

## How to Support Co-Workers, Family, Friends after a Traumatic Event



Winnipeg Regional  
Health Authority  
Caring for Health

Office régional de la  
santé de Winnipeg  
À l'écoute de notre santé

## Critical Incident Stress Management Program

- Learn more about traumatic or critical incident stress.
- Be aware that people may respond in different ways to the same event.
- Encourage them to talk about how they are feeling about the event.
- Tell them you are willing to listen whenever they need you. Be empathetic and supportive.
- Realize traumatize people isolate themselves because they think no one understands how they feel.
- Offer to spend time with them, but don't intrude.
- Don't minimize their situation.
- Don't try to explain or make excuses for why this event happened.
- Tell them you are sorry this happened to them and you want to understand them and help.
- Let them express their extreme emotions.
- Actively listen to what they say.
- If you don't know what to say, say nothing, just listen.
- Don't make false promises such as "everything will be OK."
- Know when to help, know when to let go.
- Encourage them to get back to as normal a routine as possible.
- You can be an important source of support to your loved one or friend, but know when you are in over your head.
- If you think things are not getting better, encourage them to get help from a mental health professional who is specialized in traumatic stress.
- If you want to support them, you also need to take time for yourself and ensure there is someone with whom you can talk things out.
- You can be there to support, encourage and validate their feelings but, you cannot fix their pain.

### How to Access Assistance for CISM

#### Days, Monday to Friday:

Contact the site Occupational Health Nurse.

At Health Sciences Centre contact the appropriate Manager of Patient Care.

#### After Hours:

Health Sciences Centre and St. Boniface contact the Nursing/Hospital Supervisor.

All others contact the site/program On-Call person.

#### Resources:

[www.wrha.mb.ca/professionals/safety/policies\\_section02.php](http://www.wrha.mb.ca/professionals/safety/policies_section02.php)

*A Critical Incident is a traumatic event that falls beyond the usual range of human experience.*

*A Critical Incident can cause unusually strong emotional and stress reactions, which can overwhelm how you cope.*

*It can interfere with how you function, now or later.*

*These reactions are normal reactions to abnormal events.*

# Critical Incident Stress Reactions

It is very common for you to have a reaction to a Critical Incident.

People can react in many different ways to a traumatic event. Some common signals of a Critical Incident Stress reaction include:

**Physical signals:** nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, chest pain, trouble breathing, fast heart rate, feeling dizzy, weakness, sweating, tremors or shakiness.

**Cognitive signals:** Nightmares, “seeing the event,” can’t think / concentrate / remember, more or less aware of surroundings, confused.

**Emotional signals:** Fear, guilt, grief, anxiety, panic, depressed, irritable, angry, emotional outbursts, overwhelmed, can’t control emotion.

**Behavioral signals:** Withdrawal, can’t rest or sleep, change in usual speech / behavior / appetite, increased use of drugs or alcohol.

**Spiritual signals:** anger at God / clergy, loss of meaning and purpose, questioning one’s basic beliefs, change in religious involvement.

## Mild Normal Reactions in the First Few Hours

Within the first few hours a number of reactions may occur. These initial reactions are primarily physical and perceptual in nature as a result of the “fight or flight” instinct that has been aroused by the incident. These may include the following reactions:

- **Perceptual Distortions:** fixating on the scene and not noticing people or events around you.
- **Physical Reactions:** Gagging, heavy feeling in the stomach, lump in the throat.
- **Psychological Reactions:** Feeling like crying.

## Intense Normal Reactions in the First Few Hours

More intense reactions are also possible within the first few hours. The nature of these reactions is usually related to the intensity of the incident as well as the health services worker’s current situation. These can include the following reactions:

- **Perceptual Distortions:**
  - \* Time Warping: either slow or fast motion.
  - \* Auditory distortions with diminished or intensified sound.
  - \* Visual distortions with either tunnel vision or heightened sense of detail.
- **Physical Reactions :** Tremors / shakes, hyperventilation, throwing up, bladder / bowel release.
- **Psychological Reactions:** Crying, fear, shock & numbness.

## Normal Reactions in the First Few Days Afterwards

After a few days the CIS reactions may continue. As time goes on the physical / perceptual reactions begin to lessen as the body begins to return to its normal level of functioning . The remaining physical reactions are those we normally associated with high levels of stress. However, we also begin to see a general increase in the psychological or emotional reactions caused by the critical incident. This is primarily due to the fact that as time goes on we begin to “process.”

## Normal Reactions 3 to 7 Days After the Event

- **Physical Reactions:** Sudden awakening after going to sleep, sexual difficulties, alcohol / drug abuse.
- **Psychological Reactions:** Flashbacks, heightened sense of danger, anger / blaming / guilt, nightmares, isolation / social withdrawal, fear / anxiety about the future, feeling emotionally numb, depression, family problems / misunderstandings, feeling out of control, alienation from people, exaggerated startle response.

# Things to Help You Deal with a Critical Incident Stress Reaction

- Within the first 24-48 hours, alternate periods of physical activity with rest.
- Structure your time to keep busy.
- Try to maintain a normal schedule.
- Don’t label yourself as crazy! You are a normal person , having a normal reaction, to an abnormal event.
- Do not isolate yourself from family / friends.
- Reach out—people do care about you.
- Spend time with others.
- Talk to people—talk is the most healing medicine.
- Beware of numbing the pain with drugs or alcohol.
- Give yourself permission to feel badly and share your feelings with others.
- Keep a journal; write your way through those sleepless nights.
- Do things that feel good. They help to put the “sparkle” back into your life.
- Realize that those around you are also under stress.
- Don’t make any big life decisions.
- Make as many daily decisions as possible to help you gain a feeling of control over your life again.
- Take care of yourself: eat well, get plenty of rest, even if you don’t feel like it.
- The thoughts and dreams are normal. They should decrease with time and become less painful.
- Give yourself time to heal.
- Educate yourself about CISM.