



Critical Incident Signs & Symptoms of Stress

A Critical Incident is defined as a traumatic event that causes emergency service personnel to experience unusually strong emotional reactions which have potential for interference with their ability to function either at the scene or afterward. Even though the event may be over, the emotional and physical reactions can be manifested hours, days, weeks, and even months thereafter. It is common, and albeit quite *normal*, for people to experience emotional aftershocks in the aftermath of a Critical Incident.

The signs & symptoms of an emotional aftershock, or stress reaction, may last a few days, a few weeks, or a few months and occasionally longer depending on the severity of the Critical Incident. When a person has an established support system or group (family, peers, professional aid), the stress reactions usually subside in a shorter amount of time. There are times, however, when the Critical Incident is too painful that professional assistance is needed in the form of counselors or mental health professionals. This is *not* an indication that a person is “crazy” or weak, simply that the event provoked emotions that were too overwhelming for their normal coping strategies.

The following are some common signs & symptoms of stress reactions:

**Indicates need for medical evaluation*

<u>Physical</u>	<u>Cognitive</u>	<u>Emotional</u>	<u>Behavioral</u>	<u>Spiritual</u>
Fatigue	Blaming everyone	Anxiety	Change in speech patterns	Anger at God
Nausea	Poor attention	Guilt	Withdrawal	Feeling distant from God
Muscle tremors	Poor decisions	Grief	Emotional outbursts	Withdraw from place of worship
Twitches	Heightened or lowered alertness	Denial	Suspiciousness	Uncharacteristic religious involvement
Chest pain*	Poor concentration	Severe panic (rare)	Change in communications	Sudden turn toward God
Difficulty breathing*	Hypervigilance	Emotional shock	Loss or increase in appetite	Familiar faith practices seem empty (prayer, hymns)
Elevated BP	Difficulty in identifying familiar objects or people	Fear	Alcohol consumption	Religious rituals seem empty
Rapid heart rate	Increased or decreased awareness of surroundings	Uncertainty	Inability to rest	Belief that God is powerless
Thirst headaches	Poor problem solving	Loss of emotional control	Antisocial activities	Loss of meaning and purpose
Visual difficulties	Abstract thinking	Inappropriate emotional response	Nonspecific bodily complaints	Sense of isolation
Vomiting	Loss of time memory	Apprehension	Hyper alert to environment	Questioning of one's basic beliefs
Grinding of teeth	Nightmares	Feeling overwhelmed	Startle reflex	Anger at clergy
Weakness	Intrusive images	Intense anger	Erratic movement	Believing God is not in control
Dizziness	Etc....	Irritability	Change in sexual functionability	Believing God doesn't care
Profuse sweating		Agitation		Belief that we have failed God
Chills		Temper flare-ups		
Shock symptoms		Etc....		
Fainting				
Etc...				

Dealing with Stress from Critical Incidents (within the first 24-48 hours)

- ❑ Try to have periods of strenuous physical exercise, alternated with times of rest & relaxation. This will alleviate some of the physical reactions.
- ❑ Structure your time and schedule to keep busy. Stay to a routine that you are familiar with.
- ❑ REMEMBER, you are a *normal* person having a *normal* reaction to an *abnormal event*—don't label yourself as crazy or weak.
- ❑ Talk to people—talk is the most healing medicine for Critical Incident Stress.
- ❑ Be aware of trying to numb the pain through the use of drugs and alcohol. You don't want to compound your stress with a substance abuse problem.
- ❑ Try not to be alone too often—spend time with family and friends. Reach out to others.
- ❑ Help co-workers and others who were involved in the incident by sharing your feelings and “status checks”.
- ❑ Keep a journal of thoughts surrounding the event. By chronicling your emotions on paper you can identify and deal with them.
- ❑ Do things that you find enjoyable. Try going on a walk.
- ❑ Keep in mind others around you that are under stress from the event or from being around you.
- ❑ Avoid any big life changes or decisions during this period. Do make daily decisions that will give you a sense of control, such as meal choices, clothing and places to go.
- ❑ Try to get plenty of rest, but avoid oversleeping. Wake and retire at your normal hours, if possible.
- ❑ Eat well-balanced and regular meals, even if difficult to eat at times. Your body needs nourishment.
- ❑ Re-occurring thoughts, dreams, and flashbacks are normal—don't try and fight them. They will decrease over time and become less painful.
- ❑ Avoid excess caffeine or alcohol.
- ❑ Stick to your normal routine.

For Family Members & Friends

- ❑ Listen carefully. Encourage sharing, but avoid over-questioning.
- ❑ Spend time with the traumatized person.
- ❑ Offer assistance and a listening ear if they have not asked for help.
- ❑ Reassurance them that they are safe.
- ❑ Help them with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, caring for the family. Keep in mind that as time progresses these chores become easier for them to do themselves, but immediately they may need some assistance.
- ❑ Give them some private time when needed—avoid “smothering” them.
- ❑ Don’t take their anger or other feelings personally, as they are likely reacting in this manner because of the post-incident stress.
- ❑ Avoid statements such “lucky it wasn’t worse” and “c’mon...get over it!”—such statements do not console traumatized people. Tell them that you are sorry the event occurred and you are there to hopefully understand and help them.