

What to do After a Critical Incident

How you can help yourself

If you have been affected by a critical incident, there are several things you can do to enhance your ability to cope. Even if you feel unmotivated and apathetic, try to do some of the things below. They will help you to come to have a less intense reaction to the stress of the incident and an improved ability to manage problems.

- Recognise that you have been through an extremely stressful incident. Give yourself time and space to acknowledge what you have been through and that you will have an emotional reaction to it. Give yourself permission to feel rotten but don't over react- it is unpleasant but you can cope with it.
- Focus on the positive aspects of the incident/ job. Although an incident may have been very confronting or distressing, and may have even involved a death, in many cases there are positive aspects that should be acknowledged. For instance, it is important for you to acknowledge to yourself that you did a good job, that you behaved professionally, that you comforted distressed relatives, that you found an important piece of evidence that will help the investigation, and so on.
- Use your sense of humour. It is important to try and maintain a sense of humour, although be sure to use your humour judiciously.
- Look after yourself: get plenty of rest, even if you can't sleep, and try to eat regular, well-balanced meals. Regular exercise, like walking, cycling or jogging, is very good at reducing physical effects of stress and trauma; try to do a little every day. Relaxing activities such as listening to music, yoga, meditation, or taking a hot bath may also be of use.
- Cut back or cut out tea, coffee, chocolate, cola and cigarettes. Your body is already 'hyped up' and these substances will only add to this. Do not try to numb the pain with drugs or alcohol, this will lead to more problems in the long term.
- Spend time with people you care about, even if you do not want to talk about the incident. Contact friends and, if necessary, have someone stay with you for a few hours each day. Sometimes you will want to be alone; that's ok, but try not to become too isolated.
- Contact your S/HSO, PSO or Chaplain if you feel you need to talk.
- Recurring thoughts, dreams and flashbacks are normal. Don't try to fight them. They will decrease in time. Try not to block them out or bottle up your feelings. Confronting the reality, bit by bit, will help you to come to terms with the experience.
- Be more careful than usual, for example when cooking driving or using machinery. Following a critical incident you may be more vulnerable to accidents and physical illness.
- Try to resume a normal routine as quickly as possible, but take it easy, do not throw yourself into activities or work in an attempt to avoid the unpleasant feelings and memories. Tackle the things that need to be done a bit at a time and count each success.
- Avoid making any major life decisions, such as moving house or changing jobs, in the period following the trauma. On the other hand, make as many smaller daily decisions as possible, like what you want to eat or what film you'd like to see. This helps to re-establish feelings of control over your life.
- A critical incident can have an impact on how you see the world, your life, your goals and your relationships. Giving yourself time to re-evaluate what you think and talking to others about it may help.
- You may wish to provide support to others who have been through similar situations, especially as you start to feel better.