

Critical Incident Response Management Service

Understanding reactions to critical incidents at work

Sometimes departmental staff are involved in distressing or unusual incidents that arise from their work. These can range from a physical assault by an upset client to dealing with a natural disaster. When an incident has a major impact on a staff member's emotions and wellbeing, it is regarded as critical.

The Critical Incident Response Management Service has been developed to provide support to staff and help them to use their own abilities to overcome the effects of these incidents. Critical incident stress debriefing is an activity that provides information about normal stress responses to abnormal experiences and helps staff to form a clear idea of the event, mobilise problem solving strategies and obtain personal support.

The following information may be of assistance.

Common reactions					
Some of the most common reactions to critical incident stress are:					
Physical	Behavioural	Cognitive	Emotional	Social	General
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> tiredness nausea sweating shakiness digestive upsets headaches. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> restlessness apathy sleeplessness nightmares inappropriate humour avoidance of reminders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> flashbacks keep remembering the incident keep thinking about the incident. concentration, planning and decision making problems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> numbness fearful distrustful anxiety irritability frustrated angry guilty helplessness feel vulnerable loss of confidence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> withdrawal avoid others want to be with others. feel resentful of or misunders tood by others. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> wonder what it all means. uncertainty about goals. purposes values loss of motivation. self-doubt.

- Recognise that you have been through a highly stressful experience and acknowledge that you will have a psychological reaction to it. Refusal to accept your responses can delay the recovery process.
- Seek out other people's support. Talk about your experience to other people who will understand, particularly those who have been through something similar. Discussing your reactions is part of the natural healing process and will help you accept what has happened.
- Try not to block out thoughts of the incident or avoid reminders of it. You need to think and talk about it and clarify the what's and why's of the incident. Confronting the reality, bit by bit, will help you to come to terms with the experience. Recurring thoughts, dreams and flashbacks are normal. Don't try to fight them. They will decrease, becoming less painful in time.
- People with critical incident stress are more vulnerable to accidents and physical illness. It's important to look after yourself and be more careful than usual, for example when driving.

Even if you feel unmotivated and apathetic, try to do some of the things listed here. They will help to re-motivate you and assist your recovery.

Look after yourself

- Get plenty of rest, even if you can't sleep.
- Eat regular and well-balanced meals.
- Regular exercise, such as walking, cycling or jogging, helps reduce the physical effects of stress and trauma.
- Reduce use of stimulants such as coffee, chocolate and cigarettes. These substances only add to the stress your body is experiencing.
- Do not try to numb the pain with drugs or alcohol; this will lead to more problems in the long term.
- Make time for relaxation. Active techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, yoga or breathing exercises are helpful in reducing tension.

Adjust your lifestyle

- Resume a normal routine as quickly as possible, but take it easy. Don't throw yourself into activities in an attempt to avoid the unpleasant feelings and memories. Make time for recovery.
- Sometimes you will want to be alone, but try not to become too isolated. Contact friends and, if necessary, have someone with you for a few hours each day.
- Do things you enjoy and be nice to yourself. Schedule at least one pleasurable activity each day. Pleasure is the best remedy for stress.
- Communicating with others who have been through similar situations will help you put it in perspective and could prove to be helpful to them too.
- Don't make major life decisions, such as changing jobs or moving house, in the period following the incident. However, make smaller, daily decisions to re-establish a feeling of control over your life.
- Some people find that keeping a journal or diary is helpful. Writing down your thoughts and feelings can be almost as good as talking about them.
- Above all, remember you are having normal reactions to an abnormal experience; don't label yourself as weak or crazy. Give yourself permission to feel rotten after a critical incident. Although it is unpleasant, don't over-react; it should start to pass in a few days. If it doesn't, contact your debriefer and talk about it.
- Going through a critical incident also has its positive aspects. People can come out wiser, stronger and better able to cope with the stresses of every-day life. It can also be a turning point to re-evaluate your life and appreciate things that are often taken for granted.

How family members and friends can help

- Spend time with the stressed person and reassure them that they are safe.
- Offer support and a listening ear.
- Assist with everyday tasks like cooking and caring for children.
- Don't take it personally if they want to be alone sometimes or seem angry.
- Statements like 'you're lucky it wasn't worse' or 'pull yourself together' are not consoling. Instead let them know you're sorry the event occurred and you want to understand and help them.

Do not hesitate to contact the Critical Incident Response Management Service or the Employee Assistance Program if you do not start to feel better soon, or if you find the incident has made other issues in your life more difficult to manage. Remember the most effective recovery is when you are active and when you don't wait until it gets bad. "Prevention is better than cure!"

You can contact your regional Critical Incident Response Management Service coordinator by contacting your regional switchboard.

**Contact the departments' Employee Assistance Provider as follows:
ResolutionsRTK on (03) 9529 6600 or 1800 350 359.**

*June 2008
Employee Wellbeing Unit*