

DelCo DCORT Tip Sheet

Common Reactions to a Critical Incident

After exposure to an intense, critical event, some individuals will experience reactions that are out of the ordinary for them. The event may create an acute stress response which can result in a disruption of physical and psychological processes. These reactions are normal and the experience is not uncommon; in fact, critical incident stress affects up to 87% of all individuals exposed to a critical incident. No one is immune to critical incident stress, regardless of age or past experiences.

Stressful events affect each person differently. Sometimes reactions appear immediately after the event. Sometimes they appear a few hours or a few days later. In some cases, weeks or months may pass before reactions appear. Acute stress symptoms can last days, weeks, months and occasionally longer depending on the severity of the event or situation.

Some of the more common, and normal, responses to a critical incident include:

Cognitive Reactions

- Confusion/Difficulty Concentrating
- Difficulty Making Decisions
- Decreased Alertness
- Memory Lapses
- Frequent Thoughts of the Event

Physical Reactions

- Fatigue
- Insomnia
- Headaches
- Nausea/Gastrointestinal Problems
- Hunger or Loss of Appetite

Emotional Reactions

- Anger
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Emotional Numbness
- Apathy/Boredom
- Frustration

Behavioral Reactions

- Withdrawal from Others
- Restlessness
- Hyper Vigilance
- Blaming Others
- Substance Abuse
- Changes in Normal Activities

PRACTICAL TIPS TO HELP YOU COPE:

- **Find Someone You Trust:** Find supportive people (family members, friends, colleagues) and talk with them about your experience. Don't carry this burden alone - share it with those who care about you.
- **Give Yourself Permission to Feel:** Acknowledge your feelings as they arise and that they are normal reactions.
- **Take Care of Yourself:** Get enough rest and eat regularly. Keep up your exercise routine if you have one. Don't abuse drugs or alcohol - they can hinder your coping abilities.
- **Know Your Limits:** Avoid other stressful situations for a while.
- **Practice Relaxation:** Meditate if you know how; if not, visualize a quiet scene. You may not always get away, but you can hold a vision in your mind that will temporarily take you out of the turmoil of a stressful situation.
- **Take One Thing at a Time:** For people under tension, assignments or responsibilities may suddenly seem overwhelming. This is a temporary condition that you can work through, one step at a time.
- **Remember You Can Always Seek Professional Help:** You don't have to go through this experience alone. Sometimes a situation is so complicated or stressful that professional assistance may be helpful. The Employee Assistance Program is available to provide you with additional support and guidance as you cope with your reactions to a critical incident.