

Coping with a Critical Incident

Overview

Ways employees can find support after a critical incident.

- Common reactions after a traumatic event
- What you can do
- Finding support

A critical incident is any sudden or unexpected traumatic event that affects people's emotional lives, feelings of safety, and ability to cope. It might be a robbery or assault that occurred in the workplace, a sudden accident or death at work, the murder or suicide of a co-worker, or domestic abuse that impacts the workplace. Floods, fires, hurricanes, acts of terrorism, and airplane crashes are other examples of critical incidents.

If you have recently experienced a critical incident, you may be feeling a number of emotions. You may be feeling sad, upset, afraid, angry, or alone. You may have trouble concentrating, or feel overwhelmed by your emotions. All of these feelings are normal reactions to traumatic events. What's important to remember at this difficult time is that there are steps you can take to seek support for yourself and find help.

Common reactions after a traumatic event

If you have experienced a critical incident or traumatic event, you may be affected for days, weeks, or even months afterwards. At first, it's normal to feel overwhelmed by the event. You may have difficulty sleeping, feel distracted, feel afraid or unsafe. You may experience symptoms of stress. The signs and symptoms of stress can be physical, mental, or emotional.

- *Physical symptoms can include*
 - nausea
 - upset stomach
 - tremors in your lips or hands
 - feeling uncoordinated
 - profuse sweating
 - chills
 - diarrhea
 - dizziness
 - rapid heart beat
 - head and muscle aches
 - chest pain (chest pain should be checked at a hospital immediately)
- *Emotional symptoms can include feelings of*

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- anxiety
 - fear
 - guilt
 - grief
 - depression
 - sadness and crying
 - anger
 - irritability
 - shock
 - loss or abandonment
 - numbness
 - isolation or feeling alone
 - worry about others
 - wanting to hide
 - wanting to limit contact with others
- *Mental symptoms can include*
 - slowed thinking
 - difficulty making decisions
 - difficulty with problem-solving
 - confusion
 - disorientation (especially about place and time)
 - difficulty concentrating
 - memory problems
 - difficulty naming common objects
 - distressing dreams
 - poor attention span

What you can do

If you are experiencing any of these symptoms, it is important that you take steps to help yourself cope and recover.

- *Have someone stay with you for at least a few hours after the critical incident.*
- *Realize that what you are experiencing is normal.* You may feel fear, shock, anger, confusion, or depression. These feelings are normal, and will usually ease with time.
- *Avoid comparing yourself with others* -- everyone is different and reacts differently to a traumatic event.

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- *Avoid using alcohol or non-prescription drugs to handle your emotions.*
- *Don't try to fight reoccurring thoughts, dreams, or flashbacks.* They are normal and they will decrease over time and become less painful. Dreaming of the incident is common. There may be times when you think or feel that the incident is recurring, sometimes like a “mini-flashback.”
- *Maintain as normal a schedule as possible.* Staying with normal routines will help you recover from a critical incident.
- *Use company resources to help you through this difficult time.* Ask your supervisor or human resources (HR) representative about company resources for people coping with a critical incident.
- *Take care of yourself.* You may be more vulnerable to illness or fatigue when coping with a traumatic event. Eat nutritious food and drink plenty of water, even when you don't feel like it.
- *Exercise.* Physical activity of any kind helps relieve stress.
- *Use a relaxation that works for you.* You might find help from yoga, meditation, or some other relaxation technique.
- *Be alert for signs that you may need help coping,* such as becoming teary all the time.

Finding support

- *Contact your employee assistance program (EAP).* Your EAP can offer confidential support 24 hours a day to help you cope with your feelings and reactions to the critical incident. Your EAP can also provide helpful materials, referrals to local resources, counseling, and long-term counseling, if necessary.
- *Talk about your feelings with co-workers, your manager, family, or friends.* Don't try to hide or ignore your emotions.
- *Consider seeing a counselor if your feelings become prolonged,* or if you are having trouble coping or handling your feelings.