

Putting a Face on Traumatic Events



Look Like Anyone You Know ?

Critical Incident Information

When engaged in providing emergency services, you respond to difficult and distressful types of incidents (critical incidents). Occasionally, you are exposed to sights, sounds, smells, thoughts and work demands that exceed normal working conditions or life experiences.

Even when the event is over, you may find yourself continuing to experience reactions for several days or longer. Some common stress reactions for emergency responders include:

<u>Physical</u>	<u>Thinking</u>	<u>Emotional</u>	<u>Spiritual</u>
Adrenalin rush -as if you drank too much caffeine	"In a fog" "Like a nightmare" Slowed thinking	All stirred up Numb, flattened emotions	Loss of innocence (things will never be quite the same)
Rapid breathing	Indecision		Loss of meaning
Tremors to hands & lips; clumsiness	Memory loss	Anxiety/fear	Loss of direction
Upset stomach, nausea, diarrhea, loss of appetite	Difficulty concentrating, short attention span	Sadness, depression	Thoughts about mortality
Sweating, chills, dizziness	Confusion, disorientation	Embarrassed	Emptiness, doubt, apathy
Cardiac symptoms: rapid heartbeat, increased BP, chest pain	Difficulty problem- solving, calculating, distracted	Isolated, alienated, want to hide	Cynicism, unforgiving
Sleep disturbance (most common)	Distressing dreams, nightmares	Guilt	Feeling that you don't belong
No energy	Images you can't get out of your head	"Shoulda, coulda, woulda"	Casting blame
Head & muscle aches, Sensory loss	Flashbacks	Anger, irritability	Feeling abandoned
Sexual dysfunction	Hyper-vigilance	Powerlessness, hopelessness	Loss of faith

These signs and symptoms usually diminish or disappear within a few days. Less often, such incidents may cause a more prolonged stress reaction. Research suggests that symptoms occur about 19% of the time in emergency service personnel, depending on certain situational and psychological variables of the incident. However, post-traumatic stress does not usually evolve into long-term disability if recognized and addressed.

Listed on the back page are things you can do to help reduce reactions and move you toward recovery. **If stress symptoms persist for more than four weeks, contact your CISM Team or other professionals for assistance.**

Techniques for Handling Stress Reactions

- 1. Handle the adrenaline rush symptoms:**
 - Consciously relax the muscles in your shoulders, arms, legs and gut hourly over the next 12 hours.
 - Consciously breathe deeply (diaphragmatic breathing), making your exhalation longer than your inhalation, each hour for the next 12 hours.
 - Aerobic activity and exercise is helpful to dissipate stress chemicals.
 - Eat small, frequent meals, high in protein. Stay well hydrated.
 - Excessive caffeine, excessive sugar, or consuming alcohol will worsen feelings of agitation and can lead to a crash. Alcohol may contribute to depressed feelings and delay recovery. At least for the next several days, reduce or abstain from these.
- 2. Return to your routine and schedule as soon as you can.** A familiar routine helps anchor you while your thoughts and emotions are ramping down.
- 3. Rest a bit more.** If you find that you have trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep (and you didn't previously have this trouble) take note: worrying about it won't help you sleep! If you can't sleep after 15 minutes, get out of bed and do something quiet and boring until you are sleepy. If sleep disruption remains a problem four weeks after the incident or if it worsens, seek assistance.
- 4. Talk to family, friends, a chaplain or minister or to co-workers you trust.** The more you talk about the incident the sooner it will resolve in your mind and body. Seek out a designated peer-support person or help-line created to support your career.
- 5. Participate in group stress debriefings (CISD), defusings, demobilizations, after-action or crisis management briefings** that are offered to you after the event.

Please Take Note:

- ✓ Reoccurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks are not necessarily abnormal. They often are your mind's way of processing what has happened – working it through so to speak. Try to relax through them and allow them to resolve over time. If they do not subside within several weeks after the event, consider seeking help.
- ✓ If you were feeling stressed or addressing problems in your life before the incident, your feelings about these and your attempts to cope may worsen with the addition of another stressful incident. Now would be a good time to talk with someone about how the event has affected you. Tending to these matters sooner than later will help you maintain a healthy career as well as a meaningful life.

If any stress reactions or symptoms continue to be bothersome, worsen, or do not improve in four weeks, seek assistance by contacting your employee assistance program (EAP), a mental health professional, or contact a critical incident stress management (CISM) team which serves emergency service personnel.

Arrowhead CISM Team
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