

## ***“I can’t get that incident out of my head”***

It’s the face you keep seeing... the nightmare that disrupts your sleep... the smell of the fire that sticks with you... the continual thoughts of what you could have done differently. All of these are all examples of intrusive images. And they’re normal reactions to an abnormal event; they are part of the human defense mechanism.

### ***Intrusive images come in many forms.***

These images are often intense and clear and can come in the form of flashbacks, sensory disturbances, nightmares, or unwanted thoughts. No matter how they come, they cause a person to re-experience the critical incident.

### ***But why do they occur?***

You need first to understand the dynamics associated with a critical incident. A critical incident is a traumatic event that is outside normal human experience and causes unusually strong emotional reactions. For many of us, these emotional reactions often feel strange and “crazy.” Well, they’re not “crazy”; these reactions are completely normal.

Symptoms that are reactions to the event evolve to help individuals adapt to, avoid,

and recognize dangerous situations quickly. These symptoms begin as functional coping mechanisms that are survival-oriented in nature.

For example, the sense of smell in a fire is heightened to assist with finding other areas that may also be dangerous. However, after the fire is over, these symptoms (heightened sense of smell) are no longer functional and therefore usually interfere with one’s normal ability to perform (continually smelling scents from the scene the next day which makes it difficult to focus).

### ***A normal way of coping...***

When an individual experiences an intrusive image, it is not because there is something inherently wrong. Intrusive images occur because when a person experiences an upsetting event, the brain cannot process information as it ordinarily does.

An over-excitation occurs in the brain that causes an actual “re-wiring” of the brain. This makes it so the brain is unable to fully process the information... and this causes the event to be frozen in the mind in its original, anxiety-producing form... and that

frozen event in the mind is complete with the image, sound, smell, and negative self-assessment.

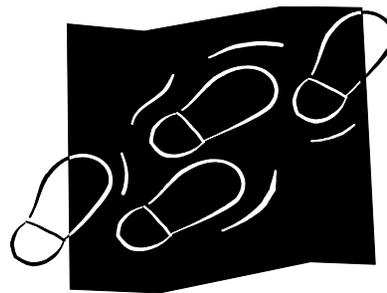
Due to the incomplete processing, this event/memory may then be inappropriately held in the nervous system and stored in the limbic system of the brain.

The problem at this point is that the limbic system processes emotions and sensations but not language and speech. Therefore, the traumatized person may have implicit memories of terror, anger, or sadness without the explicit or conscious recall of facts that aid in explaining the feelings.

In other words, after a trauma, the person may be bombarded by an image (face of a victim) and overwhelming feelings (“could I have done more”) without the necessary recall or memory to review the incident and come to some resolution about the event.

### ***Three things you can do to ease the intrusive images...***

❶ ***Talk about the incident***, your responses during the incident, and your reactions since the incident. Talk with peers, friends, family, CISM Team members, and/or mental health professionals. Talking will allow you to explore coping mechanisms; it will allow



facts to be fully processed; it will help to normalize individual responses and possibly offer healthier ways of coping.

② ***Use relaxation, guided imagery, and/or positive self-talk.*** These important techniques will assist with allowing the event to be reviewed with decreased anxiety, enabling complete processing of the trauma. One technique is to replace the intrusive image with an image that has positive connotations. Using these forms of relaxation, guided imagery, and self-talk will promote complete processing by the mind; when that happens, the memory no longer remains “stuck.”

③ ***Always incorporate appropriate nutrition and adequate sleep into your life.*** Proper food and sleep will aid in the reduction of many symptoms associated with a critical incident.

This brochure provides a basic overview of intrusive images as they relate to critical incidents. The material here is just basic information, and the tips presented here are just suggestions. If you find they do not help, seek professional help from someone trained in helping people who have experienced a critical incident. If you have experienced a critical incident, you do not have to deal with the after-effects alone.

For more information and/or help with a referral for professional assistance, contact the Tidewater CISM Team.



***How to access services from  
the TEMS CISM Team***

*Normal Business Hours*  
General Information and  
Requests for Services 757-963-0632  
*Night and Weekends*  
Request for Services: 757-622-1309  
*General Information by Email*  
tidewater@vaems.org

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# Intrusive Images

*Why do we  
have them?*

*How do we get  
rid of them?*



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Team***

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***On the World Wide Web at***

*<http://tidewater.vaems.org/cism.html>*

***So that others may serve.***