

Organisation –Critical Incident Stress Management

What is critical incident?

Work related stress is an everyday occurrence and is usually managed by each person. However, a critical incident is an abnormally stressful event that may be psychologically traumatic, such as assault, threats, severe injury, death, fire or a bomb threat. These situations may provoke severe stress reactions in workers.

Individuals directly involved in the incident may be susceptible to developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), with symptoms including intense flashbacks, high anxiety and panic. Even those not directly involved may suffer negative effects of what happened. Without proper support, employees may experience prolonged emotional pain and psychological distress. This would eventually have an impact on the organisation as employees try to cope using potentially unhelpful or destructive techniques. This includes taking days off, turning to alcohol to numb their distress, blaming various individuals for what happened, or even resigning.

What are the symptoms of critical incident stress?

The symptoms of critical incident stress are different for each person, but may include:

- Preoccupation with the event
- Anxiety
- Inability to feel happiness or enjoyment
- Withdrawal from regular social activities
- Attention, memory and concentration problems
- Erratic behaviour and emotional swings
- Eating difficulties
- Headache and bodily tension
- Rapid pulse and high blood pressure
- Poor sleep
- Physical and emotional exhaustion

If I know of someone with critical incident stress, what should I do?

There is a comprehensive series of strategies known as Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) designed to help traumatised workers come to terms with their ordeal.

CISM is a multi-faceted approach to crisis intervention, designed to offer emotional first aid after a critical incident. Timely and effective CISM processes may help prevent the development of more serious incident effects such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Typically, CISM involves at least four different elements, implemented at different stages of the recovery process.

Pre-crisis preparation

The idea is to lay the groundwork so that workers are informed and prepared, if and when a critical incident takes place. It may include educating staff on critical incident procedures, training key staff members in critical incident stress management, and providing contacts for professionals trained in critical incident management.

Demobilising

Demobilisation is a way to ease the workers from the highly aroused state caused by a critical incident into a more normal one. It should take place before those involved in the incident disperse. Strategies used may include clarifying information, developing an immediate plan of action and offering information on defusing and debriefing.

Defusing

Defusing is conducted by a team member trained in debriefing or a professional. It is designed to bring the incident to psychological closure. This is usually done by reviewing the event, clarifying questions and concerns, encouraging employees to share their experience, identifying current needs and offering advice and information on support if necessary.

Debriefing

Debriefing is usually carried out within three to seven days of the critical incident. Trained debriefers help the workers to explore and understand a range of issues including the sequence of events, the individual experience, normal reactions and ways to manage critical stress.

At The Therapy Room, Geraldine Tan, the principal psychologist, conducts CISM workshops for related professionals. Should you have any inquiries or is interested in attending such workshop, please feel free to click [here](#) to contact us and find out more.