

# TENNESSEE PUBLIC SAFETY NETWORK

## CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS INFORMATION SHEET

You have experienced a traumatic event, or critical incident (*any incident that causes emergency services personnel to experience unusually strong emotional reactions which have the potential to interfere with their ability to function either at the scene or later*). Even though the event may be over, you may now be experiencing, or may experience later, some strong emotional or physical reactions. It is very common, in fact quite **normal** for people to experience aftershocks when they have passed through a horrible event.

Sometimes the emotional aftershocks (or stress reactions) appear immediately after the traumatic event. Sometimes they may appear a few hours or a few days later. And, in some cases weeks or months (or even years) may pass before the stress reactions appear.

The signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last a few days, a few weeks, or a few months and occasionally longer, depending on the severity of the traumatic event's impact on you. With understanding and support of loved ones, the stress reactions usually pass more quickly. Occasionally the traumatic event is so painful that professional assistance from a counselor may be necessary. This does not imply craziness or weakness. It simply indicates that the particular event was just too powerful for the person to manage by themselves.

Critical Incident Stress Symptoms are the  
**normal reactions** of **normal people** to **abnormal events**

Here are some common signs and signals of a critical incident stress reaction:

PHYSICAL	COGNITIVE	EMOTIONAL	BEHAVIORAL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Fatigue</li> <li>➤ nausea</li> <li>➤ muscle tremors</li> <li>➤ twitches</li> <li>➤ chest pain*</li> <li>➤ difficulty breathing*</li> <li>➤ elevated BP</li> <li>➤ rapid heart rate</li> <li>➤ thirst</li> <li>➤ headaches</li> <li>➤ visual difficulties</li> <li>➤ vomiting</li> <li>➤ grinding of teeth</li> <li>➤ weakness</li> <li>➤ dizziness</li> <li>➤ profuse sweating</li> <li>➤ chills</li> <li>➤ shock symptoms</li> <li>➤ fainting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Blaming someone</li> <li>➤ confusion</li> <li>➤ poor attention</li> <li>➤ poor decisions</li> <li>➤ heightened or lowered alertness</li> <li>➤ poor concentration</li> <li>➤ memory problems</li> <li>➤ hyper vigilance</li> <li>➤ difficulty remembering familiar objects of people</li> <li>➤ increased or decreased awareness of surroundings</li> <li>➤ poor problem solving</li> <li>➤ poor abstract thinking</li> <li>➤ loss of time, person, or place</li> <li>➤ disturbed thinking</li> <li>➤ nightmares</li> <li>➤ intrusive images</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Anxiety</li> <li>➤ guilt</li> <li>➤ grief</li> <li>➤ denial</li> <li>➤ severe panic (rare)</li> <li>➤ emotional shock</li> <li>➤ fear</li> <li>➤ uncertainty</li> <li>➤ loss of emotional control</li> <li>➤ depression</li> <li>➤ inappropriate emotional response</li> <li>➤ apprehension</li> <li>➤ feeling overwhelmed</li> <li>➤ intense anger</li> <li>➤ irritability</li> <li>➤ agitation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Change in activity</li> <li>➤ change in speech patterns</li> <li>➤ withdrawal</li> <li>➤ emotional outbursts</li> <li>➤ suspiciousness</li> <li>➤ change in usual communications</li> <li>➤ change in appetite</li> <li>➤ alcohol consumption</li> <li>➤ inability to rest</li> <li>➤ antisocial acts</li> <li>➤ nonspecific bodily complaints</li> <li>➤ hyper alert to environment</li> <li>➤ startle reflex intensified</li> <li>➤ pacing</li> <li>➤ erratic movements</li> <li>➤ change in sexual interest or functioning</li> </ul>

\* Get emergency medical evaluation.

### **Things to Try:**

- Within the first 24-48 hours or more, periods of strenuous exercise and relaxation will alleviate some of the physical reactions.
- Structure your time – keep busy.
- You are normal and are having normal reactions – don't label yourself crazy.
- Talk to people – talk is the most healing medicine.
- Beware of numbing the pain with overuse of drugs or alcohol; you don't need to complicate the stress reaction with a substance abuse problem.
- Reach out – people do care.
- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible.
- Spend time with others; don't isolate yourself.
- Help your co-workers as much as possible by sharing your feelings with them, and checking out how they are doing.
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten and to share your feelings with others.
- Do things that feel good to you (in moderation).
- Realize that those around you are also under stress.
- Don't make any major life changes for at least several months.
- Make as many daily decisions as possible, which will give you a feeling of control over your life (e.g., if someone asks you what you want to eat, answer them even if you're not sure).
- Get plenty of rest.
- Recurring thoughts, dreams, or flashbacks are normal – don't try to fight them – they'll decrease over time and become less painful.
- Eat regular, well-balanced meals (even if you don't feel like it).

### **For your family members and friends..... Some suggestions:**

- Listen carefully.
- Spend time with the traumatized person
- Offer your assistance and a listening ear, even if they haven't asked for help.
- Reassure them that they are safe.
- Help with everyday tasks, like cleaning, cooking, caring for family, minding children.
- Give them some private time.
- Don't take the anger or other feelings personally.
- Don't tell them that they are “lucky it wasn't worse” - such statements do not console a person. Instead, tell them you are sorry such an event has occurred, and that you want to understand.

## **Critical Incident Stress Information Sheet for Significant Others**

Your loved one has been involved in an emotion-charged event, often known as a critical incident. She/he may be experiencing normal stress responses to such an event (critical incident stress). Critical incident stress affects up to 87% of all emergency personnel exposed to a critical incident. No one in emergency services is immune from critical incident stress, regardless of past experiences or years of service. Your loved one may experience critical incident stress at any time during his/her career.

### **Important Things to Remember about Critical Incident Stress**

The signs of critical incident stress are physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. Your loved one has received a handout outlining these signs. Please ask him or her to share it with you.

Critical incident stress response can occur right at the scene, within hours, within days, or even within weeks (or longer) after the incident.

Your loved one may experience a variety of signs and symptoms of a stress response, or she/he may not feel any of the signs at this time.

Suffering from the effects of critical incident stress is completely normal. Your loved one is not the only one suffering. Other emergency personnel shared the event and are probably sharing the reaction.

The symptoms will normally subside and disappear in time, if you or your loved one do not dwell upon them.

All phases of our lives overlap and influence each other: personal, professional, family, etc. The impact of critical incident stress can be intensified, influenced, or mitigated by our own personal, family, and current developmental issues.

Encourage, but do NOT pressure, your loved one to talk about the incident and his or her reaction to it. Talk is the best medicine. Your primary “job” is to listen and reassure. Remember that if the event is upsetting to you and your loved one, your children may be affected also. They may need to talk too!

You may not understand what your loved one is going through at this time, but offer your love and support. Don't be afraid to ask what you can do that she/he would consider helpful.

Accept the fact that life will go on for you, your loved one, and your children. Maintain or return to a normal routine as soon as possible.

If the signs of stress that your loved one is experiencing do not begin to subside within a few weeks, or if they intensify, consider seeking further assistance. The Critical Incident Stress Debriefing Team can help you and your loved one find a professional who understands critical incident stress and how it can affect you.