

## What is Critical Incident Stress?

As a public safety/emergency responder or healthcare professional, you play a unique role in our society. These professions require specific personal skills. Most individuals who select these professions are action oriented with a high tolerance for stress. You are willing to take risks, are prepared to make sacrifices, reluctant to give up, and able to contain emotions in spite of the depth of your caring.

An emergency responder's job can be a tremendous source of satisfaction; leaving you feeling invigorated, elite because of the specialized knowledge and skills required, and rewarded for having contributed to your community by saving lives and providing compassionate care or helping rebuild lives.

It can also be emotionally draining, taking its toll on you and your family. It may produce an occupational hazard known as **Critical Incident Stress (CIS)**.

Critical Incident Stress is a physical and/or psychological response to events that provoke unusually strong emotions. Your response to such events or to a long term series of events may be very distressing if you do not understand that such reactions are normal. Regardless of your personality or training, ALL responders are susceptible to Critical Incident Stress.

## What Causes Critical Incident Stress?

Research has indicated that certain situations are more likely to cause Critical Incident Stress in professionals. These include:

- Death or series injury of a co-worker
- Death of a child
- Death of a patient/victim, after a lengthy rescue
- Suicide of a fellow worker
- Mass causality
- Situations in which your life is in danger
- Unreasonable expectations of being able to confront any situation without being affected
- Past experiences that have not been adequately handled
- Events with sensational media coverage

Not everyone reacts the same way to the same emotional event. You may find yourself reacting to an event while another worker does not. An event may pass by without much reaction one time, yet a similar event a year later may provoke a strong reaction. Responses to emotional situations are the result of many different factors.

## Factors that Heighten Stress:

- Landmines are **sensory, memory and time reminders** of an incident. We can be affected in these three different ways.
- Sensory triggers: sights, sounds, smells, places, textures, and sensations
- Suddenness/ unexpected surprise
- Intensity
- Duration
- Identification with victim
- Holiday season or nighttime
- Personal Involvement with victim

## The Signs of Critical Incident Stress

Reactions to an event may be immediate (beginning at the scene), delayed (hours, days, or months later), or cumulative.

You may observe the following normal reactions within the first few days:

- Nausea, sweating, tremors, chest pain, elevated heart rate, and blood pressure.
- Disorientation, slowed thinking and decision making, poor concentration, confusion, and decreased attention span.
- Anxiety, fear, grief, depression, withdrawal, irritability, resentment, and feelings of being overwhelmed.
- Insomnia, flashbacks, vivid dreams, and excessive alcohol or drug use.

## Delayed reactions may include:

- Increasing depression and flashbacks.
- Decreased sex drive, excessive or too little sleep. Change in appetite
- Loss of emotional control (excessive crying, anger, humor, etc.)
- Loss of interest in family or recreational activities
- Poor job performance, re-evaluation of career, or fear of job-related activities.

**Cumulative stress:** is not caused by a specific event, but is a state of chronic fatigue and frustration. It is the result of too many stressful events. The signs include:

- Depression and withdrawal
- Fatigue, irritability, and apathy
- Disillusionment

- More frequent illness
- Family problems

You can best help yourself by:

- Learning what reactions are normal.
- Learning to cope with CIS.
- Seeking additional professional help when appropriate.

### How Can I Handle Critical Incident Stress?

#### Before

- Get as much technical training as you can so you feel well prepared.
- Learn stress reeducation techniques, particularly deep breathing.
- Establish relationships with people who understand your work and the stresses that you face.
- Educate your family about your work and let them know what they can do to help when you are under stress.

#### During

- Be active, take breaks, sleep if possible, and eat nourishing foods.
- Use humor appropriately.
- Allow controlled expression of your feelings.

#### After

- Get vigorous physical exercise within 24 hours and daily thereafter.
- Maintain a normal schedule and avoid boredom.
- Express feelings.
- Do not fight against dreams or flashbacks, as they are normal and will diminish.
- Attend a Critical Incident Stress Response.

#### Assistance:

Emergency response to any incident that causes responders unusually strong emotional reactions may qualify for Critical Incident Stress Response.

For more information on Employee Supportive Services' Critical Incident Stress Management Team and for any personnel who feel the need for confidential support/ counseling, please contact:

**Employee Support Services**

**Help line (916) 445-4337**

*Or*

**Employee Assistance Program**

**24 hr line (866) EAP-4SOC**

**(866) 327-4762**



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## *Guide to Critical Incident Stress Management*

*“Behind our roles, we are all just  
human beings”*