

AFTER A CRITICAL INCIDENT AT WORK

What people may need after a difficult event.

Healthier people. Stronger workplaces. A brighter tomorrow.

Different reactions are still normal reactions.

1 What is a critical incident?

A critical incident is a sudden, unexpected event that is perceived as overwhelming and may threaten the safety, wellbeing or sense of security of individuals or a workplace.

These events can impact anyone, even if you weren't directly involved.

Examples include:

- Sudden loss (e.g., death of a colleague)
- Violence or physical assault
- A threat (e.g., bomb threat, security incident)
- Serious injury
- A medical emergency
- Natural disaster
- Or other distressing workplace events



2 Common reactions

After a difficult event, people may experience:

- Shock or disbelief**
Feeling stunned or unreal.
- Numbness**
Feeling emotionally flat or detached.
- Anxiety**
Feeling worried, unsafe or on edge.
- Irritability**
Shorter fuse or increased frustration.
- Tearfulness**
Crying more easily or feeling emotional.
- Difficulty focusing**
Trouble concentrating or remembering.
- Sleep changes**
Difficulty falling or staying asleep, or vivid dreams.
- Strong body responses**
Headaches, stomach upset, muscle tension or feeling physically shaken.

3 What helps in the first 24 to 72 hours

In the immediate aftermath, people may need:

- Practical support**
Help with basic needs, time away from the scene, or assistance with personal matters.
- Clear and consistent information**
Honest updates about what is known, what happens next, and where to get help.
- Hydration and nourishment**
Encourage food and water, even if appetite is low.
- Rest and time**
Space to slow down, process and recover.
- Gentle connection**
A calm, caring presence. Let people know they are not alone.

Small supports make a big difference.

4 What helps teams

Teams also feel the impact. Helpful approaches include:

- Structured debrief options**
Offer a facilitated debrief (e.g., critical incident stress debriefing) when appropriate and desired.
- Flexibility**
Allow for changed work schedules, modified duties and time off as needed.
- Validation**
Acknowledge the difficulty of what happened. Normalise a range of reactions and avoid judgment.
- Stay connected**
Check in regularly, look out for one another and maintain a supportive team environment.
- Pace the return to routine**
Reintroduce regular tasks gradually, with realistic expectations.

Supportive teams are more resilient.

5 What leaders can do

Leaders play a key role in creating safety, stability and support. You can:

- Communicate clearly and often**
Share what you know; what you don't know, and what happens next.
- Reduce extra demands**
Pause non-urgent work and adjust expectations.
- Check in**
Have compassionate conversations, listen and watch for changes in behaviour.
- Support access to care**
Provide information about counselling, EAP or other professional supports.

Your calm, caring leadership matters.

6 When extra support may help

Consider additional professional support if someone is experiencing:

- Ongoing distress**
Strong emotions that don't ease over time.
- Intrusive memories**
Unwanted memories, flashbacks or recurring thoughts.
- Panic or intense anxiety**
Frequent panic, fear or feeling unsafe.
- Shutdown or withdrawal**
Pulling away from others, loss of interest or feeling emotionally numb.
- Reduced functioning**
Difficulty doing usual work, home or daily activities.

7 Important to remember

Recovery is not one-size-fits-all. People will have different reactions and different timelines.

What someone needs may be different from what you need. There is no "right" way to respond.

With the right support, most people recover. There is no "right" way to respond.

A compassionate, informed workplace makes a difference. Support, understanding and kindness help people heal and move forward.

People recover in their own way and in their own time.

Kind
Brave
Capable
You Got This