

Recognizing the Impact of a Critical Incident

Critical incidents can produce a wide range of stress symptoms which may appear immediately, within a few hours, or within days of the incident. Stress symptoms related to a critical incident usually develop in four different categories: Cognitive (thinking), Emotional (feelings), Physical (body), and Behavioral (actions). The number of symptoms experienced is usually an indicator of the impact of the incident. The longer the symptoms persist, the more potential there is for lasting harm. Therefore, it is crucial that help is sought as soon as possible. Listed below are some of the symptoms you may experience after a critical incident. This list is not exclusive.

» Cognitive

- Poor conversation
- Poor attention span
- Difficulty making decisions
- Memory problems
- Slowed problem solving
- Difficulty calculating

» Emotional

- Loss of emotional control
- Guilt
- Feeling lost/overwhelmed
- Depression

» Physical

- Muscle tremors
- Chest pain
- Elevated blood pressure
- Headaches
- Gastro-intestinal distress
- Difficulty breathing

» Behavioral

- Withdrawal from contact
- Excessive silence
- Changes in eating habits
- Sleep disturbances
- Change in work habits
- Unusual behavior

CISM

**A comprehensive, systematic and multicomponent approach
for the reduction and control of harmful aspects of stress***

Critical Incidents Defined

Priority

- » Death of a child – active case
- » Death of a foster child
- » Assaults and/or threats against staff member that include weapons
- » Death of a co-worker in the line of duty
- » Intense media coverage of an incident
- » Lawsuits that impact staff
- » Fire, bomb threats, major disaster

Discretionary

- » Accident resulting in client or staff injury
- » Discriminatory incident based on race, religion, gender or sexual orientation
- » Death of a child or parent – closed case
- » Abuse or criminal charges against a staff member
- » Death of staff member
- » General child fatality (due to nature of death or effect of cumulative fatalities)
- » Other incident producing trauma

*Mitchell, J.T. & Evelyn, G.S. Critical Incident Stress Management:
The Basic Course Workbook, 2nd ed. 1998*

Ways to Respond to a Stress Reaction

- ✓ Appropriate physical exercise
- ✓ Rest & relaxation
- ✓ Talk with friends
- ✓ Reach out to others who care
- ✓ Maintain as normal of schedule as possible
- ✓ Give yourself permission to feel rotten and to share your feelings with others
- ✓ Don't make any major life changes
- ✓ Beware of overuse of alcohol and/or drugs
- ✓ Eat well-balanced and regular meals
- ✓ Keep a journal or write your feelings down

Remember

You are normal and having a normal reaction to an abnormal situation.

Adapted from International Critical Incident Stress Foundation (ICISF) information pamphlet

Services Provided by DCFS CISM Team

» Pre-Crisis Preparation

Stress prevention education to help staff improve coping and stress management skills.

» Crisis Management Briefing/Staff Consultation

Stress management intervention used to inform and consult and to allow psychological decompression.

» Defusing

Small group intervention provided within a short timeframe after a traumatic event to reduce the level of harm to the people exposed to it.

» Critical Incident Stress Debriefing

Small group intervention which uses crisis intervention and educational processes to reduce psychological distress associated with a critical incident.

» Individual Crisis Intervention (1:1)

Used when only one to three people are affected by the traumatic incident. The goal is to assist the individual in reestablishing pre-incident level of functioning.

Mission Statement

The DCFS Critical Incident Stress Management Team has as its paramount concern the development, implementation and administration of a system of interventions designed to facilitate wellness among DCFS staff with the ultimate goal of enhanced services to the children and families we serve through retention of competent, compassionate and experienced staff.

Goals

The goal of the DCFS Critical Incident Stress Management Team is to provide stress prevention education and to respond to staff experiencing critical incidents, either directly or indirectly, in a timely manner utilizing the most appropriate intervention that will assist staff in returning to their normal level of functioning.

