



Critical Incident / Traumatic Event

INFORMATION SHEET

A traumatic event might include an injury, loss of loved one or property or a serious threat, or any overwhelming emotional experience. Sometimes the emotional aftershock or stress reactions appear immediately after the traumatic event. Sometime they may appear a few hours or days later. And, in some cases, weeks or months may pass before stress reactions appear.

CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS REACTIONS

You may not necessarily experience a stress reaction to a critical incident. If you do it may happen immediately after the incident, a few hours after or a few days later. In some cases weeks or months may pass before stress reactions appear. It is common and in fact quite normal for people to experience stress reactions when they are involved in a critical incident.

Signs and Symptoms

The signs and symptoms may last a few days, a few weeks or a few months and occasionally longer, depending on the critical incident. With understanding and the support of your family and friends stress reactions will usually pass more quickly.

Occasionally however, the critical incident has such an impact that support may be necessary from a counsellor. This does not imply weakness rather it indicates that the particular critical incident was too powerful for the person to manage with their usual supports.

Common Signs and Symptoms of a Stress Reaction

Some of the physical or bodily reactions after an event may include general physical discomfort and tension including an upset stomach, pains and headaches. Some people find that their thinking is affected, for example heightened confusion and reduced concentration. Emotionally, individuals can experience a wide range of reactions such as fear, sadness and anger.



PHYSICAL*	EMOTIONAL	THINKING	BEHAVIOURAL	SPIRITUAL
Upset stomach	Anxiety	Slow thinking	Changes to usual behaviour	Anger at God
Feeling uncoordinated	Fear	Difficulty making decisions	Withdrawal	Questioning basic beliefs
Diarrhoea	Guilt	Disorientation	Restlessness	Withdrawal from place of worship
Dizziness	Grief	Difficulty concentrating	Sleep disturbance	Faith practices and rituals seem empty
Chest Pain **	Depression	Memory problems	Changes in appetite	Loss of meaning and purpose
Rapid heart beat	Sadness	Seeing the event over and over	Increased drug/alcohol use	Sense of isolation from God or faith
Difficulty breathing	Feeling lost	Nightmares	Avoidance of TV and newspapers	
Grinding of teeth	Feeling isolated	Poor attention span		
	Anger			
	Irritability			
	Feeling numb			

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

**If experiencing chest pain please seek medical attention immediately.

Trying some of the following hints may help to alleviate the symptoms associated with a critical incident

For yourself:

- Eat well-balanced and regular meals even when you don't feel like it.
- Within the first 24-48 hours, periods of appropriate physical exercise, alternated with relaxation will help to alleviate some of the physical reactions.
- Do not make any life changing decisions while experiencing symptoms associated with a critical incident.
- If you are experiencing re-occurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks – try not to fight them – they are unpleasant but will decrease over time and become less painful.
- Re-establish and maintain as normal a schedule as possible.
- Fight against boredom – keep busy.
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten and share your feelings with others.
- Contact you EAP counsellor if the feelings are prolonged or are too intense, or if you just need to talk to someone.
- Reach out, people do care.
- Spend time with others.



For family members and friends:

- Listen.
- Spend time with them
- Offer your assistance and a listening ear even if they haven't asked for help.
- Re-assure them that they are safe.
- Offer to help with everyday tasks such as cleaning, cooking or minding children.
- Give them some private time.
- Do not tell them "they are lucky it wasn't worse" These statements do not provide comfort. Instead, tell them you are sorry they had to experience such an event and that you want to understand and assist them.

If you experience severe symptoms, if the symptoms last longer than six weeks or if you need to talk to someone you may benefit from contact to your EAP counsellor.

Contact to EASA is available 24 hours a day 7 days a week by contacting: 0407 111 003

UNDERSTANDING CRITICAL INCIDENT AND REACTIONS

For Managers

When a person has been involved in a critical incident the following steps may help to reduce the impact before the EAP counsellors arrive.

- Limit the exposure to the sights, sounds and smells surrounding the incident.
- Provide somewhere immediately for a rest break – a minimum of 15 minutes is suggested.
- Provide the person with fluids to drink, namely water or juice – avoid alcohol or caffeinated drinks.
- Provide the person with something to eat, even if they don't feel like it. Low fat, low salt and low sugar food is best.
- Allow the person to talk about their experience if they want to.
- Protect the person from onlookers and the media.
- Reassure the person that what they are experiencing is normal; most people recover very well from stressful situations.
- Have a friend stay with person if you have to go away.



Things to Avoid

As a Manager who is assisting an employee after a traumatic event/critical incident there are some action you need to take:

- Do not underestimate the impact of a critical incident on an employee. There can sometimes be an assumption that because the impact may have been worse than it turned the fear of the outcome is equally significant to cause distress.
- Do not ask whose fault the incident was or seek to blame an employee.
- Do not tell employees that they are *“lucky it was not worse”* or *“they should be over it by now”*.
- Do not compare incidents to one another in terms of being better or worse. For example, expecting employees to recover quickly from an incident because they went through a *“worse”* one the year before.
- Do not tell employees *“you’ll be ok, you’re strong”*. When they may be feeling quite vulnerable and find it difficult to be strong. They may take this as a lack of empathy.
- Do not compare employees to how you think you would react if you were involved in an incident. *“.....if this happened to me, I’d just move on and get over it”*

Remember

- A critical incident may disrupt a person’s sense of control and power and their view or assumptions of self, others, authority, society and the world may also be disrupted.
- Their perception may be that there is a serious threat to their life, safety and well-being or to their close friends or relatives.
- A critical incident may also strain a person’s normal coping strategies and may even disconfirm their view of the world or change their view of the world as they once knew it.
- Following a critical incident a person may be vulnerable for some time. How you treat the person back at work may determine how quickly they recover and get back to their former self.
- As for family and friends, ongoing support by management and workmates is essential. They will appreciate your help and offer of support.



CRITICAL INCIDENTS - INFORMATION FOR MANAGERS
IMMEDIATELY

<i>What you might notice:</i>	<i>What to look for:</i>	<i>What you should do:</i>
<p>The following symptoms might be noticeable in employees who have experienced a critical incident.</p> <p>Physiological symptoms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tremors • Shakiness • Sweating • Difficulty breathing • Vomiting • Dilated pupils • Appearing shocked • Agitated <p>Emotional symptoms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easily startled • Visibly upset, crying • Angry • Pre-occupied • Reliving the experience by talking a lot to others and gathering information <p>Cognitive symptoms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impaired concentration • Difficulty completing tasks • Reduced confidence <p>Behavioural symptoms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heightened irritability • Social withdrawal • Disinterest at work <p>Spiritual symptoms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anger at God • Not attending or talking about usual spiritual beliefs 	<p>Organisationally you may notice the following symptoms of employees who have been involved in or witnessed a critical incident:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extremely upset • Anger and uncontrollable crying • Employees reporting they thought they were going to die • Vomiting, severe shock and vagueness <p>You need to look out for employees who may have experienced in the previous 12 months the following circumstances:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has been anxious or depressed • Has had a loss, separation, divorce or death in the family • Has been through a workplace incident or conflict at work <p>Organisational issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Known conflict between employee, team leader or supervisor/manager • Organisational change for the team • Other incidents in the past 12 months. 	<p>As the Manager you can assist employees by providing the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend to the employee as soon as possible • Ensure the safety of the workplace • Reassure the employees that they reacted appropriately in the circumstances • Reassure them that the threat has passed • Ask them how they are? • Offer assistance and comfort • Provide tissues and a drink of water if they are upset • Answer the questions that you can • Ensure that employees can get home safely or arrange transport • Report the incident under your OHS or workers' compensation requirements • Speak with the EAP trauma counsellors/team • Provide them with the necessary details about the incident • If an employee declines the EAP services follow them up with a courtesy call and a letter that the offer was declined



The risks for organisations can involve the following:

- Employees who are physically injured in an incident will usually take longer to recover from an incident as the injury often reminds them of the incident for longer. Employees will need extra care from a counsellor, psychologist and their Manager including other supports like their family GP or physiotherapist during their recovery period.

Workplaces with existing workplace conflict may:

- Have employees who will take longer to recover if they have previously been working in a difficult work environment. An employee in this environment will need extra support and assistance with coaching for the Manager on assisting the employee back into the workplace.

A Manager or Human Resource environment that is unsupportive and unsympathetic to staff play a crucial role in returning the employee back to the workplace and this situation places a risk to this process and will require additional coaching and education to both the employee and the workplace to return them satisfactorily.



CRITICAL INCIDENTS - INFORMATION FOR MANAGERS
THE NEXT DAY

<i>What you might notice:</i>	<i>What to look for:</i>	<i>What you should do:</i>
<p>The following symptoms might be noticeable the next day in employees who have experienced a critical incident.</p> <p>Physiological symptoms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nervousness and anxiety about returning to work • Agitated • Hyper-vigilant – focusing on personal safety and tasks • Injuries • Vomiting, stomach upset and vagueness <p>Emotional symptoms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easily startled • Visibly upset, crying • Angry • Pre-occupied • Reliving the experience by talking a lot to others and gathering information • Reporting nightmares <p>Cognitive symptoms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impaired concentration • Difficulty completing tasks • Reduced confidence <p>Behavioural symptoms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fatigue due to sleep disturbance • Poor concentration • Talking about the incident and what occurred. <p>Spiritual symptoms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anger at God • Not attending or talking about usual spiritual beliefs 	<p>Organisationally you may notice the following symptoms of employees who have been involved in or witnessed a critical incident:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extremely upset • Screaming, anger and uncontrollable crying • Vomiting, severe shock and vagueness • Not presenting to work due to injury – psychologically or physically <p>You need to look out for employees who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not wish to speak with their Manager or contact them • Have known conflict in the workplace • Has been through a workplace incident or conflict at work or have a grievance against them • Other disciplinary action against the employee 	<p>As the Manager you can assist employees by providing the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge staff arriving at work • Offer support and comfort • Be physically available to employees – cancel meetings and be there on the day they return so they can see you and you are supportive of them • Ensure the safety of the workplace • Contact the employees who have not returned to work and offer support and let them know it is “ok” that they are still at home and off work • Reassure them that the threat has passed • Ask them how they are? • Offer assistance and comfort • Be willing and available to answer the questions or let the employees talk about the incident • Offer Peer Support if it is appropriate and available and the employees are comforted by it.



**CRITICAL INCIDENTS - INFORMATION FOR MANAGERS
ONE WEEK LATER**

<i>What you might notice:</i>	<i>What to look for:</i>	<i>What you should do:</i>
<p>The following symptoms might be noticeable one week later in employees who have experienced a critical incident.</p> <p>Physiological symptoms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nervousness about the weekly anniversary date • Many employees will be back to their normal routine • Some employees may still want to talk about the incident • Some employees may not want to talk about the incident <p>Some employees may exhibit some of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mild anxiety • Sleep disturbance • Stomach upset • Agitation 	<p>Organisationally you may notice the following symptoms of employees who have been involved in or witnessed a critical incident:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Severe distress at any mention of the incident • Vomiting • Physical injury <p>You need to look out for employees who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are not attending work • Employees who have taken sick leave at any time including some days after the event • Employees who have taken stress leave 	<p>As the Manager you can assist employees by providing the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue contact with staff who have not returned to work due to stress or injury • Acknowledge the employees who have returned • Offer support and comfort to all • Be physically available to employees – cancel meetings and be there on the day they return so they can see you and you are supportive of them • Ensure the safety of the workplace and that the employees know that so they can feel safe about returning to work if they haven't as yet. • Assess the need to refer to Injury Management and return to work co-ordination with reference to HR and OHS policy on this area. • Continue with peer support if appropriate

If an employee has not returned to work there may be a further complication unless they were seriously injured in the incident. Employees who are staying away from the workplace for other reasons may need to be investigated.

Some employees may stay away due to an intense fear of the workplace. A psychologist should be called in these circumstances to assist the employee back to the workplace with support of the Manager.

There does tend to be a risk for the workplace and employee the longer they stay away the harder it is to get them back into the workplace.



CRITICAL INCIDENTS - INFORMATION FOR MANAGERS
TWO WEEKS LATER

<i>What you might notice:</i>	<i>What to look for:</i>	<i>What you should do:</i>
<p>The following symptoms might be noticeable two weeks later in employees who have experienced a critical incident.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many employees will be back to their normal work routines • Some anxiety may still exist • Most employees will be talking about “normal” workplace issues rather than the incident • Employees will be less concerned about safety • Employees will start to appear confident – you may notice they have returned to work routines, normal duties and interacting with fellow employees and customers • Employees will start to look refreshed and less fatigued 	<p>Organisationally you may notice the following symptoms of employees who have been involved in or witnessed a critical incident:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Severe distress at any mention of the incident • Vomiting • Physical injury <p>You need to look out for employees who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are not attending work • Employees who have taken sick leave at any time including some days after the event • You may notice an employee who returned to work immediately after the incident but then 1-2 weeks later become unwell and take sick leave • Employees who have taken stress leave 	<p>As the Manager you can assist employees by providing the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge the recovery of the employees who have returned and continue to offer support and encouragement • If there are any updates about the incident talk to employees about these • Refer any employees onto the EAP if the incident has raised any workplace issues or has exacerbated any personal issues • Be physically available to employees – cancel meetings and be there on the day they return so they can see you and you are supportive of them • Liaise with the return to work coordinator and psychologist if any employee is continuing to show signs of trauma as they did on day one of the incident • Liaise with the return to work Co-Ordinator and psychologist if an employee was coping well but is now taking sick leave. • Continue with peer support if appropriate

Between two and four weeks is the crucial recovery time. Psychological assessment can be made during this time and if the employee is still experiencing trauma symptoms such as vomiting, nausea, shakiness, nightmares, and hyper-vigilance contact the psychologist immediately so a full clinical assessment can be made. It is important to contact the psychologist so intervention can quickly facilitate the employee’s recovery.



**CRITICAL INCIDENTS - INFORMATION FOR MANAGERS
FOUR WEEKS LATER**

<i>What you might notice:</i>	<i>What to look for:</i>	<i>What you should do:</i>
<p>The following symptoms might be noticeable four weeks later in employees who have experienced a critical incident.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be back to work • Be doing their usual duties • Appearing more confident and content at work • Employees may be less fearful and less anxious • Employees will talk less about the incident and more about “normal” work related issues <p>In some cases employees may:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be still on gradual duties and working reduced hours – this maybe a normal part of the return to work program • Be recovering from an injury and on reduced duties 	<p>Organisationally you may notice the following symptoms of employees who have been involved in or witnessed a critical incident:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Severe distress at any mention of the incident • Employee reporting sleep disturbance, recurrent memories, nightmares or anxiety • Vomiting • Physical injury <p>You need to look out for employees who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are not attending work • Employees who have taken sick leave some weeks after the incident 4 to 14 days • Employees who have taken stress leave 	<p>As the Manager you can assist employees by providing the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If an employee is still experiencing severe clinical symptoms a clinical assessment is required by a psychologist • Liaison with rehabilitation provider, return to work co-ordinator and liaison with treating psychologist <p>Ongoing support: For employees ongoing return to work plans you may need to provide appropriate work related duties.</p> <p>Liaise with health professional including psychologist, rehabilitation consultant.</p> <p>Organisationally you need to reassess incident management procedures and determine what worked well and what needs further development.</p> <p>Adjust work place policies and procedures for next incident response and reporting</p>

INFORMATION AND REFERRAL

Further Information can be obtained by contacting EASA Employee Assistance on:

0407 1111 003 or 0407 918 998