

Guidelines for Supervisors Following a Critical Incident

Your staff and possibly you have just experienced an event that has created an unusual amount of stress and anxiety for all involved. Many of those around you may have strong reactions, which can create a range of feelings including distress, anxiety and agitation. The reactions you witness can be unsettling and disruptive. However, as the individual in charge, there are some concrete steps you can take to assist others, and care for yourself such that you may continue assisting others.

- Keep in mind that the reactions you observe are normal given the event the group has just experienced, and that not everyone will have a severe reaction.
- Individuals who cannot be calmed down or are perceived to be excessively agitated and anxious should be supported individually. (Does your organization have support such as an Employee Assistance Program that can be utilized?)
- Once the reports are completed, arrange for employees to have an opportunity to talk to one another following the event. This can be facilitated by providing something nutritious to eat and drink. Caffeine or alcohol should be avoided. (Company protocol will often require reports to be submitted before these conversations take place.)
- Distribute the handout for critical incident care. This will discuss the preliminary stages and reactions your staff may anticipate, while offering simple, clear suggestions about what they can do in the next few days. (Does your organization have debriefing protocols and resources to be used at this time?)
- Ensure that employees who are most seriously affected are accompanied home. It is advisable for staff to car pool or go home in a taxi. Employees should avoid going home alone.
- Staff members under the age of 19 should have their families notified of the situation. Try not to let any staff member affected by the event go home to an empty house.
- It is not recommended to send an unsettled employee home. If there are concerns of the well-being of the staff, counselling should be sought if available through your organization or the staff member should be picked up by a family member who can access community medical professionals or a hospital ER if necessary.

- As the contact person, there is some pressure on you to be in control, calm and collected. This may be difficult as you may be experiencing some of the reactions you are observing in those around you. This is normal. You are encouraged to follow the advice you will be giving your staff and seek help through your organization and the community medical professionals as necessary and available. Emotional leadership can include letting your staff see that you are human and upset too. You have administrative and practical tasks to do, but controlled emotional release can be an incredibly powerful form of leadership to a young distressed staff who are at risk of mistaking vulnerability for weakness. It's okay to let them see you affected.
- If you need to excuse yourself briefly because you feel you do not want to share reaction, or you worry it may not be sufficiently controlled, do so. Ideally, take a trusted peer or colleague with you, and leave someone to attend to some of the minutia such as overseeing paperwork. Your staff need you to take care of yourself so you can continue to lead them.

How you can help others

A staff member suffering from critical incident stress may provide a wide variety of symptoms. Whether or not they display a reaction to a traumatic critical incident, a supervisor shall always be advised so that an assessment of the incident can occur. That assessment will determine the appropriate process that will be implemented, and the appropriate level of support required for the member. **It is the responsibility of all staff members to assist and support each other in this regard.**

Important for everyone to remember

It is everyone's responsibility to ensure their continued well-being. This responsibility rests with staff members, their coworkers, colleagues and family or significant others.

Remember, when a staff member is involved in a traumatic critical incident they need to tell a supervisor about the incident so that the appropriate response can be initiated.

In some cases, a staff member may be asked to attend a diffusing or debriefing session to reflect on the incident with other members that were involved. This is a helpful process that enhances our ability to cope with the situation.

For work-related incidents, the provisions of the *Workplace Safety and Insurance Act* may apply and staff member(s) may be eligible to access the resources of a community health professional through WSIB. This applies to the affected staff member(s) only and does not extend to those not directly involved in the incident.

Determine what support is to be given to staff members, including professional assistance, the guidelines that must be followed to obtain this support, and any cost to the staff member.

Do you have internal forms and WSIB forms that need to be filled out at this time?

How else can I access resources?

Does your organization have access to a Critical Incident Response Team (CRT) or Peer Support Volunteers (PSV)?

These individuals respond to traumatic incidents to assist staff members and their families to cope with any possible reactions, including the experience of critical incident stress. CRT/PSVs are volunteers who are trained in trauma response measures.

Do your staff members enjoy medical insurance coverage? This may include coverage for staff members wishing to access the services of community mental health professionals for themselves, their spouses and dependent children, as provided through a benefits plan.

Other steps

Follow the Lifesaving Society Major Incident Management Checklists. Contact the Lifesaving Society Safety Management Services for further help with:

- Safety Audits
 - Inspections
 - Accreditation
- Safety Standards
 - Advice on Operational Concerns
 - Major Incident Management Service
 - Expert Witness Services
- Legal Precedents
- Provincial Health Regulations
- Consulting

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