

Surviving a Critical Incident





A critical incident is a sudden, unexpected event or series of events that exceeds the bounds of what normally happens to people and overwhelms the coping skills of an individual or group. Critical incidents include natural events (i.e., earthquakes or tornadoes) as well as man-made events such as homicides or robberies. A critical incident can even be the recent death of an employee that impacts the workplace.

Learning healthy ways to cope with a critical incident is important not only for the individuals who are directly affected, but also the entire work group. Here are some ideas to assist in the survival of a critical incident.



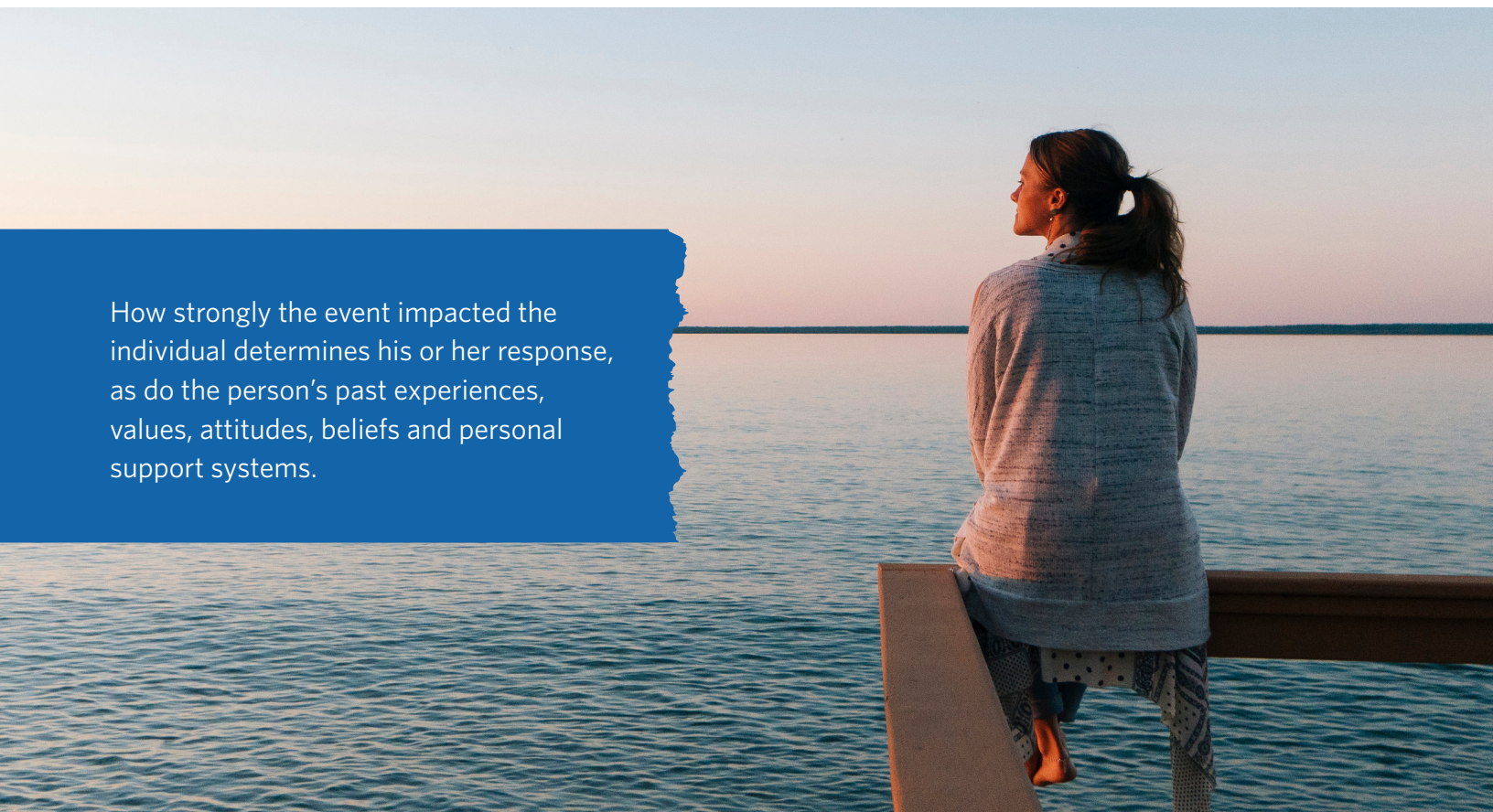
Common Reactions

- Being afraid to return to the workplace or being concerned about physical safety in the work environment
- Changing regular work routines to avoid physical reminders of the traumatic event
- Experiencing flashbacks of trauma, which are triggered by sights, sounds and smells related to the trauma
- Decreasing time spent at work through sick leave, vacations and unexplained absences
- Questioning whether or not to remain at the present job or even the present profession
- Being distracted from the task at hand (which can lead to accidents or errors)
- Deteriorating work performance and customer relations
- Wondering whether one is competent to perform one's job
- Questioning when things will get back to normal
- Feeling isolated or different, as if others do not appear to be as affected as you are by the incident
- Feeling angry about the behavior of co-workers
- Breaking down in professionalism on the job
- Losing a sense of humor
- Withdrawing from friends and colleagues

When unexpected traumatic events occur, it is normal to have strong physical and emotional reactions. Sometimes these appear immediately after the events, and sometimes they don't begin for several days, weeks or even months. While unpleasant, these reactions are normal and usually temporary, leaving no long-term effects on the individual experiencing them.

How strongly the event impacted the individual determines his or her response, as do the person's past experiences, values, attitudes, beliefs and personal support systems. Some of the wide ranges of normal responses are listed below.

EMOTIONAL	PHYSICAL	MENTAL	BEHAVIORAL
Anxiety	Fatigue	Confusion	Isolation
Fearfulness	Twitching	Forgetfulness	Increased alcohol use
Numbness	Nausea	Distractibility	Increased drug use
Uncertainty	Headache	Impaired memory	Restlessness
Depression	Sleep problems	Poor judgment	Jumpiness
Anger	Sweating	Poor concentration	Interpersonal problems
Guilt	Dizziness	Flashbacks	Appetite changes
Irritability	Intestinal problems	Past traumas remembered	Sleep disturbances
Grief	Breathing problems	Intrusive thoughts	Reduced sex drive
Vulnerability		Nightmares	Outbursts
Disbelief		Suspiciousness	

A woman with dark hair in a ponytail, wearing a grey sweater, is sitting on a wooden pier. She is looking out at the ocean under a sunset sky. The water is calm, and the horizon is visible in the distance.

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Take Care of Yourself

These reactions are all generally temporary, and pass within a few weeks. While they are normal, there are things you can do to reduce their impact and to help restore normal feeling and functioning more quickly:

- Remember you are experiencing a normal, expected and temporary response to a traumatic event. Healing from any injury takes time.
- Talking to friends, loved ones, ministers or sometimes a counselor is probably the most effective treatment for dealing with personal trauma. Discussing the event repeatedly is a common and helpful activity for many people who have undergone personal crises.
- If talking isn't possible, try writing out your thoughts and feelings. You might want to write to someone who is special or pretend you are writing to that person. What is written doesn't need to be sent or shared with anyone else; describing your feelings in words is often helpful in clarifying emotions and reducing your stress.
- Moderate physical exercise (walking, stretching, etc.), alternated with periods of relaxation, may be helpful, but consider seeing your doctor before starting any new exercise program to determine what type and amount is appropriate for you.
- Drugs, including alcohol and tobacco, should be avoided because they can mask emotions and sometimes slow down normal recovery. Instead, substitute other stress-reducing activities.
- If reactions to the crisis are excessive, short-term use of medication, prescribed by a physician specifically for you, may be helpful and appropriate.
- Be productive and make necessary decisions, but don't make major life changes until you are sure the crisis has passed.
- Concentrate on what you can control in your life, and work at letting go of those things you cannot control.
- Use your support system — your friends, family, pets, religion, hobbies, sports, etc. Most people want to help but do not always know how. Tell people what you need and want, as well as what you don't.
- Pamper yourself. Get plenty of rest. Eat regular meals even if you don't feel like it. Be as self-nurturing as you can — plan enjoyable and relaxing activities into your schedule.
- Spend time with others. Don't be alone if it makes you feel uncomfortable, or if isolating yourself is hampering the process of recovery.
- Be patient with yourself, not critical. Recurring thoughts, flashbacks, restlessness, etc., will eventually stop. Give yourself permission to recover at your own pace. Remember that you are having a normal reaction to an abnormal event. Be as loving to yourself as you would be to a loved one.



Supporting Others in Their Recovery

You can help others cope with their reactions to a critical incident. Your genuine concern can help others cope and return to some sort of normalcy. Below are examples of support strategies:

- Practice listening
- Ask questions respectfully
- Give permission to repeat his/her story
- Avoid saying "I know how you feel"
- Periods of silence can be healing
- Don't take others' emotional responses personally (i.e., anger, withdrawal)
- Avoid euphemisms
- Don't assume that another person's faith beliefs are like your own
- Take care of yourself
- Spend time together doing something enjoyable
- Allow tears and laughter
- Don't try to fix it
- Be honest
- Provide a place of safety
- Offer your companionship, even if it is declined
- Lower expectations for awhile
- Encourage physical activity
- Learn about normal stress reactions such as
 - Reduced concentration
 - Withdrawal
 - Sadness
 - Guilt
 - Anger
 - Frustration
- Recognize your own reactions, particularly survivor's guilt
- Be patient
- Get help from a professional



Remind your group that there are resources available to them if they are struggling with healthy ways to cope with a critical incident. In the case of a sudden, traumatic death, you may want to consult with your EAP about on-site services to give everyone a chance to process thoughts and feelings.

When facing life's challenges, you often turn to family or friends for support. But sometimes that's not enough. Sometimes you need an experienced professional to talk with to know you're not alone.

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