

How to Recognize and Deal with Critical Incident Stress (CIS)

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Critical Incidents defined:

-Any traumatic event that shocks you and affects or undermines your ability to cope

-The CI can create an unusually strong physical, emotional and/or mental reaction either during or following the event

-Acute Critical Incident - occurs during an actual incident

-Delayed Critical Incident - occurs once the incident is over. Reactions can occur minutes, hours, days, or even years after the event

-Research shows that it is common amongst all emergency personnel (both career and volunteer) that at some point in their careers they may experience CIS symptoms

How to recognize CIS:

- CIS is a normal reaction to an ABNORMAL EVENT

- You may react to the scene and become overwhelmed by what you saw, heard, touched, or smelled

- Your stress response could be triggered by one or more events either immediately or after some duration of time

- Individual reactions vary greatly according to the severity, intensity, and duration of the CI, as well as the amount of support following the incident

Common reaction to CIS:

Expect the incident to bother you.

Physical Reactions:

- Sleep disturbances
- Headaches
- Stomach upsets
- Exhaustion
- Startle reactions
- Hyperactivity
- Lethargy
- Nightmares

Emotional Reactions:

- Fear
- Guilt
- Grief
- Anxiety
- Sense of helplessness
- Anger
- Irritability
- Frustration

- Oversensitivity
- Emotional numbing

Mental Reactions

- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty with decision making
- Flashbacks
- Memory problems

How to effectively deal with CIS:

- *Realize that your reactions are normal*
- Eat well and avoid caffeine
- Avoid the use of alcohol or drugs as a way of coping
- Exercise regularly
- Get plenty of rest
- Be gentle and nurturing of yourself
- Try not to isolate
- Reach out for support
- Talk through your thoughts and feelings with family, friends, or co-workers

Most CIS reactions will decrease within a few weeks. If this does not occur, seek medical attention and extra CIS support. It may be necessary to take time off work; return only when you are ready. If you are ready to resume normal daily tasks of living, do so. However, if you feel vulnerable, request time off work.