

## Post Incident Reactions

After exposure to an intense, unusual or abnormal emergency service event (a critical incident), some persons may experience reactions that are out of the ordinary for them. This is not an uncommon experience. The event may create a stress response, which can result in a disruption of physical and psychological processes. These reactions are normal. Often, these reactions appear immediately after the event, but they may appear hours, days, weeks or even months later. Some of the more common reactions reported by emergency providers after involvement with a critical incident include:

<u>Physical</u>	<u>Emotional</u>	<u>Cognitive</u>	<u>Behavioral</u>
Nausea / Intestinal upset	Anxiety	Memory problems	Withdrawal
Fatigue	Grief	Poor attention	Restlessness
Rapid heart rate	Denial	Nightmares	Emotional outbursts
Chest pain *	Fear	Intrusive images	Increased alcohol usage
Difficulty breathing *	Depression	Hyper-alertness	Avoidance of others
Shock symptoms *	Panic	Loss of Orientation	Change in speech
Muscle cramps	Apprehension	Poor problem solving	Change in appetite
Headaches	Disturbed thinking	Poor decisions	Increased startle reflex
Chills		Sleep disturbance	Blaming others

This is not an all-inclusive list. Some people exposed to the same event may not suffer any effects, and this is also a normal reaction. While these reactions can be alarming and unsettling, it is important to remember that these are normal reactions, and you are not unique to the experience. However, if you experience any of the reactions marked with an “\*”, medical and/or psychological assistance should be obtained immediately.

Some of the things you can do to help speed up the recovery process include:

- Eat – even if you do not feel like eating, try to eat something with nutritional quality. The stress reaction depletes energy levels. It is important to keep the mind and body functioning normally. Try to avoid caffeine and sugar.
- Exercise – regular exercise is ideal to total health and well being. It is especially important to get some physical exercise within 24 hours of a critical event, and each day the symptoms persist. One suggestion for good physical exercise is a brisk walk. Exercise helps to reduce any stress chemicals in the system, and helps to “clear the mind”.
- Rest – try to get plenty of rest. A common stress reaction is for people to try to “bury” themselves in work or activity. This can be self-defeating both physically and mentally. If you find your sleep is interrupted, get up and replenish yourself. You can do this a number of ways: a glass of juice or milk, something good to eat if you have not eaten, read, watch TV, talk, or write about your feelings. After a short period of time, you should find that you are able to return to bed and rest more comfortably.
- Talk – it is important to share your thoughts and reactions about the event. Suppression of thoughts and reactions may postpone or prolong the recovery process. Sharing is the mind’s way of replenishing. It is also important to share your reactions with loved ones, so they may understand and assist in your recovery.

If you find your stress symptoms persist, get worse or become more uncomfortable, you should consider contacting your physician or a competent mental health professional to assist you with the recovery process. If you feel you would like to speak with someone about the event, want more information about the stress response, or would like a referral to a mental health professional, please contact the CISM Program Coordinator by one of the following methods:

Through the Radio Room	Digital Pager	CISM DES Office
(610) 344-5100	1 (888) 608-0396	(610) 344-5021

Or contact any CISM team member. If a Debriefing is to be held, your Chief or Administrator will advise you of the time, date and location.

## **Critical Incident Stress Information Sheet For Significant Others**

Your loved one has been involved in an emotionally stressful event, often known as a *Critical Incident*. He/she may be experiencing normal stress responses to such an event. (*Critical Incident Stress*) Critical Incident Stress affects up to 87% of all emergency personnel exposed to a critical incident. No one in Emergency Services is immune to Critical Incident Stress, regardless of past experiences or years of service. Your love one may experience Critical Incident Stress at any time during his/her career.

### **Important things to remember about Critical Incident Stress:**

The signs of Critical Incident Stress are Physical, Cognitive, Emotional, and Behavioral. Your loved one has received a handout outlining these signs. Please ask him/her to share it with you.

Critical Incident Stress Responses can occur right at the scene, within hours, within days, or within weeks of the event.

Your loved one may experience a variety of signs/symptoms of a stress response, or he/she may not feel any of the signs at this time.

Suffering from the effects of Critical Incident Stress is completely normal. Your loved one is not the only one suffering; other emergency personnel shared the event and are probably sharing the reaction.

The symptoms will normally subside and disappear in time if you and your loved one do not dwell on them.

All phases of our lives overlap and influence each other: personal, professional, family, etc. The impact of Critical Incident Stress can be intensified, influenced, or mitigated by our own personal, family, and developmental issues.

Encourage, but do ***NOT*** pressure, your loved one to talk about the incident and his/her reaction to it. Talk is the best medicine. Your primary *job* is to listen and reassure. Remember that if an event is upsetting to you and your loved one, your children may be affected also. They may need to talk too.

You may not understand what your loved one is going through at this time, but offer your love and support. Don't be afraid to ask what you can do that he/she would consider helpful.

Accept the fact that life will go on: His/hers, yours, and your children's. Maintain or return to a normal routine as soon as possible.

If the signs of stress your loved one is experiencing do not begin to subside within a few weeks, or if they intensify, consider seeking further assistance. The Critical Incident Stress Management Team of Chester County can help you and your loved one find a professional who understands Critical Incident Stress and how it can affect you.

Chester County CISM Team Contact Information:

Through the Radio Room

(610) 344-5100

Digital Pager

1 (888) 608-0396

CISM DES Office

(610) 344-5021