

# What to do After a Critical Incident

## How you can help your mates

If one of your work mates has been affected by a critical incident, you can help by:

- Recognising that they have been through an extremely stressful incident. They may need time and space to acknowledge what they have been through. You can help by offering practical support with things like giving them a lift home from work.
- Offering to keep track of developments related to the incident so that they do not feel the need to monitor it continuously. While it is important for people to keep informed of the facts, it is not good to focus too much on media accounts of the incident.
- Encouraging them to re-establish normal routines as quickly as possible; this helps to restore a sense of order and control in their life. Help them to start with small daily goals and to recognise each success. Equally, don't allow them to throw themselves back into activity as a way of avoiding unpleasant feelings or memories; encourage them to slow down.
- Helping them to think through decisions, but don't make decisions for them. Advise them to avoid making any major life decisions in the period following the trauma.
- Encouraging them to think constructively about their lives. Help them to plan things that they want to do and to acknowledge their success in coping so far. For example, ask questions such as: "Are there any things that you think would help you to feel better, anything that I can get for you or do for you? Do you have any concerns or problems that we could sort out together? What have you done in the past to make yourself feel better when things got difficult?"

Your work mate might want to talk to you about their experience or feelings. If possible, choose a time and place to talk where you won't be interrupted and when neither of you is rushed or tired.

All you need to do is listen. Don't feel that you have to say 'the right thing'; you're there as a colleague or friend, not a mental health professional. Here are some general pointers to being a good listener.

- Listen intently if they talk to you about their experience. Don't interrupt, offer examples from your own life, or talk about yourself. Try to avoid offering simple reassurances like "I know how you feel" or "It's all going to be ok". Instead, just acknowledge the situation with responses like "It's really tough to go through something like this; This is such a difficult time for you"
- You might want to reassure the person that distress is to be expected after such incidents. Even when coping well, things can be hard.

If you think that the person needs more help than you can offer, suggest that they contact their PSO, Chaplain, S/HSO or local GP.

If the person doesn't want to talk about the experience or their feelings, don't force it. Just try to be with them and focus on practical help, and other topics of conversation. Let them be alone for a while if that's what they want. However, it is a good idea for them not to get too isolated and to have some company for some part of each day.

## What are posttraumatic mental health problems?

While most people will come through the worst of any post critical incident difficulties within the first fortnight or so, some people will face ongoing problems. Posttraumatic mental health problems include a range of reactions to a traumatic incident, including anxiety, depression, PTSD, and risky alcohol and drug use, as well as difficulties with relationships, work, or study. These problems do not only affect the individual, but can have a significant impact on family, friends, and carers.

## When to get further help

- Following a critical incident, the majority of members will not need professional help. However, it may be necessary to seek further assistance if initial distress has not reduced after two weeks; if you feel highly anxious or distressed; if your reactions to the incident are interfering with home, work or relationships; or if you are having thoughts of harming yourself or someone else.
- Your GP or the S/HSO in your region are both good first ports of call. They will be able to determine if there is a problem, what the best approach might be and provide referrals to mental health professionals such as psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers if need be.