

After a Critical Incident

A Critical Incident is an unexpected, extreme event is usually defined as an experience which is life threatening, or where there is a significant threat to one's physical or psychological wellbeing. It is a potentially traumatic event outside the range of normal human experience that would be frightening or distressing to anyone. These events are traumatic, causing emotional turmoil and behavioural changes. It may:

- Involve us personally.
- Involve a family member.
- Involve a friend or someone we know.
- Occur at work.
- Occur outside work but have an impact on staff.
- Attract high media exposure and involve graphic images.

How people react to a Critical Incident.

Many people have strong emotional or physical reactions following experience of a traumatic event. For most, these reactions subside over a few days or weeks. For some, the symptoms may last longer and be more severe. This may be due to several factors such as the nature of the traumatic event, the level of available support, mental and physical health, previous and current life stress, personality, and coping skills.

Symptoms of trauma can be described as physical, cognitive (thinking), behavioural (things we do) and emotional. As long as they are not too severe or last for too long, these symptoms are normal reactions to trauma. They are part of the natural healing process of adjusting to a very powerful event, making some sense out of what happened, and putting it into perspective. With understanding and support from family, friends and colleagues the stress symptoms usually resolve more rapidly.

It helps to be aware that even though a traumatic event is over and they have returned to work and their normal activities, individuals may experience a strong physical and emotional reaction, or "emotional aftershock," in response to the event. This is a NORMAL reaction of a NORMAL person to an ABNORMAL event.

- The reaction may be immediate, or appear a few hours or days later. Sometimes, even weeks or months may pass before the stress reaction appears.
- The extent of a reaction may range from mild to intense.
- The duration of a reaction may be a few days to weeks, months or longer, depending on the severity of the traumatic event.
- Sometimes the event is so painful that it does not pass, and professional help may be needed. This does not mean the person is weak. It just means this event was too powerful for them to manage by themselves.

Practical information:

- Be mindful that we all react differently to trauma.
- It is important not to pathologise a person's reaction to an abnormal event.
- Anyone involved is adjusting and adapting to what has happened, and this process will take time and will affect people differently and in different ways, depending on their circumstances and previous history.
- The death of a person in a critical incident may also have a significant impact on individuals who knew the person (whether they were involved in the incident or not) and they may also be experiencing a grief reaction.
- After a traumatic event, many people experience strong feelings like fear, sadness, guilt, anger, or grief. They might be finding it hard to cope and it might take a while to come to terms with what has happened. These feelings will usually become less intense after a few weeks.
- It takes time to readjust and get back to a daily routine after a traumatic event. Be patient and do not expect them to rush the healing process.

Some simple, practical things you can do to assist colleagues in the workplace:

- Welcome your colleagues back warmly (e.g., "It's great to see you back").
- Behave as normally as possible, as they will be looking for this.
- Help them re-establish a daily routine at work.
- Be patient and understanding if they are experiencing variable ability to concentrate.
- Provide a calm work environment to assist them manage emotional fluctuations.

- Recognise that they have been through an extremely stressful event and may need time and space to deal with it.
- Respond in a supportive way if they are experiencing episodes of irritability (e.g., *"I was just wondering – is there anything I can help you with today?"* or *"Would you like to come for a walk at lunchtime?"*)
- Listening is very important, but it can sometimes be hard to know what to say. Don't be afraid to take a few moments to listen, and don't worry about having to say 'the right thing'. There is no right thing to say, but here are a few pointers:
 - **Try to put yourself in their shoes.** Don't interrupt, offer examples from your own life, or talk about yourself.
 - **Avoid** offering simple reassurances such as, *"I know how you feel"*, or *"You'll be OK"*.
 - **Acknowledge their distress** with statements like, *"It's really tough to go through something like this"*, *"This is such a tough time for you"*, and *"Sometimes it's hard to see a light at the end of the tunnel"*, or as appropriate.

After someone has been through a traumatic experience, re-establishing a normal routine at work can help them restore a sense of order and control in their life after the chaos they may have experienced.

Also be aware of secondary impacts:

- The experience of a colleague or friend can trigger distressing emotional responses in some individuals. For example, they can suddenly feel unsafe, afraid and inhibited in going about their normal routines. Be supportive of them or encourage them to seek professional help.
- Some individuals may have pre-existing vulnerabilities – states of anxiety, depression, trauma from a previous disaster, etc - which cause an emergence of a stress reaction or grief reaction, which may require professional counselling.

After a traumatic incident

It is normal when people who have experienced trauma, need to feel 'heard' after the experience; to tell their story. Usually this is done with family and friends. Sometimes it helps to tell a health professional if very strong emotions are being experienced and there is a risk of being re-traumatised.

Some people will feel comfortable about writing things down soon after the incident, then putting it away to be looked at later when they feel stronger. Sometimes people will use the media if the incident has had a high media profile. This information may also be extremely valuable later to authorities investigating the incident and therefore may be very helpful to the community.

One of the positives after a traumatic incident is that there is an opportunity for people to take care of each other, strengthen relationships or re-evaluate their own lives. Therefore if someone's traumatic stress reaction is so intense and persistent that it's getting in the way of their ability to function, they may need help from a mental health professional. Some examples:

- It's more than 6 weeks, and they're not feeling any better.
- They are having trouble functioning at home or work.
- They are experiencing intrusive memories, nightmares, or flashbacks.
- They are having an increasingly difficult time connecting and relating to others, including in their own social groups.
- They are experiencing suicidal thoughts or feelings.
- They are unnecessarily avoiding more and more things that remind them of the traumatic event.

If you or someone you know appears to be struggling with any of the above symptoms, seek the help of a mental health professional. Call Barcare for assistance.

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