What is critical incident stress?

Workers responding to emergency events and or disasters will see and experience events that will strain their ability to function. These events, which include having to witness or experience tragedy, death, serious injuries and threatening situations are called "Critical Incidents." The physical and psychological well-being of those experiencing this stress, as well as their future ability to function through a prolonged response, will depend upon how they manage this stress. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder differs from critical incident stress by lasting longer than four weeks after the event triggering the emotional, mental or physical response. Most instances of critical incident stress last between two days and four weeks.

What are some signs of critical incident stress?

The signs and symptoms of critical incident stress can be physical, emotional, cognitive, or behavioral. Individuals express stress in different ways and therefore manifest different reactions. The list below is not exhaustive but will help supervisors to identify workers who are exhibiting stress reactions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHYSICAL</th>
<th>COGNITIVE</th>
<th>EMOTIONAL</th>
<th>BEHAVIORAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fatigue</td>
<td>Uncertainty</td>
<td>Inability to rest</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Chills</td>
<td>Confusion</td>
<td>Withdrawal</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Unusual thirst</td>
<td>Nightmares</td>
<td>Antisocial behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chest pain</td>
<td>Poor attention making ability</td>
<td>Increased alcohol consumption</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Headaches</td>
<td>Poor concentration, memory</td>
<td>Change in communications</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dizziness</td>
<td>Poor problem solving ability</td>
<td>Loss/increase in appetite</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grief | Fear |
Guilt | Intense anger |
Apprehension and depression | Irritability |
Chronic anxiety |

The Oklahoma Department of Labor’s PEOSH Division has jurisdiction over workplace safety for public sector workers, including most fire fighters, law enforcement officers, paramedics and other first responders. Limited service consultations are available to assist public employers in reducing work-related injuries and illnesses.

The OSHA Consultation Program provides confidential on-site consultations to private employers, free of charge, to assist employers in identifying and eliminating hazards in the workplace.

For more information, visit our website at www.labor.ok.gov or call us at 405-521-6140 or 1-888-263-5252.
What can be done immediately?

During the emergency phase of the response, monitoring of employees by simple conversation and observation may help to identify early signs for some responders. The following steps can reduce significant stress detected early in the response:

- Limit exposure to noise and odors.
- Dictate an immediate 15 minute rest break
- Provide low sugar and low fat food.
- Get the person to talk about his or her feelings.
- Do not rush the person back to work.

What is critical incident stress management?

Critical Incident Stress Management is a system of education, prevention and mitigation of the effects from exposure to highly stressful critical incidents. It is handled most effectively by specially trained individuals, such as crisis intervention specialists.

What is critical incident stress debriefing?

Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) is a facilitator-led group process conducted soon after a traumatic event with individuals considered to be under stress from trauma exposure. When structured, the process usually (but not always) consists of seven steps: Introduction; Fact Phase; Thought Phase; Reaction Phase; Symptom Phase; Teaching Phase; and Re-entry Phase. During the group process, participants are encouraged to describe their experience of the incident and its aftermath, followed by a presentation on common stress reactions and stress management. This early intervention process supports recovery by providing group support and linking employees to further counseling and treatment services if they become necessary.

Source: OSHA

For additional information:

Training Manual for Mental Health and Human Service Workers in Major Disasters, US Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Agency (SAMHSA) - http://store.samhsa.gov/product/SMA96-0538


Source: OSHA

Moore Tornado Disaster, May 2013

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