

Management of staff after a critical incident

Anna Eliatamby and Richard Danziger

A critical incident can be defined as any event that has a stressful impact large enough to overwhelm an individual's usually effective coping skills. Critical incidents are abrupt, powerful events that fall outside the range of our ordinary experiences. While we can recognize the risk of such incidents occurring and can plan accordingly, we generally have very little advance warning of *when* such an incident may take place. It's therefore crucial that we have plans, procedures and capacity in place to enable us to respond urgently and manage the incident effectively, whenever the need arises.

Critical incidents tend to have a strong emotional impact, even on experienced staff members. It's important for managers to understand the likely feelings and behaviours during and after a critical incident. Reactions and coping strategies will vary across different people with different levels of experience and exposure to high risk environments. We need to be alert to a range of possible reactions and ensure that we provide additional support where it is needed.

Immediate and short-term reactions of heightened stress, shock, and emotional distress are to be expected. This may include disturbing thoughts or images replaying themselves in one's mind, interrupting sleep, and making it difficult to focus on 'normal life'. These symptoms may last for several weeks.

Some individuals may experience a prolonged or particularly intense reaction, which may develop into an adjustment disorder, an acute stress disorder, or even post-traumatic stress disorder. It's also possible for such events to reawaken past anxieties or traumas, which may undermine an individual's ability to cope with the current event.

Managers may find it useful to work with staff members to reflect on their feelings and behaviours before and after the critical incident, to assess whether there has been any significant or lasting change, which may indicate the need for additional support. It's also important for managers themselves to recognise that they will also be affected by such an incident, and that they, too, need to identify sources of support and coping mechanisms to strengthen their own resilience.

The concept of emotional processing was first introduced by Rachman in 1980, to refer to the way in which an individual processes stressful life events. He defined emotional processing as: 'A process whereby emotional disturbances are absorbed, and decline to the extent that other experiences and behaviour can proceed without disruption'. Successful emotional processing is indicated when there is a return to 'undisrupted behaviour after an emotional disturbance has waned'.

Healthy processing involves acknowledging the feelings one is experiencing, restructuring emotions to make them more manageable, and building a memory of the event that is not disruptive and that includes higher level learning from the experience. Effective processing includes the shift from physical and emotional sensations when thinking about the incident, to a more controlled, verbal and conceptual memory mode.

Rachman suggested that ‘successful processing can be gauged from persons’ ability to talk about, see, listen to or be reminded about the significant events without experiencing distress or disruptions’. But if individuals are unable to absorb or process emotional disturbances, or try to suppress their experience without processing it, they will remain in a state of heightened emotional arousal, stress and/or fear, making them unable to concentrate on the daily tasks of living.

Typical emotional reactions following a critical incident, and how to support effective emotional processing:

Typical Response	Mechanisms for support
<i>Immediate aftermath</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shock, denial, trying to carry on or take charge, paying insufficient attention to the situation • Ensure basic needs are met including contact with partners and family • No in-depth analysis, focus only on crucial information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide time to re-group, as individuals or a group – one to two weeks on special leave with pay • Facilitate access to Counsellors, Staff Welfare • Psycho-support for those who want it
<i>Later</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resurfacing of unresolved issues caused by previous experiences • More sensitive to reminder cues in the environment • Work toward conceptually integrating the experience into own schemas for work and life • Forgiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow an adjustment period and exercise patience • Encourage healthy emotional processing, discourage suppression • Provide access to counselling support as needed • Understand that discussions with the staff may also have an emotional impact on you. • Consider restricting duties/responsibilities if appropriate

References:

Crisis Management – Guidance and good practice, British Standards Institute, 2014

<https://www.officer.com/home/article/10249385/critical-incident-stress>

<http://emotionalprocessing.org/definitions/>