



Critical Incidents and Sleep Problems

It is quite common for emergency services personnel to have sleep problems after experiencing a critical incident. In fact, research conducted in Manitoba by Dr. Noreen Ek indicates that the most common post-incident difficulties are sleeping problems (approximately 54%).

Emergency services workers may be kept awake at night for a number of reasons. The initial reasons are likely due to the physiological changes that occur in our body as a result of the critical incident. These may include high levels of adrenaline, higher respiration, increase in heart rate and other “fight-or-flight” reactions you experience at the time (and possibly for a few days after the incident). It is hard to sleep when you are “pumped-up” by the event.

Other common reasons are as a result of the images of the critical incident being “stuck” in your head. These images may become “stuck” in your head because of your previous experiences or they may remind you of your own situation in some way. Emergency services workers may also “replay” an event over and over in their mind either to try to find meaning for the event or to think about different ways in which they could have responded to have a more positive outcome for the event. These “If only” and “What if” scenes you play out in your mind can keep you awake for hours, days, or even weeks after an incident.

If you are having sleep problems it may be important that you do something about it. One researcher (Lavie, 2001), believes that sleep difficulties may actually be an early indicator of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the treatment of these sleep problems may prevent the onset or lessen the impact of PTSD.

There are a number of things you can do to help deal with sleep problems. Keep in mind that what works for some individuals may not work for others. So, your best bet is to find out what's effective for you and stick with it. In general, try to build into your schedule time for eight hours of sleep, and follow this routine as regularly as possible. Even on weekends. Here are a few tips many people have found to be useful:

- Avoid caffeine, nicotine and alcohol in the late afternoon and evening. Caffeine and nicotine can delay your sleep, and alcohol may interrupt your sleep later in the night.
- If you have trouble sleeping when you go to bed, don't nap during the day, since it affects your ability to sleep at night.
- Exercise regularly, but do so at least three hours before bedtime. A workout after that time may actually keep you awake because your body has not had a chance to cool down.
- Establish a regular, relaxing bedtime routine that will allow you to unwind and send a "signal" to your brain that it's time to sleep. Avoiding exposure to bright light before bedtime and taking a hot bath may help.
- Don't use your bed for anything other than sleep or sex. Your bed should be associated with sleep.
- Consider your sleep environment. Make it as pleasant, comfortable, dark and quiet as you can.
- Find safe and appropriate opportunities to talk to someone you trust about the disturbing images or thoughts you may be having.
- If you can't go to sleep after 30 minutes, don't stay in bed tossing and turning. Get up and involve yourself in a relaxing activity, such as listening to soothing music or reading, until you feel sleepy. Remember: Try to clear your mind; don't use this time to solve your daily problems.

If sleep problems continue please contact your family doctor. Your doctor will first want to determine whether there are any underlying medical problems that are contributing to or causing your sleep problem. In many cases, your doctor will be able to recommend lifestyle changes that can help promote sleep.