Critical Incident Stress

Critical Incident Stress occurs when an individual experiences an unusual extreme emotional reaction after a traumatic event.

The event is referred to as a critical incident due to how it occurs or happens. In most cases it is sudden, unexpected, shocking, incomprehensible and personally upsetting to the person who has experienced it, either by being personally involved or witnessing the event take place. For example the Haiti natural disaster that took away so many of our colleagues, who were otherwise on their normal typical day’s routine in work place or unexpected floods like this one here.

*Printed with permission, courtesy: Residents of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa aboard a boat after a natural disaster. Copy right UN- Habitat - Pakistan.*
Typically a critical event in most cases results into a crisis that requires intervention. Some examples of critical incidents include: Human caused events such as; fires, carjacking, kidnapping, rape, sudden death of loved ones (parents, children, siblings spouses etc.), mugging, robbery, bomb blasts, plane crash, road traffic accident, witnessing another person being killed, tortured or threatened with death; nature caused disasters such as earthquakes, floods, storms, volcanic eruptions, landslides etc.

Some individuals usually react immediately after the event (acute traumatic stress reaction) while others tend to react much later, after weeks; months or even years after the events have taken place (delayed Stress reactions to a critical incident or a combination of several incidents). The gist of critical incident stress is the understanding that one is experiencing normal reactions to abnormal events.

Everyone responds differently to different events and an event that may be termed critical by one person may not be viewed so by another person. Response to a critical incident is specific and personal; however, critical stress leads us to question whether we are normal or abnormal.

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is carried out to enable us to share our experiences with someone else who is trained to help us to understand our reactions as normal human responses to abnormal events. PFA also helps us to access information related to where we can go for help if we continue experiencing traumatic stress reactions. For example assistance of a professional counselor we get equipped with coping tools that we can continue using to deal with the overwhelming effects of the critical incident stress. Psychological First Aid accelerates the normal recovery of normal people.

Some knowledge about what critical incident stress reactions are is important for self-help or for assisting someone else to understand what is happening to him / her and seek professional assistance.

Some of the reactions may include: physical symptoms (shaking, headaches, feeling very tired, loss of appetite, aches and pains); emotional symptoms (emotionally numb, crying, sadness, depressed mood, grief, anxiety, fear, irritability, anger, feeling unreal or dazed) Psychological symptoms (being “on guard”, or “jumpy”, worry that something bad is going to happen, guilt, shame (for having survived or for not helping or saving others), insomnia, nightmares, confused, appearing withdrawn or very still (not moving), not responding to others, not speaking at all, disorientation, not being able to take care of self or others e.g. children, not being able to eat or excessive drinking, or undecisiveness.
Although traumatic stress reactions can look similar to reactions observed in people with acute mental health problems, they are different as people with mental health disturbances tend to have these signs and symptoms going on and on. Our expectations are that traumatic stress reaction will resolve at some time and that we will return to our normal selves and resume our normal functions including work life.

**How does one recover from these abnormal reactions?**

It is important to know that one can recover from a critical incident stress; however, the process differs from one individual to another. Factors such as one’s personality, support from family, friends, co-workers, employer and one’s spiritual well-being play a vital role in the recovery process. Quite often we tend to imagine that we can forget or get over critical incident stress just like that, this is not true. A critical incident (s) is an historical event in one’s life and so it is important to acknowledge that it has occurred, however unpleasant the reactions may be rather than denying its existence.

**What is your role in recovery?**

- Acceptance that a critical event has taken place that is out of the ordinary daily occurrences
- Share experiences with a caring friend, a spiritual leader, a supportive colleague, a counselor or a mentor
- It is good to receive Psychological First Aid, either as an individual or as a group (workmates, family etc.), depending on the situation. For example if the event involved you and other people it is good to receive PFA together, as this helps you to know what the others are going through and how they are coping.
- If symptoms persists after PFA, it is advisable to organize to be attended to by a professional counselor for further evaluation and management.
- Avoid self-medication to reduce the symptoms you are experiencing as these tend to numb your feelings and interfere with your natural healing processes.
- Avoid self-isolation though you may need sometime alone, reach out to friends.
- Eat a healthy diet that keeps your body healthy and your mind clear.
- Exercise regularly - this promotes a sense of well-being and reduces daily and specific incident stress effects.
- Do not over work or under work.
- Have time with family or loved ones, where this is possible.
• Ensure consistent sleep on daily basis as sleep tends to be sacrificed during emergencies, monitor your sleep pattern and note if there is any abnormality either in the quality or quantity. Note if there are abnormal dreams (nightmares)

• Have time to relax to allow natural healing process to take place

• Do not forget your personal values and your spirituality

• Reflect back and check on the positive lessons learnt from the traumatic event, and reflect on how these lessons can be used in future similar situations.

If you have encountered Critical Incidents in the past and you’ve never thought psychological interventions were necessary and you are still suffering from some of the symptoms mentioned above, you can approach The Office of the Staff Counselor and share your traumatic experiences.

You can prevent complications by talking about critical incident stress with the counselor.

Note: Let the brochure remain as it is except change office location to Block G- Room 122