

Critical Incident Stress

INTRODUCTION

It is essential for Controllers to understand Critical Incident Stress and how it can be minimized and dealt with where necessary.

EXPLANATION

What is a Critical Incident?

Critical incidents are events that are outside the usual range of experiences and are so powerful and sudden that they can overwhelm a person's ability to cope. Dealing with death, destruction of property, personal danger and acute discomfort may cause a reaction.

Common Reactions to Exposure in Critical Incident

Different people have different reactions to unusual events. Some people may have no reaction. Others may notice sleep disturbance, increased alcohol use, nervousness, anxiety, irritability, poor concentration, confusion and some physical discomfort such as nausea and headaches. Some people report feelings of depression, sadness, isolation or loneliness. Some people may also experience changes in appetite or sexual interest.

How long do these reactions last?

Some reactions may last only a few days, some may remain for weeks or even months. Sometimes they appear straight away. Sometimes they appear after a while and sometimes not at all.

SYMPTOMS

The following common signs and symptoms of an acute stress reaction may include:

- **Emotional Responses.** Fear, apprehension, frustration, anger, wanting to hide or escape the scene.
- **Cognitive Responses.** Memories, dreams, flashbacks, ruminations, sudden recall, vivid associations.
- **Physical Responses.** Sweating, dizziness, heart palpitations.
- **Behavioural Responses.** Sleep disturbances such as not wanting to go to bed in fear of what tomorrow may bring, mood swings, poor concentration, agitation, failure to maintain good working habits, blaming

others, avoiding certain activities and situations.

While not always symptoms of stress, it is important to note that emotional changes such as anxiety and depression, and behavioural changes such as increased alcohol intake, outbursts of aggressive behaviour and obsessive behaviour are often the most observable signs of critical incident stress.

MINIMISATION OF CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS

As with most disorders, prevention of Critical Incident Stress is better than cure and there are steps which should always be taken by Controllers/Team Leaders. The main ones are:

- Only deploy suitably trained volunteers on operations.
- Ensure that those who are deployed are physically fit enough for the expected operations.
- Make sure that everyone is properly dressed and equipped for the operations.
- Give everyone as much information as possible prior to deployment, so that they know what to expect.
- After deployment ensure that:
 - information on what is occurring and future intentions are passed on by Team Leaders to all members.
 - adequate rest breaks are provided.
 - food and water are available.
 - accommodation is of a reasonable standard.
 - alcohol is avoided.

REDUCTION OF EFFECTS OF EXPOSURE TO CRITICAL INCIDENTS

Volunteers who have been exposed to critical incidents should be advised that the effects on them can be reduced or even eliminated by the following:

- Talking about the experience.
- Eating regular meals and getting plenty of rest.
- Minimizing consumption of alcohol and caffeine.
- Continuing normal activities as much as possible.
- Accepting the fact that they may feel different or rotten for a while.
- Understanding that bad memories will fade away rather than disappear.

INFORMAL DEBRIEFINGS

Informal debriefings are an essential element in eliminating or at least reducing the effects of Critical Incident Stress.

An informal debriefing should be held no later than 3-4 hours after the incident or if there is a prolonged recovery process, then at the end of each shift before rescuers disperse. It will take between 30 and 45 minutes and should be conducted in a comfortable atmosphere, free from distractions and interference. Immediate intervention is the key.

The purpose of an informal debriefing is to stabilize crews so that they can be returned to service or allowed to go home without excessive stress.

- An informal debriefing provides:
- An update on information. It pieces together the events surrounding the incident to create a complete picture.
- A status report of the rescue and extent of injuries.
- An opportunity to ventilate feelings and demystify the reactions associated with stress of this kind.

- An offer of support.
- An opportunity to assess the need for a formal debriefing.
- The leader with an occasion to monitor the reactions of his/her workers.

As a group process it gives rescuers a sense of team work, particularly those who have had very isolating tasks.

All rescue and emergency personnel and support workers who have been involved in the incident should participate. Personnel from other support services are included, depending on the incident, the debriefer available and the site of the debriefing.

Team Leaders normally conduct the informal debriefing, although others, particularly Chaplains may do so.

TIPS FOR DEBRIEFS

Keep the session informal and **do not allow it to become a critique of operations.**

- Introduce yourself, for the purpose of those who do not usually work with your Unit, but who may have been involved in this incident.
- Explain the purpose and ground rules of the informal debriefing.
- Emphasize confidentiality.
- Give a status report.
- Give positive feedback of the effort they have given over the past hours.
- Ask the group "What happened out there?"
- Ask the group "What was the worst part?"
- Allow feelings to be expressed but do not probe or dwell on them.
- Offer information on possible signs and symptoms of stress.

- Give out and discuss the pamphlet "Coping with the Effects of Critical Incident Stress".
- Establish in your own mind the need for a formal debriefing. If necessary inform the group of the time and place.
- Go home and get some rest or hand over to the relieving rescue or emergency leader.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

If members are still experiencing problems and they are not becoming less severe, organize a formal debriefing with a CISD trained mental health professional. You will need to answer the following questions:

- Who should conduct it?
- Where will it be held?
- When will it be scheduled?
- Who will attend?
- How will you contact them?

Observe your staff and volunteers. You may be aware that they are suffering from stress symptoms before they recognize them or admit it. Be aware of your own stress levels and well being in these situations.

In the event that the symptoms are severe or last longer than six weeks the person affected will need professional help. The nearest WorkCover Authority Office or the Area Health Service should be able to arrange for professional counseling. Alternatively DHQ will arrange it.