

# Putting A Face On Traumatic Events



## Look Like Anyone You Know ?

### Critical Incident Information

When engaged in providing emergency services, you may respond to difficult and distressful types of incidents (critical incidents). Occasionally, you are exposed to sights, sounds, smells, thoughts and work demands that exceed normal working conditions or life experiences.

And even though the event is over, you may find yourself continuing to experience reactions for several days. Some common stress reactions include:

<b>Physical</b>	<b>Thinking</b>	<b>Emotional</b>	<b>Spiritual</b>
Adrenalin rush (as if you drank 1,000 cups of coffee)	"In a fog" "Like a nightmare" slowed thinking	All stirred up	Loss of innocence (things will never be quite the same)
Rapid breathing	Indecision	Numb	Loss of meaning
Tremors (hands & lips), clumsiness	Memory loss	Anxiety/fear	Loss of direction
Upset stomach, nausea, diarrhea	Difficulty concentrating/ poor attention span	Sadness/ depression	Thoughts of mortality
Sweating/chills	Confusion	Embarrassed	Emptiness, doubt, apathy
Cardiac symptoms: Rapid heart beat, Increased BP, chest pain (check out at hospital)	Difficulty problem- solving, calculating	Isolated, alienated, want to hide	Cynicism, unforgiving
Head & muscle aches	Distressing dreams/ nightmares	Guilt	Feeling that you don't belong
Dizziness	Images you can't get out of your head	"Shoulda, coulda, woulda"	Casting blame
Sleep disturbance	Disorientation	Anger, irritability	Feeling abandoned
Sexual dysfunction	Hyper-vigilance	Powerlessness, hopelessness	Loss of faith

These signs and symptoms usually disappear within a few days. Less often, such incidents may cause a more prolonged stress reaction. Research suggests that this occurs about 19% of the time in emergency service personnel, depending on certain situational and psychological variables in the incident.

On the back of this page, there is a list of things that you can do to help minimized the symptoms. **If stress symptoms persist more than four weeks, contact your CISM Team or a team member for additional assistance.**

## **Techniques for Handling Stress Reactions**

1. **Handle the adrenaline rush symptoms:**
  - Consciously relax the muscles in your shoulders, arms, legs and gut hourly over the next 12 hours.
  - Consciously breathe deeply (diaphragmatic breathing), making your exhalation longer than your inhalation, each hour for the next 12 hours.
  - Aerobic activity and exercise is helpful to dissipate stress chemicals.
  - Eat small, frequent meals, high in protein.
  - Excessive caffeine, excessive sugar, or use of alcohol will worsen the feeling of agitation and can lead to a crash. Alcohol may worsen any depressed feelings in the long run. At least for the next several days, abstain from ingesting these things.
2. **Return to your routine and schedule as soon as you can.** A familiar routine helps anchor you while your thoughts and emotions are ramping down.
3. **Rest a bit more.** If you find that you have trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep (and you didn't previously have this trouble) take note: worrying about it won't help you sleep! If you can't sleep after 15 minutes, get out of bed and do something quiet and boring until you are sleepy. If sleep disruption remains a problem four weeks after the incident or if it worsens, seek assistance (see below).
4. **Talk to family, friends, a chaplain or minister or to co-workers you trust.** The more you talk about the incident the sooner it will be over in your mind and body.

### **Please Take Note**

- ✓ Reoccurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks are not necessarily abnormal. They often are your mind's way of incorporating what has happened – working it through so to speak. Try to relax through them and allow them to pass without fighting them. They should decrease over several weeks. If not, seek assistance.
- ✓ If you were feeling stressed or had problems before the incident, your feelings about these and your attempts to cope with them may worsen with the effects of the incident. Now would be a good time to talk with someone about these stresses. Tending to these matters will help you maintain a healthy career as well as a meaningful life.

If any symptoms listed on the other side of this page are very bothersome, worsen or do not improve in four weeks, seek additional assistance by contacting your Employee Assistance Program (EAP), a mental health professional, or a team member of your regional Critical Incident Stress Management Team at: **218.727.8770**

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Serving the Counties of Cook, Lake, St. Louis, Carlton, Aitkin, Itasca,  
and Koochiching County in Minnesota and Douglas County, Wisconsin