

# **COPING WITH A CRITICAL INCIDENT**

***CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS INFORMATION***

## Critical Incident Stress Information

You have experienced a traumatic event. Even though the event itself may be over, you may be experiencing some strong emotional or physical reactions (aftershocks.) It is very common and quite normal to experience such reactions. Some reactions may appear immediately after the event, while others may appear days later. In certain cases, the reactions may appear weeks or months later.

These reactions are neither a sign of weakness nor an indication that you are failing to handle the situation well. Instead, they are simply the way your body is attempting to deal with the event. Your body is reacting normally to an abnormal situation. Generally, the severity of the reactions will begin to lessen within a few days or weeks. This does not mean that you can expect to forget the event entirely. With the passage of time, however, you will be able to put the event into perspective and complete the healing process.

So that you will not be caught off guard, here are some very common signs of “aftershock:”

<u>Physical</u>	<u>Thinking</u>	<u>Emotional</u>	<u>Behavioral</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fatigue</li><li>• Nausea</li><li>• Muscle tremors</li><li>• Twitches</li><li>• Chest pain *</li><li>• Difficulty breathing *</li><li>• Elevated blood pressure *</li><li>• Rapid heart rate *</li><li>• Thirst</li><li>• Headaches</li><li>• Visual difficulties</li><li>• Vomiting</li><li>• Grinding of teeth</li><li>• Weakness</li><li>• Dizziness</li><li>• Sweating</li><li>• Chills</li><li>• Shock symptoms*</li><li>• Fainting</li><li>• Exhaustion</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Blaming someone</li><li>• Confusion</li><li>• Poor attention</li><li>• Poor decision making</li><li>• Heightened or lowered alertness</li><li>• Poor concentration</li><li>• Memory problems</li><li>• Exaggerated vigilance</li><li>• Difficulty identifying familiar objects or people</li><li>• Increased or decreased awareness of surroundings</li><li>• Poor problem solving</li><li>• Poor abstract thinking</li><li>• Loss of orientation to time or place</li><li>• Disturbed thinking ability</li><li>• Nightmares</li><li>• Intrusive images</li><li>• Disbelief</li><li>• Flashbacks</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Anxiety</li><li>• Guilt</li><li>• Grief</li><li>• Denial</li><li>• Severe panic (rare)</li><li>• Emotional shock</li><li>• Fear</li><li>• Uncertainty</li><li>• Loss of emotional control</li><li>• Depression</li><li>• Inappropriate emotional response</li><li>• Apprehension</li><li>• Feeling overwhelmed</li><li>• Anger</li><li>• Irritability</li><li>• Agitation</li><li>• Emotional numbness</li><li>• Loss of motivation</li><li>• Sense of vulnerability</li><li>• Feelings of loss</li><li>• Feelings of helplessness</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Change in speech patterns</li><li>• Withdrawal</li><li>• Emotional outburst</li><li>• Suspiciousness</li><li>• Change in usual communication</li><li>• Loss or increase of appetite</li><li>• Increased alcohol consumption</li><li>• Inability to relax or sleep disturbance</li><li>• Nonspecific bodily complaints</li><li>• Increased alertness to environment</li><li>• Startle reflex intensified</li><li>• Pacing</li><li>• Erratic movements</li><li>• Change in sexual functioning</li><li>• Restlessness</li></ul>

**\*Definite indication of the need for medical evaluation**

### **Within the First 24-48 Hours**

- Periods of strenuous physical exercise alternated with relaxation will alleviate some of the physical reaction.
- Structure your time - keep busy.
- You're normal and having a normal reaction - don't label yourself.
- Talk to people - talk is the most healing medicine.
- Be **aware of numbing the** pain with overuse of drugs or alcohol, you don't need to complicate this with a substance abuse problem.
- Reach out - people do care.
- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible.
- Spend time with others.
- Help your co-workers as much as possible by sharing feelings and checking out how they are doing.
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten and share your feeling with others.
- Keep a journal; write your way through the sleepless hours.
- Do things that feel good to you.
- Realize those around you are under stress.
- **Don't make any big life changes.**
- Do make as many daily decisions as possible which will give you a feeling of control over your life if someone asks you what to eat-answer them even if you're not sure.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Reoccurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks are normal - do not try to fight them - they will decrease over time and become less painful.
- Eat well-balanced and regular meals (even if you don't feel like it).

## For Family Members & Friends

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- ✚ Spend time with the person who experienced the trauma. Often you do not even need to say much – just “being there” for them can be as helpful as anything you might be able to say.
- ✚ Encourage the person to talk about his/her feeling and emotions. Avoid telling the person “Everything will be OK” or “I know how you must feel.” Your role is to be a good **listener**. You do not have to fix the situation (“make it all better”) nor do you need to explain why the event happened.
- ✚ Be respectful if the person requests some private time, but do not assume the person wants to be alone just because he/she has not contacted you first.
- ✚ Offer specific assistance. Avoid saying something vague, like “How can I help?” Instead, say something such as “Can I help by taking care of the kids tonight?” or “Would it be OK if I brought dinner over tonight?”
- ✚ Remember that anyone (men *and* women of all ages) are affected by a traumatic event.
- ✚ Sometimes people in trauma say or do things which they would not say or do under normal circumstances. Do not take it personally.
- ✚ Offer to accompany the individual to any events associated with the trauma (funerals, investigative hearing, court, etc.).