

## Critical Incident Coping Strategies

Everyone deals with stress after a Critical Incident in his or her own way. That is the way physically, mentally, physiologically and spiritually we are able to **COPE** with the event or events that caused the stress—a NORMAL reaction that a NORMAL person would have to an ABNORMAL event. The following techniques are some coping mechanisms that have proven to be helpful in post-incident stress situations.

**Expressing feelings:** Share your thought and feelings with someone you trust, though it may be painful. Make sure the other person understands you're not asking for a solution, just an opportunity to express how you feel.

**Facing the pain:** Painful, fearful thoughts and memories come back without warning. This is normal, but our first reaction is to prevent this. Instead, let the memory or thought come back so that some release of tension can take place, and then decide when you want to stop it. You can even say to yourself, "Okay, that's enough!" Gradually you will gain more control over these intrusive thoughts and feelings.

**Dreams and nightmares:** Nightmares are very common reactions to traumatic stress. Although they can never be controlled completely, some people have learned to diminish them for themselves, "Okay, that's enough. Now I am going to dream about something else more pleasant." If you have trouble sleeping, try reading or watching TV. Insomnia should resolve in a few days, but if not you may want to consult your physician.

**Recognizing self-blame and survivors' guilt:** It's normal to feel some blame for just surviving a traumatic incident, especially if others were severely injured or killed. The "Why me?" and "I could have done something (or more) for that [person or situation]" can mentally take a toll on a survivor. Recognize this normal reaction for what it is—an irrational thought, one that cannot change what has occurred. It is OKAY to have survived.

**Changing the memory:** Remember that what's upsetting after a traumatic incident is not the incident itself, but your memory of it. You, and others you talk to, may keep discussing aspects of the event that are particularly distressing, stirring up those upsetting memories. Try to substitute other more affirmative aspects of the event, such as remembering someone who was saved. Or got to safety. Or how well the rescue team worked together to make the situation better. Substituting the positive thoughts for the negative is a healthy way to cope with the event, and does not discount the significance of the event.

**Exercise:** Stress affects physically as well as mentally. Strenuous exercise afterward is very useful, especially if you are already in good shape. Don't overdo it, however, and cause more harm than good! If you have chest pain or difficulty breathing while working out, stop the activity and consult your physician.

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**Getting back to work:** If you take time off work to cope, get back to work when it is appropriate. Expect the apprehension of your duties to remain with reminders of the incident. These responses are perfectly normal and should diminish with time. Getting back to the routine of your job aids in healing.

**Decrease alcohol consumption:** Drinking alcoholic beverages rarely helps in coping with stress and may compound thoughts and feelings surrounding the event. It hinders our ability to deal with stress, and blunts our responses. Try substituting juices and healthier drinks.

**Accept enjoyment and diversion:** Although you may believe it will be a long time before you will laugh and feel better, it is OKAY to enjoy yourself and forget the incident. Getting involved in pleasant activities, such as going to the movies, playing sports, reading a good book, or exercising your mind, will be helpful in the days after a critical incident.

**Ask for professional help:** Sometimes professional help is needed to work through traumatic stress—remember that the CISM teams are primarily peers helping peers, NOT professionals. Seeking the help of an employee assistance program is NOT a sign of weakness; it is a sign of strength. It takes courage to work with a professional and face your pains and fears. Be proud that you take this step.

**Don't expect too much:** Working through post-traumatic stress is not something that happens overnight, and the process may take some time, and may never return you to a pre-incident level of function. You will likely remember the event for a long time. Try to accept this element of yourself and put it in proper perspective.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** If traumatic stress can be faced squarely and dealt with in some positive fashion, you are winning half the challenge!