

# Employee Assistance Program *Tip Sheet*

## Critical Incident Stress Response & Recovery

A “critical event” includes witnessing, experiencing, or being impacted by a tragedy, death, serious injuries, situations threatening an individual’s physical or psychological safety and wellbeing, or a distressing situation. The event affects not only the victim(s), but also family, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances. Larger scale events can impact entire communities or reach a global scale. It is helpful to understand typical responses to these events, steps you can take to minimize long-term impacts, and how to recognize when professional help may be indicated.



### Common Immediate Stress Reactions

After a critical event, it is common to develop stress symptoms within 24 hours which typically resolve within 3 weeks, but for some can last a few months depending on the severity of the event. The incident can alter an individual’s sense of safety, wellbeing, and competence. Your ability to function normally may be temporarily disrupted.

Within the **first few hours** after an event, it is typical to fixate on what happened, feel numb or shut down, feel like time is speeding up or slowing down, feel overwhelmed, or a combination. After a **few days**, the initial numbness you might have felt lifts, and you begin to process the event. The following are common reactions to have at any point after a critical event, and in fact are quite *normal*.

#### Physical Responses:

- Fatigue
- Restlessness
- Appetite changes, nausea
- Neck and/or back pain
- Headaches
- Tension
- Sweating
- Insomnia, nightmares, flashbacks

#### Emotional Responses:

- Shock, denial, confusion
- Irritability
- Recurring thoughts about the event
- Avoidance of people, places and activities
- Profound sadness, fear, anxiety, anger, rage, frustration, helplessness
- Feeling jumpy or easily startled

#### Cognitive Responses:

- Inability to concentrate
- Making more mistakes than usual
- Trouble remembering things
- Tendency to overwork
- Staying home from work more often

### Steps to Take to Recover

Factors that contribute to stress symptoms clearing up include support and understanding from family and friends. Your employer may also offer a critical incident debriefing, facilitated by a trained counselor. The goal of a debriefing is to promote resiliency and recovery.

The following are some ways to work through your stress response and ultimately help you move through the symptoms you may be experiencing.

- Return to your typical routines as much as you are able to provide structure to your day.
- Acknowledge how you are reacting without judgement.
- Get ample rest which will result in being able to cope better.

- Maintain a good diet and exercise routine.
- Engage in stress reduction activities that you find help such as going for a walk, taking a nap, listening to music, spending time with pets, reading, or exercising.
- Take time for leisure activities.
- Spend time with family and friends.
- Avoid smoking, drinking, and use of substances including excessive caffeine which can alter moods and lead to numbing feelings, agitation, and depression.
- Give yourself time and patience to heal.
- Spend time with supportive and trustworthy people in your life and talk to them about the event if you feel ready.

### **When to Seek Professional Help**

If you find that your stress response symptoms are persisting, getting worse, or interfering with your life, it is time to consider professional assistance. The following are signs that you should contact a doctor or mental health professional.

- Suicidal thoughts.
- Thoughts of wanting to harm someone else.
- Chest pain and/or heart palpitations (contact a physician or 911 immediately).
- Flashbacks, amnesia, feeling disconnected from the world.
- Feeling completely overwhelmed or paralyzed.
- Feeling like you cannot handle your thoughts, feelings, or physical symptoms.
- Chronic tension, confusion, emptiness, and exhaustion.
- Keeping yourself so busy in order to avoid your feelings.

#### References:

International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, Inc. "After A Critical Incident", "Traumatic Critical Incident Stress Info. Sheet for Spouses, Families, and Significant Others", "Critical Incident Stress Information Sheets"

### **Professional Resources**

#### **Your Employee Assistance Program**

Available 24/7/365 by calling the toll-free number below. The EAP offers support and linkage to local grief counselors and support groups.

#### **National Institute of Mental Health**

[www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)

Search "traumatic event" for tips for children, post-traumatic stress disorder, self-care strategies, and more

#### **US Department of Veterans Affairs**

[www.ptsd.va.gov](http://www.ptsd.va.gov)

Self-care tips, PTSD Coach Online, and more

#### **The National Child Traumatic Stress Network**

[www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org)

Tips for supporting children and teens

### **Emergency Helplines**

#### **National Crisis Lifeline**

Dial or text 988

More information at [www.988lifeline.org](http://www.988lifeline.org)

#### **SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline**

<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline>

Call or text 1.800.985.5990 for 24/7 help and support for survivors

### **Your Employee Assistance Program**

Anytime, any day, you have access to mental health professionals available to connect you with free and confidential services and resources to help you be your best. Simply call to get started today.



**CALL TOLL-FREE, 24/7:**  
1.800.833.3031



#### **WEBSITE:**

[www.EAPHelplink.com](http://www.EAPHelplink.com)  
Code: IOWA