

Critical Incidents in the Workplace: A Guide for Employees

This information was prepared by the City of Toronto's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) as a guide to assist employees who have experienced a critical incident in the workplace.

Critical incidents are highly stressful events that have the potential to overwhelm an individual's usual coping abilities. These are extreme events which fall outside the range of normal experience. It is important to recognize that individuals involved in a critical incident may experience a broad range of reactions. These reactions are a normal human response to extremely abnormal events. For the majority of individuals, such reactions will ordinarily resolve in a relatively short period of time.

What is a Critical Incident?

A critical incident can take many forms and occur anywhere. A critical incident usually occurs in a sudden and/or unexpected manner and can involve:

- exposure to shocking scenes of death and/or injury
- experiencing physical danger or violence
- threats to the safety and security of an individual
- witnessing violence, injury or death of another, even if the individual is not directly harmed or threatened

Examples of Critical incidents that could occur in the workplace include:

- a serious accident or injury
- a violent physical (including sexual) assault
- a threat with a weapon
- a fire or explosion

What feelings, actions, and thoughts are commonly experienced?

Each person's response to a critical incident is unique, but there are some common reactions that many people experience.

Understanding that these are *normal* and *natural responses* in the face of *abnormal circumstances* can help people to cope with them.

Reactions during and immediately following the Critical Incident

Individuals frequently report experiencing intense fear, helplessness, horror, shock and disbelief that the incident is happening or other similar reactions of distress.

Disorientation, confusion, feeling detached or experiencing a sense of unreality about the incident are also common. As the "fight/flight" response is activated, physical responses beyond one's control can occur. These can include nausea, sweating, racing heart and trouble breathing.

Common Stress Reactions

In the days and sometimes weeks following a critical incident, stress reactions may be experienced in a range of ways including:

Physical	Cognitive	Emotional	Behavioural
Changes to sleep patterns	Poor concentration	Anger	Withdrawal from social network
Insomnia	Impaired Memory	Fear	Argumentative
Intense dreams and nightmares	Inability to focus	Irritability	Frequent or uncontrollable crying
Nausea	Intrusive thoughts	Sadness	Loss of interests
Headaches	Flashbacks and replay	Grief	Increased use of alcohol or drugs
Diarrhea	Difficulty making decisions	Depression	Changes in appetite
Feeling wound up and unable to relax	Second guessing of actions during the event	Numbness	Avoidance of places, objects, activities, and people that are reminders of the incident
Muscle tension	Loss of sense of control	Guilt/shame	Self-destructive or careless
Elevated blood pressure, racing heart or sweaty hands when reminded of event	Preoccupation with safety and protection	Anxiety	Changes to regular activities and routines
Startles easily	Hypervigilance (always on guard)	Loss of trust	Blames self or others
Restlessness	Desire to change jobs	Isolation	
Susceptible to physical illness		Disconnection	
		Distress when reminded of event	
		Worry that the world is dangerous	

Recovery

With the support of family and friends, most people recover well from the effects of a critical incident. Stress reactions typically decrease in frequency and intensity as time passes and one begins to integrate the experience. However, stress reactions may persist in a small minority of individuals, making it difficult for them to return to normal activities and routines.

If you continue to experience significant difficulties 2-3 weeks following an event, a consultation with your treating health care practitioner or an EAP counsellor is recommended.

Most individuals make a good recovery and do not go on to develop serious mental health issues.

Practical Strategies for Managing Stress after a Critical Incident

Physical	Cognitive	Emotional	Behavioural
Take time to rest, relax and recover	Bring your mind back to the safety of the present moment if you have intrusive thoughts	Maintain a sense of perspective	Remain involved in as many of your usual activities as you can
Engage in physical activity, e.g. walking	Focus on the future, set priorities and goals	Talk about your feelings with a supportive person	Create some structure to your day
Eat nutritious snacks and meals at regular intervals	Acknowledge the impact of the incident and that some things may not be the same	Give yourself permission to have sad times	Spend time with family and friends
Avoid bingeing on junk or comfort foods	Be kind to yourself – recovery is not a process that can be rushed	Find a creative outlet (e.g. painting, gardening, music)	Do not become "housebound". Start with short outings to familiar places.
Eliminate or limit use of stimulants including coffee, cigarettes, chocolate, soft drinks	Avoid second guessing or blaming yourself or others	Writing about your experience in a journal can be therapeutic	Spend time outdoors in nature
Go to bed at your normal time and try to get enough sleep	Try to examine your recovery as a learning experience	Connect with support systems including friends, family, trusted colleagues, religious advisor	Connect with others who have gone through the same experience
Use relaxation techniques that have worked for you previously	Acknowledge your progress and successes along the way	Don't "go it alone" – stay connected with family and friends	Engage in self-care activities you have found to be helpful in the past
Participate in sports and leisure activities	Look for opportunities for self-development	Identify your personal strengths and resources	Be proactive in taking positive steps towards your recovery
Stay well hydrated	Try to approach the future with hope and optimism	Approach your recovery with compassion and self-acceptance	Consult with your physician or a mental health professional if symptoms persist or become overwhelming
Avoid using alcohol and drugs to help you to relax			
A warm shower may help to ease tense muscles and relieve stress			

Resources and Supports to assist you following a Critical Incident:

- Manager or Supervisor for information, help in accessing services and determining next steps
- Peer Support Team (ask your Supervisor or Union Representative if your division has one)
- City of Toronto Employee Assistance Program
- Your own Physician or Mental Health Professional
- Hospital Emergency Department for situations requiring immediate medical attention
- Visit the City of Toronto [Mental Health in Our Workplace](#) Intranet Website for additional resources and tools
- Your Union / Association for additional resources and support

The City of Toronto Employee Assistance Program (COT EAP)

The COT EAP provides confidential short-term counselling, information and referral services related to a broad range of personal, health, and workplace issues.

Telephone advice and consultation with a professional counsellor is available 24 hours/day, 7 days/week including statutory and designated City of Toronto holidays.

There is no cost to access the services of the EAP. Professional services are available to all eligible COT employees and their eligible family members.

For more information or to obtain a copy of the COT EAP brochure visit our website at:

[City of Toronto Employee Assistance Program](#)

Confidential counselling services are just a phone call away...

416-392-6633