

Critical Incident Stress
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CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS INFORMATION SHEET

You have experienced a traumatic event or a critical incident (any incident that causes people to experience unusually strong emotional reactions which have the potential to affect their ability to function at their workplace, within their families, and/or in other areas of their lives). This event or events may be time-limited or may be on-going or chronic.

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 emotional aftershocks when they have passed through a horrible event or be subject to ongoing stressors.

Sometimes the emotional after-shocks (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 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. With understanding and the 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. Here are some very common signs and signals of a stress reaction:

PHYSICAL: Fatigue, thirst, headaches, visual difficulties, vomiting, grinding of teeth, weakness, dizziness, profuse sweating, chills, rapid heart rate, nausea, muscle tremors, twitches, chest pain, * difficulty breathing, elevated blood pressures, * shock symptoms, fainting, etc. (*Indicates the need for medical evaluation).

COGNITIVE:(AFFECTING THOUGHTS): blaming someone, confusion, poor attention, poor decisions, heightened or lowered alertness, poor concentration, memory problems, hyper-vigilance, difficulty identifying familiar objects/people, increased or decreased awareness of surroundings, poor problem solving, poor abstract thinking, loss of time, place, or person orientation, disturbed thinking, nightmares, intrusive images, etc.

EMOTIONAL: anxiety, guilt, grief, denial, severe panic (rare), emotional shock, fear, uncertainty, loss of emotional control, depression, inappropriate emotional response, apprehension, feeling overwhelmed, intense anger, irritability, agitation, etc.

BEHAVIORAL: change in activity, change in speech patterns, withdrawal, emotional outbursts, suspiciousness, change in usual communications, loss or increase of appetite, alcohol consumption, inability to rest, antisocial acts, nonspecific bodily complaints, hyper-alertness to environment, intensification of startle reflex, pacing, erratic movements, change in sexual functioning, etc.

THINGS TO TRY:

1. Within the first 24-48 hours, periods of strenuous physical exercise.
2. Structure your time—keep busy.
3. You're normal and having normal reactions. Don't label yourself crazy.
4. Talk to people. Talk is the most healing medicine.
5. Be aware of numbing the pain with overuse of drugs or alcohol. You don't need to complicate this with a substance abuse problem.
6. Reach out—people do care.
7. Maintain as normal a schedule as possible.
8. Spend time with others.
9. Help your co-workers as much as possible by sharing feelings and checking out how they are doing.
10. Give yourself permission to feel rotten and share your feeling with others.
11. Keep a journal, write your way through those sleepless hours.
12. Do things that feel good to you.
13. Realize that those around you are under stress.
14. Don't make any big life changes.
15. Do make as many daily decisions as possible which will give you a feeling of control over your life, i.e., if someone asks you what you want to eat—answer them, even if you aren't sure.
16. Get plenty of rest.
17. Recurring thoughts, dreams, or flashbacks are normal—don't try to fight them—they'll decrease over time and become less painful.
18. Eat well-balanced and regular meals (even if you don't feel like it).

FOR FAMILY MEMBERS AND FRIENDS

1. Listen carefully and spend time with the person who is hurting.
2. Offer your assistance and a listening ear even if they have not asked for help.
3. Reassure them that they are safe.
4. Help them with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, caring for the family, minding children.
5. Give them some private time.
6. Don't take their anger or other feelings personally.
7. Don't tell them that they are "lucky it wasn't worse"—traumatized people aren't consoled by that. Tell them you're sorry this event has occurred and that you want to understand and help.

Stress Management: Coping with Everyday Life

Stress is a natural part of life. Every day there are responsibilities, obligations and pressures that change and challenge you. In response to these daily strains your body automatically increases blood pressure, heart rate, respiration, metabolism, and blood flow to muscles.

However, when this natural response is prolonged or triggered too often without sufficient adjustments to counter its effects, it can threaten your health and well being. Therefore, it is essential that you learn to cope with these natural responses in order to avoid physical and/or emotional problems.

Am I Suffering From Stress And Tension?

Each person handles stress differently. Some people actually seek out situations , which may appear stressful to others. A major life decision, such as changing careers or buying a house, might be overwhelming for some people while others may welcome the change. Some find sitting in traffic too much to take, while others take it in stride. ***The key is determining your personal tolerance levels for stressful situations.***

Stress can cause physical, emotional, and behavioral changes which can compromise health, vitality, and peace-of-mind, all of which may affect personal and professional relationships. Too much stress can cause relatively minor illnesses like insomnia, backaches, or headaches as well as potentially life-threatening diseases like high blood pressure and heart disease.

Here are questions to identify negative reactions to stress and tension:

1. Do minor problems and disappointments upset you excessively?
2. Do the small pleasures of life fail to satisfy you?
3. Are you unable to stop thinking of your worries?
4. Do you feel inadequate or suffer from self-doubt?
5. Are you constantly tired?
6. Do you experience flashes of anger over situations which used to not bother
7. Have you noticed a change in sleeping or eating patterns?
8. Do you suffer from chronic pain, headaches, or back aches?

If you answered yes to some of these questions, it is likely that you have identified negative reactions to stress and tension and need to make some changes.

Helpful Ways to Reduce and Control Stress and Tension

As you read the following suggestions, remember that success will not come from a halfhearted effort, nor will it come overnight. ***To manage stress successfully, you must take control of your situation and make the needed changes to both your responses to stress and your lifestyle.*** It will take determination, persistence and time. Some suggestions may help immediately, but if your stress is chronic it may require more attention and/or lifestyle changes. Determine *your* tolerance level for stress and try to live within these limits. Learn to accept or change stressful and tense situations whenever possible.

Be realistic – If you feel overwhelmed by some activities (yours and/or your family's) learn to say ***no!*** Eliminate an activity that is not absolutely necessary or ask someone else to help. You may be taking on more responsibility than you can or should handle. If you meet resistance, give reasons why you are making the changes. Be willing to listen to other's suggestions and be ready to negotiate.

Shed the "superman/woman" urge – No one is perfect, so don't expect perfection from yourself or others. *Perfectionism is one of the leading causes of internally induced stress.* Ask yourself: What really needs to be done? How much can I really do? Is the deadline realistic? What adjustments can I make? Don't hesitate to ask for help if you need it.

Relax – Just 10 to 20 minutes of quiet reflection may bring relief from chronic stress as well as increase your tolerance to it. Use the time to listen to music, relax and try to think of pleasant things or nothing at all.

Visualize – Use your imagination and picture how you can manage a stressful situation more successfully. Whether it's a business presentation or moving to a new place, many people feel visual rehearsals boost self-confidence and enable them to take a more positive approach to a difficult task.

Take one thing at a time – For people under tension or stress, an ordinary workload can sometimes seem unbearable. The best way to cope with this feeling of being overwhelmed is to take one task at a time. Pick one urgent task and work on it. Once you accomplish that task, choose the next one. The positive feeling of "checking off" work is very satisfying. It will motivate you to keep going.

Exercise – Regular exercise is a popular way to relieve stress. Twenty to 30 minutes of physical activity each day benefits both the body and the mind.

Hobbies – Take a break from your worries by doing something you enjoy. Whether your interests include gardening, painting, fishing, etc schedule time to indulge yourself.

Healthy lifestyle – Get regular checkups. *Know the general condition of your vital signs (blood pressure, etc) even if you have no symptoms.* Good nutrition also makes a difference. Limit intake of caffeine and alcohol (alcohol actually disturbs, not helps, regular sleep patterns), get adequate rest, exercise, and *balance work and play.*

Share your feelings – A phone call to a friend lets you know that you are not the only one having a bad day, dealing with a sick child, or working in a busy office. Stay in touch with friends and family. Let them provide love, support, and guidance. Don't try to cope alone

Give in occasionally – Be flexible! If you find you are meeting constant opposition in either your personal or professional life, rethink your position or strategy. Arguing only intensifies stressful feelings. If you know you are right, stand your ground, but do so calmly and rationally. Make allowances for other's opinions and be prepared to compromise. If you are willing to give in, others may meet you halfway. Not only will you reduce your stress, you may find better solutions to your problems.

Go easy with criticism – You may expect too much of yourself and others. Try not to feel frustrated, let down, disappointed, even "trapped" when another person does not measure up. The "other person" may be a wife, a husband, or child whom you are trying to change to suit yourself. Remember, everyone is unique, and has his or her own virtues, shortcomings, and right to develop as an individual.

Deal with problems promptly – Don't let things build up until they become a crisis. Whenever possible, resolve family, financial and legal issues before you go off to work. Having too much on your mind will affect your ability to concentrate on your job and make you more accident /mistake prone

CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS INFORMATION FOR SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

Your loved one has been involved in an emotion-charged event, often known as a critical incident. He/she may be experiencing normal stress responses to such an event (critical incident stress). Critical incident stress affects most of the people exposed to a critical incident. No one is immune to critical incident stress, regardless of past experience or years of experience. 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 stress are physical, cognitive, emotional and behavioral. Your loved one has received a handout outlining these signs. Please ask him/her to share it with you.
- Critical incident stress response can occur right at the scene, within hours, within days or even within weeks.
- Your loved one may experience a variety of signs/symptoms of a stress response or he/she 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 and 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/her reaction to it. Talk is the best medicine. Your primary “job” is to listen and reassure. Remember that if an 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. Do not be afraid to ask what you can do that he/she would consider helpful.
- Accept the fact that life will go on: his/hers, yours and your children. Maintain or return to a normal routine as soon as possible.
- If the signs of stress 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 Management Team can help you and your loved one find a professional who understands critical incident stress and how it can affect you.