



# Critical Incident Stress Information Packet

## **Critical Incident Stress Information**

You have experienced a traumatic event or a critical incident. Any incident that causes an individual, including emergency service personnel, who has witnessed crime or trauma, to experience unusually strong emotional reactions which have the potential to interfere with their ability to function either at the scene or later is defined as a critical incident. Even though the event may be over, you may now be experiencing or may experience later, some strong emotional or physical reactions. It is very common, in fact quite normal, for people to experience emotional aftershocks when they have passed through a horrible event.

Sometimes the emotional aftershocks or stress reactions appear immediately after the traumatic event. Occasionally they may appear a few hours or a few days after the incident. In some cases, weeks or even months may pass before the stress reactions occur.

The signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last a few days, a few weeks, or a few months and occasionally longer depending on the severity of the traumatic event. With understanding and support from loved ones, stress reactions usually diminish in a normal fashion. Occasionally, the traumatic event is so painful that professional assistance from a counselor may be needed. Professional assistance for the aftershocks of trauma does not imply weakness but is often a wise decision to better deal with the problems.

### **Normal Post Incident Stress Symptoms**

Some of the stress symptoms that individuals may experience after traumatic incidents are listed below. They are best seen as normal reactions to abnormal circumstances. In times of stress your mind and body make adjustments in an attempt to regain balance. Statistics report that 80 to 85% of all individuals exposed to a critical incident will show noticeable symptoms within 24 hours. Furthermore, 50% percent of that group will continue to be affected after three or more weeks. Additionally, the severity of the incident will affect these statistics.

#### **Tension:**

Physical and emotional tensions, being excessively 'hyper' and unable to relax or sit still for very long. Muscle tremors or twitches.

#### **Nausea, vomiting or other gastrointestinal symptoms:**

Especially during or right after the incident.

**Body temperature regulation:**

Profuse sweating in cold conditions or chills in warm ones.

**Sleep disturbances:**

Either unable to get to sleep, disruptive dreams or nightmares, or waking up early (or all of the above!).

**Fatigue:**

Prolonged weariness and feeling a lack of stamina to do the basics of daily living.

**Intrusive thoughts and memories:**

Thinking about an incident or some recurring memory associated with the incident when you don't want to.

**Negative feelings:**

Unpleasant feelings that may come without warning, such as profound sadness, helplessness, fear, anxiety, anger, rage, discouragement, frustration, or depression.

**Crying:**

Sudden feelings of depression, sadness or grief which are expressed in unexpected tears.

**A feeling of vulnerability or lack of control:**

Feeling exposed to threat, or not in control of one's life anymore.

**Interpersonal problems:**

Increased irritability, insensitivity, blaming others for your stress or feelings, wanting distance instead of closeness.

**Increased problems with alcohol or drugs:**

"Self medication" to decrease symptoms.

**Compulsive behavior:**

Increased problems such as compulsive eating, etc.

**A vague feeling of self blame:**

Usually this fixes on some particular aspect of the event.

**Occupational Effects of trauma:**

Incidence of errors may increase

Increased absenteeism

An inability to concentrate and possible memory lapses

May overwork ~ i.e. harder and longer but usually not more efficiently  
May avoid coworkers or have difficulty getting along with them and/or supervisors

## **Coping Strategies for Post-Traumatic Stress**

Below are some techniques that have been used successfully to cope with the effects of trauma. Some may work for you while others may not. Try these techniques on an experimental basis and use the ones that seem to work best for you.

***Expressing feelings:*** Although it may be painful, share your thoughts and feelings with a good friend ~ someone you trust. 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 may 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 & nightmares:*** Nightmares are very common reactions to traumatic stress. Although they can never be controlled completely, some people have learned to diminish them by deliberately thinking about the trauma sometime before they go to sleep and then saying to themselves, "okay that's enough. Dream about something else." If you have trouble sleeping, try reading or watching TV. Insomnia should resolve in a few days.

***Recognizing self-blame and survivors' guilt:*** It's normal to feel some blame for just surviving a traumatic incident, especially if others were killed or severely injured. Recognize this for what it is—an irrational thought. It's 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. Since it's a memory, you can change what you recall. If some particularly upsetting scene keeps coming back to you, try substituting some other memory of the incident that has less painful emotions associated with it. For example, remember someone who was helped, or got to safety. Remember how good the teamwork was, or how hard everyone worked together to try to make the situation better.

***Exercise:*** Strenuous exercise afterward is very useful, especially if you are already in good shape. However don't overdo it and cause more harm than good!

***Getting back to work:*** Get back to work when it is realistic, but accept the jitters that you will feel with reminders of the incident. These are perfectly normal responses and will diminish with time.

***Decrease alcohol consumption:*** Drinking is not useful to the body in coping with stress or trauma. It hinders our ability to deal with stress, and blunts our responses. Drink healthy fluids.

***Accept enjoyment and diversion:*** It's OKAY to enjoy yourself and forget the incident. Be kind to yourself, go to a movie, get involved in a ballgame, exercise your mind, etc.

***Ask for professional help:*** Sometimes professional help may be necessary to work through traumatic stress. This is NOT a sign of weakness; it is a sign of strength. It takes courage to work with a professional to face your own pain and fear. Be proud of yourself.

***Don't expect miracle cures:*** Working through post-traumatic stress may take a long time and it may never really be finished. Try to accept this part of you and put it in proper perspective with time.

***THE BOTTOM LINE:*** Stay committed to the process of healing ~ keep "moving forward" toward healing and recovery. If you can face squarely traumatic stress and deal with it in a positive, constructive fashion, you are on the road to recovery.

## **After You Have Been Involved In A Critical Incident**

### **Things to try within the first 24 to 48 hours:**

- Periods of strenuous physical exercise, alternated with relaxation, will alleviate some of the physical reactions.
- Structure your time – keep busy
- You're normal and having normal reactions – don't label yourself crazy.
- Talk with your friends – talk is the most healing medicine.
- Be aware of numbing the pain with overuse of drugs or alcohol, you don't need to complicate this with a substance abuse problem.
- Reach out – people do care.

- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible.
- Spend time with others.
- Help your co-workers as much as possible by sharing feelings and checking how they're doing.
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten and share your feeling with others.
- Keep a journal, write your way through those sleepless hours.
- Do things that feel good to you.
- Realize those around you are under stress.
- Don't make any big life changes.
- Continue to make as many daily responsible decisions as possible, i.e., if someone asks you what you want to eat – answer them even if you don't "feel" like making that decision.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Re-occurring thought, dreams or flashbacks are normal – don't try to fight them they'll decrease over time and become less painful.
- Eat well-balanced and regular meals (even if you don't feel like it).
- Drink plenty of water -- try to avoid caffeine if at all possible.

**For Family Members & Friends:**

- Listen carefully.
- Spend time with the traumatized person.
- Offer your assistance and a listening ear even if they have not asked for help.
- Reassure them that they are safe.
- Help them with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, caring for the family, and minding the children.
- Give them some private time.
- Don't take their anger or other feelings personally.
- Don't tell them that they are "lucky it wasn't worse" – those statements do not console traumatized people. Instead, tell them that you are sorry such an event has occurred and you want to understand and assist them.

# Twelve Principals of Grief

by Dr. Alan Wohlfelt, Ph.D.

## ***Principal #1***

**Remember that your grief is unique.**

Others may grieve in different ways than you because your experience will be influenced by a variety of factors, including the relationship you had with the person who died; circumstances of the death – whether it was sudden or expected; your support system; and your cultural and religious background. It is important not to compare one's self with others who are grieving, and to consider the "one-day-at-a-time" approach to allow yourself to proceed at your own pace.

## ***Principal #2***

**Remember that it is often helpful to talk about your grief.** By expressing grief openly, healing occurs and you are likely to feel better. Ignoring it will not make your grief go away. It is important to seek out caring friends and relatives who will listen without judging.

## ***Principal #3***

**Expect to feel a multitude of emotions.**

Your head, heart, and spirit will be affected when you are experiencing loss. As a result, you may experience feelings of confusion, disorganization, fear, guilt, relief, or other emotions. Sometimes they may come simultaneously or follow each other within a short period of time. It is important to know that these emotions are normal responses to the death of a loved one even though you may be feeling overwhelmed at the time.

## ***Principal #4***

**Allow for some numbness that may occur.** Part of the grief experience when a loved one dies includes feeling numb or disoriented. It allows your emotions to "catch up" with what you know intellectually and allows you to be insulated from the reality of the death until you can tolerate what you don't want to believe.

## ***Principal #5***

**Be tolerant of your physical and emotional limits.** You may feel very tired as a result of your feelings of loss and sadness. Your low energy level may impair your ability to think clearly and to make decisions. It is important to nurture yourself by getting daily rest, eating balanced meals, and lowering your expectations of yourself.

## ***Principal #6***

**You may experience grief attacks or flashbacks.** These "surges of grief" or flashbacks can be frightening and leave you feeling overwhelmed. These feelings are also a normal reaction. Try to find someone who understands how you're feeling and is willing to listen.

## ***Principal #7***

**Remember to develop a support system.** Although reaching out to others and accepting their help may be difficult, finding people who will provide the understanding you need and who will let you be yourself may be the best action you can take on your own behalf.

***Principal #8***

**Make use of ritual.** The funeral ritual serves the dual purpose of acknowledging the death of a loved one and allowing you to express grief. It also provides you with the support of caring people who are also grieving.

***Principal #9***

**You have the freedom to embrace your spirituality.** Express your faith in whatever ways that seem appropriate to you. Try to have people around you who support your religious beliefs. You may feel hurt and abandoned and may feel angry with God because of the death of someone you loved, but it is important to realize that this feeling is a normal part of grief. Try to find someone who won't be judgmental about your feelings and who will allow you to explore your thoughts and feelings.

***Principal #10***

**You have the freedom to allow a search for meaning.** You may find yourself asking, "Why did he or she die?" Or "Why now?" This search for meaning is often another normal part of the healing process. Some questions have answers. Some do not. Actually, healing occurs in the opportunity to pose the questions, not necessarily in answering them. Find a supportive friend who will listen responsively as you search for meaning.

***Principal #11***

**You have the freedom to cherish your memories.** Treasure your memories of your loved one who has died. Share them with your family and friends. Recognize that your memories may make you laugh or cry. In either case, they are a lasting part of the relationship that you had with a very special person in your life.

***Principal #12***

**You have the freedom to move through your grief and heal.** The capacity to love requires the necessity to grieve when someone you loved dies. You cannot heal unless you openly express your grief. Denying your grief will only make it become more confusing and overwhelming. Embrace your grief and heal. Reconciling grief will not happen quickly. Remember grief is a process, not an event. Be patient and tolerant with yourself. Never forget that the death of someone you loved changes your life forever. It's not that you will never be happy again. It's simply that you will never be exactly the same as you were before the death.