



Helping employees who have been involved in a critical incident

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A critical incident is an incident that involves some element of threat or surprise. Sometimes the threat turns out to be less than was thought while the incident was unfolding, and sometimes the threat results in serious and lasting harm. Regardless of the seriousness of the consequences of the incident, people who are exposed to critical incidents will often experience some emotional and physical reactions to the stress of their experience. These reactions are part of a healthy human response and they are part of moving towards recovery. Reactions can range in intensity, with most gradually fading with time, social support, and active self-care.

Staff may experience a sense of reduced safety or security, fear of the experience happening again, anger and disbelief, sadness and helplessness. There can be a short-term reduction in efficiency, confidence, or problem-solving ability, and the person may withdraw from others. Physical reactions are caused by hormones which are released during a critical incident, and can include shock, agitation, stomach upset, rapid breathing, heart palpitations, and changes to appetite. All of these reactions are normal, and with support from the workplace combined with a person's own active coping, the reactions tend to reduce with time.

Complete Support

Following referral to Benestar, a specialist counsellor will contact you over the phone, followed up with attendance at your workplace or, in some cases, phone support for affected staff. The counsellor is there not only to assist your team, but to help you have the insights you need to lead effectively in the post-incident period. They will also give you an avenue to ensure your personal coping strategies and recovery are well set up.

What should I talk to the counsellor about?

- Brief the counsellor on each employee's experience of the incident.
- Identify any background stressors that may act as an additional stressor.
- Outline any history of similar or stressful experiences staff have recently faced.
- Explain any pre-existing interpersonal conflict within the team.
- Notify the counsellor if the staff member does not return to work the following day.

What can I do that will help recovery?

- Show compassion and understanding.
- Bring in support staff for short-term practical support. This allows affected employees to take it slowly and connect with their peers, leading to a more robust recovery.
- Ensure that any damage to property is fixed as soon as possible.
- Keep staff updated on any news related to the incident.
- Check staff wellbeing in both the short and long term (in the days and weeks after an event).
- Provide food and caffeine-free hydration for staff.
- Encourage full use of the Complete Support service.
- Reassure staff that all personal information discussed with the counsellor will remain confidential.
- Encourage staff to be open with you about what they need. If any short-term adjustments to duties are made, ensure that these are written down clearly.
- If an employee chooses to leave work, make a plan with them for what would be helpful for them the next day when they return.
- Openly and generously acknowledge staff for positive actions taken during the incident, as well as their effort to remain at work in the event aftermath. Make praise as specific as possible.
- Try not to take acute stress symptoms personally i.e. anger, irritability, and sadness are not your fault but are common in the critical incident aftermath.
- If your staff drive to work, ensure that affected staff are able to get home via alternative transport if needed on the day of the incident.

Is there anything I should be careful NOT to do?

- Don't try to get the person to put the event in perspective before they are ready by saying things like "it could have been worse".
- Don't give generic advice like "just try and forget about it", or "you have to get straight back on the horse" – these things may be impossible for the employee to do straight away and are likely to cause extra stress and confusion.
- Don't ignore staff who appear unaffected on the surface. Speak to everyone individually and carry on checking how each individual is going over the days and weeks following the event.

Care for yourself while caring for others

- Notice any changes in yourself (to sense of safety, mood, or concentration), and speak to the counsellor about these things.
- Ensure that you have your own manager's support.
- Make time to do things you enjoy outside of work and make sure you set the example for following the advice given to your team to eat well, exercise, get some good sleep, and drink plenty of water.
- Do not take responsibility for what happened simply because it affected your team. The majority of critical incidents are not the fault of anyone at the workplace, including the manager.
- Talk openly to the counsellor. They are there to assist you in your role as a manager, but also to support you through your personal reaction.