



You and Your Family

The experience of a critical incident affects not only you but may also impact your family. It may be difficult to hide your reactions. It may be clear that you are hurting because of the behavior changes, emotional sensitivity, or physical symptoms that are being expressed.

Let them know of your involvement in the incident. This does not mean that you have to expose them to all the details, just let them know that there may be some period of adjustment required while you recover from the incident's impact.

Educate them as well by showing them this pamphlet. Having their understanding and support and allowing them to be a part of the solution will have tremendous value.

Help through the County's Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

Some may benefit from additional assistance to help them get back on track. The EAP has experienced professionals who can assist you and your family if you are having difficulty managing the impact of a critical incident.

**Contact the EAP at
654-4327
for a confidential
consultation or visit.**



COUNTY OF VENTURA



MANAGING CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS

Employees for the County of Ventura have a dedication and commitment to providing excellent service to the public. Many employees within the County have job tasks that result in exposure to the emotional and/or physical distress of others. For example, individuals in careers such as emergency response, human services, health care or mental health are dedicated to provide assistance to mitigate grief, hardship, or trauma.

Most of us maintain a significant amount of resilience. We are able to cope with day-to-day stresses as well as manage adversity and challenge. Most of the time we maintain the internal resources to cope with these stressful experiences. However, because of the nature of the job, employees may become involved in incidents or encounters that are out of the ordinary, such as.

- When you are exposed to continuous physical and emotional pain or grief of others.
- Events that might be life-threatening.
- Exposure to human-caused or natural disasters.
- Death of a client, customer, or co-worker.



What is a "Critical Incident"?

People vary in the degree they express and process emotions. Some events may prompt greater emotional reactions than others. Jeffery Mitchell, Ph.D., a leader in the area of managing traumatic stress, describes a "critical incident" as any incident that causes an individual to "experience strong emotional reactions which have the potential to interfere with their ability to function. All that is necessary is that the incident, regardless of type, generates unusually strong emotional feelings".

We all respond to stress differently and it may also be difficult to predict how we respond to a critical incident. A lot may have to do with other factors such as how much additional stress we are experiencing at home and work or that the incident reminds us of a sensitive experience in our past. Some reactions may surprise you or the reaction may be delayed. The body can express stress in a number of ways by affecting not only emotions but also how you think and behave.

Here are few of the more common symptoms of adverse reactions to a critical event:

- Poor concentration, forgetfulness, or disorganization.
- Brief or unexpected periods of depression or anxiety.
- Reduced motivation or apathy.
- Increased or decreased appetite, need for sleep, interest in intimacy or closeness, as well as social contact.
- Increase in irritability, crying spells, or emotional sensitivity.
- Physical symptoms such as headaches, fatigue, or other body aches.



- Sensitivity to everyday circumstances with additional fear or hypervigilance.
- Preoccupation with reviewing or reliving the incident expressed in the need to talk about it, dream about it, or continually remind yourself of it.
- Excessive feelings of guilt or self-blame.

These reactions are normal experiences to an abnormal event. Experiencing them does not mean that you are "weak" or that you are "going crazy". They are typically just temporary. Similar to when a body experiences an emotional injury, the body employs different methods to protect itself and start the healing process rapidly. Individuals usually begin to see symptoms disappear within about two weeks. However, for a very few, symptoms may last longer and additional help from a mental health professional may be beneficial.

What Helps?

- Recognize what is a normal reaction in the event of a stressful event. Each individual responds to, and recovers from, emotional injury differently. Again, the symptoms mentioned above vary greatly, are normal, and usually temporary.
- Some individuals may tend to feel selfish if they focus on themselves after experiencing a traumatic or difficult event, yet taking care of yourself at this time is critical. Stay in a routine, exercise, give yourself permission to rest or relax, or engage in some kind of healthy diversion.
- Take the time to explain to family or partner that you may need some space and to not be offended if you are distracted, distant, or isolative. They cannot read your mind so tell them what you need. At the same time, do your best not to retreat or avoid the support from those close to you.
- Social support is an important mediator of stress. Support of peers in returning to diversions such as humor, light conversation, shared tasks, and/or exercises are critical.
- You may be comforted by spiritual guidance.

- Be aware of danger signals such as heavy drinking, self-destructive and/or heightened risk taking behaviors. Consult with your primary doctor or mental health professional immediately if these symptoms are present.
- Education and awareness of what to expect are critical. The Employee Assistance Program can serve as a resource to you by making available mental health professionals who can assist you with confidential support, educational materials, and resources.

Critical Incident and the Workplace

Your department may request that you voluntarily participate in a group process as part of its Critical Incident Stress Management program. This may be directly after the incident (diffusing) and involve only a few short moments with your co-workers and a professional. Other times a more formal process will take place a few days after the event (Critical Incident Debriefing) that will last longer. These are not designed to critique the incident but rather to educate participants on predictable stress reactions, discuss coping strategies, provide you and your co-workers additional support, and accelerate the recovery process.