



## Understanding Critical Incident Stress

Tragedies, deaths, serious injuries, known victims, and threatening situations are a few of the incidents that an emergency services worker can experience, sometimes on a frequent basis. Critical incident stress is the stress typically created by these powerful events (critical incidents) that are outside the usual range of experience of emergency services personnel and sometimes overwhelms their ability to cope with the event. It is well known that the stress created by emergency services work (critical incident stress) can have a significant impact on an individual and sometimes their families.

### **Critical Incident Stress Normal Reactions**

The most important thing to remember is that in almost all situations we are talking about **normal people having normal reactions to abnormal events**. Critical Incidents may produce a wide range of normal stress reactions, which can appear immediately at the scene, a few hours later or even a few days or weeks after the event. Stress reactions usually occur in four different areas: cognitive (thinking), emotional (feelings), physical (body) and behavioural (actions).

#### **Mild Normal Reactions in the First Few Hours**

On scene or within the first few hours after an incident a number of reactions may occur. These initial reactions are primarily physical and perceptual in nature as a result of the “fight or flight” instinct that has been aroused by the incident. These may include the following reactions:

- **Perceptual Distortions**  
Fixating on the scene and not noticing people or events around you
- **Physical Reactions**  
Gagging, heavy feeling in the stomach, lump in the throat
- **Psychological Reactions**  
Feeling like crying

#### **Intense Normal Reactions in the First Few Hours**

More intense reactions are also possible within the first few hours. The nature of these reactions is usually related to the intensity of the incident as well as the emergency services worker's current situation. These can include the following reactions:

- **Perceptual Distortions**  
Time warping: either slow or fast motion  
Auditory distortions with diminished or intensified sound  
Visual distortions with either tunnel vision or heightened sense of detail
- **Physical Reactions**  
Tremors/shakes, hyperventilation, throwing up, bladder/bowel release, and difficulty sleeping
- **Psychological Reactions**  
Crying, fear, shock and numbness

#### **Normal Reactions in the First Few Days Afterwards**

After a few days the CIS reactions may continue. As time goes on the physical/perception reactions begin to lessen as the body begins to return to its normal level of functioning. However, there can be a general increase in the psychological or emotional reactions caused by the critical incident due to the fact that as time goes on people begin to “process” the events and begin to fully embrace the experiences. These reactions typically involve:

- **Physical Reactions**  
Heart palpitations, stomach aches, heart burn, muscle aches, difficulty sleeping, diarrhoea, constipation,

lower sex drive

- **Psychological Reactions**

Numbness, inattentiveness, disbelief, running on “auto-pilot”, memory gaps, loss of perspective on life event, tense and irritable, feeling isolated, feeling no one cares or understands, preoccupied with thinking about the event, heightened sensitivity

### Normal Reactions 3 to 7 Days After the Event

As time goes on the physical reactions continue to lessen. The most common ones being sleep difficulties and other “avoidance” types of behaviours. It is also important to realise that these **normal reactions** can have a negative impact in the home or workplace if they are not acknowledged and understood as being normal and they will (in almost all cases) pass after a short period of time.

Problems may occur where these reactions persist or in cases where the emergency services worker uses inappropriate methods to deal with these reactions. Problems in the home or workplace may occur when the significant others in their lives do not understand where these reactions originate or where appropriate communication does not occur. It is important that other people recognise and understand that these normal short-term reactions are not caused by them. These reactions may include:

- **Physical Reactions**

Sudden awakening after going to sleep, sexual difficulties, alcohol/drug abuse

- **Psychological Reactions**

Flashbacks, heightened sense of danger, anger/blaming/guilt, nightmares, isolation/social withdrawal, fear/anxiety about the future, feeling emotionally numb, depression, fear of recurrence, family problems/misunderstandings, feeling out of control, alienation from people, exaggerated startle response

These are a few important things to remember:

Do	Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Expect the incident to bother you</li><li>• Maintain a good diet</li><li>• Take time for leisure activities &amp; exercise</li><li>• Remind yourself these reactions are normal</li><li>• Learn about Critical Incident Stress</li><li>• Talk with family, friends and co-workers about the reactions.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Stay away from work</li><li>• Use legal or illegal substances to numb-out</li><li>• Have unrealistic expectations for recovery</li><li>• Think that you are “crazy”</li><li>• Drink alcohol excessively</li><li>• Withdraw from friends, family &amp; co-workers and avoid the impact of the reactions</li></ul>

Most critical incident stress reactions resolve themselves within 6 to 8 weeks after the incident. Sometimes the memories may last longer but usually the intensity of the reactions will lessen. The more time that passes the easier it will become. Many people find talking to someone they trust will also help lessen the reactions. **If these reactions do lessen after 6 to 8 weeks or they impair a person's ability to function at home or work seek help immediately.**