

Critical Incident Stress Information Handout

When you have experienced a traumatic event or critical incident (any event that causes unusually strong emotional reactions) the strong reactions they can induce have the potential to interfere with the ability to function and go about daily life in the normal way. It is very common, in fact quite normal, for people to experience emotional aftershocks when they have gone through a significantly distressing event.

Emotional aftershocks (or stress reactions) will sometimes appear immediately after the traumatic event, or they may begin hours or days later. In some cases, it can be weeks or months before the stress reactions appear.

Signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last a few days, weeks, months or longer – depending on the severity of the traumatic event. The understanding and support of loved ones usually helps the stress reactions pass more quickly. Occasionally, the traumatic event is so painful that professional assistance may be necessary. This does not imply mental instability or weakness. It simply indicates that the particular event was just too powerful for the person to manage alone.

Common signs of a stress response occurring include:

Physical*	Cognitive	Emotional	Behavioural
Chills	Confusion	Fear	Withdrawal
Thirst	Nightmares	Guilt	Antisocial acts
Fatigue	Uncertainty	Grief	Inability to rest
Nausea	Hypervigilance	Panic	Intensified pacing
Fainting	Suspiciousness	Denial	Erratic movements
Twitches	Intrusive images	Anxiety	Change in social activity
Vomiting	Blaming someone	Agitation	Change in speech patterns
Dizziness	Poor problem solving	Irritability	Change in appetite
Weakness	Poor abstract thinking	Depression	Hyper-alert to environment
Chest pain	Poor attention/decisions	Intense anger	Increased alcohol consumption
Headaches	Poor concentration/memory	Apprehension	Change in usual communications
Elevated BP	Disorientation of time, place or person	Emotional outbursts	
Rapid heart rate	Difficulty identifying objects or people	Loss of emotional control	
Muscle tremors	Heightened or lowered alertness	Inappropriate emotional response	
Shock symptoms	Increased or decreased awareness of surroundings	Emotional shock	
Grinding of teeth		Feeling overwhelmed	
Visual difficulties			
Profuse sweating			
Difficulty breathing			

***Any of these symptoms may indicate the need for medical evaluation. When in doubt please contact a physician.**

Self-help: things to try

- WITHIN THE FIRST 24-48 HOURS: periods of appropriate physical exercise, alternated with relaxation will alleviate some of the physical reactions
- Structure your time and maintain as normal a schedule as possible
- You are normal and having normal reactions; don't label yourself crazy
- Talk to people, reach out and spend time with others. People do care.
- Avoid numbing pain with the overuse of drugs or alcohol. This can complicate matters and make the recovery longer.
- Help your co-workers as much as possible by sharing how you are and checking out how they are doing.
- Give yourself permission to feel awful and share your feelings with others.
- Keep a journal – write your way through those sleepless hours
- Don't try and fight recurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks – they are normal and will decrease over time and become less painful.
- Do things that feel good
- Realise those around you are under stress
- Hold off making any big life changes
- Make as many daily decisions as possible that will give you a feeling of control over your life (e.g. if some asks what you want to eat, answer even if you are not sure)
- Get plenty of rest
- Eat well-balanced and regular meals (even if you don't feel like it)

Guidance for family and friends

- Listen carefully
- Spend time with the traumatised person
- Offer your assistance and a listening ear even if they have not asked for help
- Reassure them they are safe
- Help them with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, caring for the family, minding children
- Give them some private time
- Don't take their anger or other feelings personally
- Don't tell them they are 'lucky it wasn't worse'; a traumatised person is not consoled by those statements. Instead tell them you are sorry such an event occurred and you want to understand and assist them.