Pacing
- Non-specific bodily complaints
- Erratic movements
- Hyper alert to environment
- Alcohol consumption
- Startle reflex intensified
- Suspiciousness

## 4. How can I take care of myself?

Some things you can do right away for ...

### A. Your Body

Eat well: Avoid deep-fried food, excessive sweets, and coffee. They can add to your stress.

Get some exercise: Even a long walk is helpful - especially within the first 24-hours after the event.

Beware of false remedies: Alcohol and drugs can provide immediate temporary relief but they can add new problems and complicate recovery.

Rest: Find a quiet place to rest. Reduce unnecessary stimulation (avoid violent movies).

### B. Your Mind

Keep it simple: The stress that you are feeling only means that you are under stress. This is no time to reflect on your career or to make major decisions in your life.



Do not fight the images: The more people try to block an image (e.g., decapitation, robbery), the more an image can emerge as a disruption. Allow the stressful image to pass through your mind.

## **C. Your Emotions**

If you want to cry, then cry: If you are embarrassed about crying, then you may want to be alone.

Accept the "roller coaster" of emotions: Sudden changes from numbness, to anger, to grief may confuse you. That is okay and it is common.

Critical Incident Stress runs a natural course. The intensity and frequency of symptoms will diminish with time.

A debriefing with your colleagues or crew is common. You will be informed by your employer if there is to be a debriefing. At the same time, you may wish to speak with a therapist alone by calling your Employee Assistance Program, your Community Mental Health Clinic, or a private therapist listed under "Counsellors" in the telephone yellow pages.