

Understanding Reactions After a Critical Incident

You have recently experienced a critical incident – an event that can cause unusually strong emotional reactions that have the potential to impact your ability to function normally. It is very common, in fact quite normal, for people to experience emotional aftershocks when they have been through a significant event in the line of duty. These stress reactions may appear immediately after the incident, or they may appear a few hours or days later. You might be feeling a lot right now, or you might not feel much at all. Both responses are normal following such an event.

Experiencing these reactions does not mean there is something wrong with you. It simply indicates that you have been through a high stress experience and your mind and body are responding.

This information sheet outlines some of the symptoms you may experience. Understanding these potential reactions can help you recognize what you are going through in the days and weeks ahead. You may notice that some of these reactions are more intense or persistent than others. If you are finding it difficult to manage these experiences on your own, or if they are significantly impacting your daily life and ability to function, please know that seeking support from professionals who understand the demands of your profession is available and encouraged.

Remember, the response you are experiencing is a normal human reaction to an the situation you encountered as part of your professional duties. Pay attention to how you are feeling and know that support is available if you need it.

Physical	Cognitive	Emotional	Behavioural
Thirst Fatigue Hypertension Muscle aches/pains Muscle tremors/spasms Elevated blood pressure Dizziness Weakness/Numbness Chest pain Rapid heart rate Headaches Grinding teeth Shock symptoms Visual difficulties Profuse Sweating Difficulty breathing	Nightmares Confusion, Uncertainty Hypervigilance Suspiciousness Intrusive images Blaming others Inability to concentrate Hopelessness/helplessness Inability to understand consequences Poor concentration/abstract thinking Difficulty identifying objects Hallucinations/delusions Diminished problem-solving Paranoid ideas Preoccupation with event Suicidal/homicidal thoughts: please seek help if you are experiencing thoughts of harming yourself or others	Guilt Grief Anxiety, Fear, Panic attacks Denial Agitation, intense anger Irritability, easily frustrated Apprehension Emotional shock Feeling overwhelmed Loss of emotional control Inappropriate emotional responses Infantile emotions Phobic avoidance Pathological guilt Feelings of deep sadness or loss of interest: You might experience periods of feeling very low, sad, or lose interest in things you usually enjoy. Please seek help if these feelings are intense or last for a long time	Social withdrawal/isolation Risk-taking Inability to rest/difficulty relaxing Intensified pacing Erratic movements Change in social activity Change in speech Change in appetite Change in sleep pattern Hyper alert Crying spells Change in alcohol/drug use Change in communication Compensatory sexuality Diminished hygiene Immobility/1000-yard stare Self-medicating to control stress Violence toward self/others Emotional outbursts Family discord Compulsivity

Practical Steps for Managing Stress

Over the next few days, it's important to engage in healthy coping practices to help you deal with the stress this event has caused, even if you don't think you're affected much. Consider the following suggestions to support your well-being:

- **WITHIN THE FIRST 24 to 48 HOURS** consider engaging in periods of appropriate physical exercise, alternated with relaxation to alleviate some of the physical toll of the stress response
- Structure your time - maintain as normal a routine as possible
- Pre-plan activities to reduce feeling overwhelmed and decision fatigue off-duty. Combat isolation by engaging in pre-planned social activities
- Connect and talk - talk is the most healing medicine. Reach out to work peers as they understand the unique stressors of the job. Know that seeking help is a sign of strength and your support networks are crucial. In addition, connect with family members or trusted friends for support.
- Be aware of numbing the pain with overuse of drugs or alcohol; you don't need to complicate this with a substance misuse. While alcohol or drugs might offer temporary relief, they can worsen stress and lead to larger problems
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten and share your feelings with others. Acknowledge and process your emotions rather than suppressing them
- Keep a journal and write – doing so can aid in emotional and mental processing
- Do things that feel good to you, such as engaging in your hobbies
- Realize those around you are also under stress; practice patience and understanding as much as possible
- Don't make any big life changes – significant life decisions shouldn't be made when experiencing high stress
- Practice mindfulness or tactical breathing techniques to help regulate your nervous system
- Make small daily decisions, even just deciding what to eat – these small decisions may seem trivial, but can aid in increasing feelings of control over your life and restore a sense of agency
- Get plenty of rest - prioritize sleep hygiene and seek strategies to improve rest
- Eat well-balanced and regular meals (even if you don't feel like it) - proper nutrition supports your body's ability to cope with stress
- Consider incorporating regular physical exercise into your routine, even for a short period each day, to help manage and release stress
- If you're still attending work: at the end of your shift, engage in a brief mind-body check-in to acknowledge and shift any lingering physical or emotional tension. Consider using a structured shift end routine to help you leave work mentally and emotionally
- Be aware of "presenteeism" - being physically present at work but not fully mentally or emotionally engaged. If you find this happening, consider strategies to recenter or reach out for support

For Family members and Friends

First responders are exposed to critical incidents and trauma that can significantly affect their mental and emotional well-being. Understanding the impact of their work is crucial in providing effective support, as the challenges they face can have a ripple effect on their home life. Here are suggestions for support:

- Breathe deeply yourself and ensure you are grounding yourself/monitoring your own activation level. Remember that supporting someone through stress can also be stressful for you. Take care of your own well-being so you can be supportive of those you care about
- Spend time with the person, even if sitting in comfortable silence together. Your presence and non-judgmental support can be very comforting. Understand that they may not always want to talk, but your being there can make a difference
- Offer your assistance and a listening ear if they have not asked for help. Let them know you are there for them without being pushy. Sometimes simply knowing someone cares is enough. Be prepared to listen without offering immediate solutions unless asked
- Reassure them that they are safe in the present moment. In some situations, in the aftermath of a critical incident, one may struggle with feeling safe. Gentle reminders of their current safety may be helpful
- Be aware they may need some help with tasks of daily living (such as cleaning, cooking, caring for the family). The physical and emotional toll of the stress reaction may leave them feeling depleted, which makes everyday tasks overwhelming
- They many want some alone time to decompress and process their experiences alone
- Take care not to take their anger or other feelings personally as it may be part of a stress reaction. First responders can experience intense emotions as a result of their work. Try to understand that their reactions may not be directed at you. Remember that you too should have supports in place to manage your own stress and well-being while providing support
- Don't tell them that they are "lucky it wasn't worse" – people who have been through a critical incident and who are experiencing shock reactions are not consoled by those statements. Instead, express you are sorry such an event has occurred, and you want to understand and be supportive. Validate emotions and acknowledge the difficulty of their experience
- After working in a heightened state of alertness, first responders may come home and seem emotionally distant, withdrawn, or want to isolate themselves. It's important to know that this change is often a physiological reaction as their bodies and minds try to cope with the intense demands of their job, and it is not typically a reflection of their feelings towards you. Recognize the signs of potential difficulties, such as increased isolation, changes in mood, sleep disturbances, or increased use of alcohol/substances. Gently express your concerns and encourage them to seek professional help, remembering that seeking help is a sign of strength and courage
- Be aware of the potential for moral injury resulting from events they witness or actions they are required to take. Provide a safe space for them to process these complex emotions without judgment
- Support their engagement in hobbies and activities outside of work. Having interests and connections beyond their profession is vital for their well-being and can help them decompress
- Encourage open communication within the family about the challenges and how you can best support each other

The information presented within this handout is based on the Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) training provided by the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation (ICISF)