

### What is a Critical Incident?

Any incident which causes emergency personnel to experience unusually strong emotional reactions which have the potential of interfering in their normal lives.

### What happens?

Stress reactions may appear immediately after a traumatic event. Sometimes they don't occur until a few hours or days later. In some cases, weeks, even months, may pass before stress reactions appear.

### How long do stress reactions last?

Stress reactions may last a few days, a few weeks, or a few months. Occasionally they may last longer, depending on the severity of the event that caused the trauma.

### Does the fact that I'm having a reaction mean I'm crazy?

No! Not in the least! People in emergency services are, if anything, better adjusted and emotionally healthier than average. A stress reaction simply means you have been exposed to an event that was too powerful for you to manage by yourself. It is common, in fact normal, for people to have emotional aftershocks when they have experienced a horrible event.

### Not everybody is reacting the way I am. What does that mean?

It means you are responding in a way that is more normal for you. Everyone reacts to stress differently. Research by Dr. Roger Solomon shows that 33% of people react severely, 33% react moderately and 33% had little or no reaction. How you react is how you react, nothing more, nothing less.

### How can I tell if I'm having a reaction?

You may experience any of the following Physical, Cognitive, or Emotional signs:

#### Physical Signs:

- Fatigue
- Insomnia (may turn into hypersomnia)
- Underactivity
- Health problems (change in appetite, headaches, digestive problems)
- Nightmares
- Hyperactivity
- Exhaustion
- Startle reactions

#### Cognitive (thinking) Signs:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty solving problems
- Flashbacks
- Difficulty making decisions
- Memory disturbance
- Isolation
- Inability to attach importance to anything other than this incident

#### Emotional Signs

- Fear
- Guilt
- Emotional numbing
- Oversensitivity
- Anger, manifested by: scapegoating, irritability, frustration with bureaucracy, violent fantasies.
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Feelings of helplessness
- Amnesia for the event

These signs are normal and, although painful, are part of the healing process. There isn't a lot anyone can do to make you not have these uncomfortable feelings, but there are things you can do that will help.

### What can I do?

Things you can try:

- Within the first 24-72 hours, periods of strenuous physical exercise will alleviate some of the physical reactions.
- Structure your time, keep busy
- You're normal and are having normal reactions- don't label yourself crazy.
- Talk to people- talk is the most healing medicine.
- Be aware of numbing the pain with overuse of drugs, including alcohol. You don't need to complicate this with substance abuse.
- Reach out- people do care
- Keep your life as normal as possible.
- Spend time with others
- Help co-workers by sharing feelings and checking out how they're doing.
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten and share your feelings with others.
- Keep a journal. Write your way through those sleepless hours.
- Do things that feel good to you.
- Realize those around you are under stress, too.
- Try supplementing your diet with Vitamin C, Vitamin B<sub>2</sub>, Vitamin B<sub>6</sub>, Calcium, and Magnesium.
- Don't make any big life changes
- Making daily decisions will give you a feeling of control over your life.

#### **REMEMBER:**

You are reacting **normally** to a horrible situation. You will, eventually, get better. Following the above recommendations, will help you recover more quickly and keep you in service.

### What about my family?

Your family is your best resource for dealing with stress. As Ft. Worth F.D. Chaplain Ed Stauffer says, "Don't lose what you loved before you started."

Don't cut your family off. They love you, they want to help. You don't need to share the gory details with them, but you can let them know how upset you are.

One key recovery strategy is to talk with people who love you.

You won't "protect" your family by not talking with them about what's upsetting you.

### As family members, how can we help?

You can:

- Listen carefully
- Spend time with the traumatized person
- Offer your assistance, even when they have not asked for it.
- Reassure them that they are safe.
- Help them with everyday tasks in like cleaning, cooking, caring for the family, minding children.
- Give them some private time
- Don't take their anger or other feelings personally.
- Don't tell them they are "lucky it wasn't worse"- traumatized people are not consoled by those statements. Instead,
- tell them you are sorry the event happened and you want to understand and assist them.

The main function of critical incident stress management is to let the person talk about what the worst part of the event was for them, and to reassure them that they will survive. Loved ones can help with this.

### Stress reactions can be career shorteners:

"...despite enormous interest, high morale, and dedication of those entering the field, there are significant numbers of well-trained EMS professionals 'calling it a career' in two, three, or five years' time." From: "Done In, Fed Up, Burned Out", by Nancy K. Graham, Jan. 1981, *jems*

You are human. Human beings exposed to horrible events have reactions. These reactions- no matter what they may be- are normal.

The fact an incident continues to bother you doesn't mean you are crazy or weak. It simply means you are human.

You will recover. By following the suggestions in this pamphlet and utilizing resources available to you, you can shorten the time your recovery takes.

The Green Mountain Critical Incident Stress Management Team is an organization founded by emergency responders to assist their colleagues in coping with the effects of critical incident stress. We are a chapter member team of the International Critical Incident Foundation (ICISF).

### For more information, contact:

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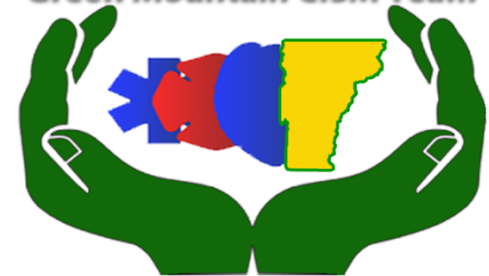
**Urgent needs: (802) 656-3473**  
(University of VT Dispatch)

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*" I CAN'T STOP  
THINKING ABOUT  
IT..."*

## Tips to Help Emergency Responders Deal with Stress Reactions

### **Green Mountain CISM Team**



*"Dedicated to keeping helpers healthy"*