

## Stress Management Plan/Additional ideas for healthy coping....

### ***Professional Track***

- Discuss thoughts and feelings about your work with a close friend, your spouse, or your parents.
- Set boundaries between home and work. Cut down on the amount of work you take home with you.
- At the end of the day, take 15 minutes to mentally review the day and make plans for the next.
- Relax. Take time for relaxation and for lunch.
- Take at least two consecutive weeks for vacation.

### ***Personal Track***

- Meditate, pray, or simply relax, in a quiet spot, with your eyes closed for two separate periods of 10-20 minutes each day.
- At home, finish projects you've been putting off.
- By phone or in person, visit and chat with 3 friends you have not seen in a long time.
- Find the time and money to take a course or workshop not directly related to work.
- Do not over-commit at home, work, or in your volunteer life. Take time for leisure activities and hobbies.
- Create a healthy support system.
- Avoid isolation.
- Balance. Balance. Balance.
- Focus on the things you can actually do. Create order in at least one part of your life...even if it's a closet. Set realistic expectations.
- Use appropriate humor.

### ***Physical Track***

- Do an alternating tensing and relaxing exercise and stretching for 3 minutes 3-4 times a day.
- Start an exercise program you can adhere to at least 3 times a week for 30-40 minutes each. Go for a 30 minute walk every day.
- Cut out all sugar and salt in your diet and limit coffee, tea and alcohol to one drink a day. Drink LOTS of water.
- Get plenty of rest-the amount that is right for you. Try to get a regular 8 hours of sleep a night.
- Take daily vitamin supplements.

This brochure provides a basic overview of ways to cope with stress. 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. For more information and/or assistance with a referral for professional assistance, contact the Tidewater CISM Team.

This Brochure was prepared by the Tidewater EMS Council's Critical Incident Stress Management Team, a regional, interdisciplinary CISM team serving law enforcement officers, fire fighters, dispatchers and emergency medical personnel in southeastern Virginia: Dana Johnson and Peter Stinson were the principal writers of this brochure.



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TIDEWATER VIRGINIA

# Reactions and Self-Care Following a Critical Incident

**CISM**

# Recognizing Stress Following a Critical Incident

## Critical Incident Stress Management— CISM

Have you experienced a traumatic event or a critical incident? **A critical incident is any event that causes people to experience unusually strong emotional reactions which have the potential to interfere with their ability to function either at the scene or later.** It's very common, in fact quite normal, for people to experience emotional aftershocks when they have passed through a very stressful horrific event.

Sometimes the emotional aftershocks (or stress reactions) appear immediately after the traumatic event. Sometimes they may appear a few hours or few days later. In other cases, weeks or months may pass before the stress reaction appears.

The signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last a few days or longer depending on the severity of the traumatic event. With understanding, the support of loved ones, and with the appropriate stress management techniques, the stress reaction usually passes more quickly.

Occasionally the traumatic event is so painful that professional assistance from a counselor may be necessary. This does not imply craziness or weakness. It simply indicates the particular event was too powerful for the person to manage him/herself.

Over the next month, you can expect to experience NORMAL reactions. Depending upon your particular event, some of these reactions could occur:

### Physical Reactions

Fatigue • Nightmares • Hyperactivity • Exhaustion • Under Activity • Startled Reactions • Insomnia • Health Problems

### Cognitive (Thinking) Reactions

Guilt • Depression • Over-Sensitivity • Poor Concentration • Amnesia of the Event • Anger • Memory Loss • Poor Attention Span • Difficulty with Calculations • Difficulty with Decisions • Slowed Problem Solving

### Emotional Reactions

Loss of Emotional Control • Grief • Anxiety • Fear • Feeling Lost/Overwhelmed • Emotional Numbing

### Behavioral Reactions

Excessive Silence • Sleep Disorder • Unusual Behavior • Withdrawal from Contact • Eating Disorder

These are NORMAL reactions and sometimes painful; they are part of the healing process.

## Guidelines for the Next 24 Hours

- Get plenty of rest.
- Eat healthy foods in moderate amounts.
- Communicate with other affected persons.
- Accept your symptoms as a warning sign of emotional overload.
- Spend time with others. Reduce/Stay away from persons or tasks that stress you.
- Structure your time. Keep busy.
- You are NORMAL, having NORMAL reactions to an abnormal event. Do not label yourself crazy.
- Avoid alcohol. Be aware of numbing the pain with overuse of alcohol or drugs. Do not make it more complicated with substance abuse.
- Reach out. People are there to help you.
- Keep your family life as normal/simple as possible.
- Help co-workers as much as possible by sharing feelings and checking out how they are doing.
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten.
- Keep a journal. Write your way through sleepless hours.
- Do things that make you feel good.
- Realize that you are under stress.
- Do not make life changes or big decisions.
- Do make as many daily decisions as possible. This will give you a feeling of control over your own life.
- If symptoms continue or if you need more than this, do not hesitate to contact your CISM team, EAP, or mental health services.

## Reframe The Event

### One: Talk to someone about the event...

If you have experienced a critical incident, seek out someone with whom you can talk. Talk to someone on the critical incident stress management team or a professional counselor, psychologist, or clinical social worker. Someone who is trained in CISM—either a peer or mental health professional can offer healthy coping mechanisms. And healthy coping mechanisms rather than unhealthy ones such as self-medicating, or eating too much, or yelling at your spouse are what you need.

### Two: Reframe the event...

Find new meaning in whatever the event is. All critical incidents have meaning in our lives; that is, in large measure, why the event impacts us. The meaning does not mesh with our view of the world. Children aren't supposed to die. Co-workers aren't supposed to get trapped in burning buildings.

Here is an off duty police officer who was mugged. In the scuffle, the perpetrator was able to get the officer's gun and fire it. The officer, hit, feigned death. The perpetrator put the gun to the officer's head to finish the job, but seeing the lifeless body, didn't fire. The officer who experienced traumatic stress from the incident believed he had failed by not being able to defend himself and apprehend the perpetrator. The new perspective, the reframe, came when the officer realized that by his training and maturity, he had feigned death, rather than attempting to be a hero (and likely dying) as he would have done in his younger days. He realized that he had "won."

### Three: Replace the "ugly" visions...

Often following a critical incident, we are left with ugly visions and memories—intrusive images. It's important to replace these images so they don't become ingrained on the mind.

A searcher couldn't shake the image of a man we had found, tangled in the wreckage and lines of hit totally destroyed 52ft catamaran. And then, I began to imagine him not as I had seen him, but sailing his then beautiful boat, a wide smile on his face, the sea and sky shining on him: a "happy" image.

There is a story of a firefighter who couldn't shake the image of a child he'd been unable to save. He attended her funeral and saw her lying, peacefully among flowers of the church. He replaced the "ugly" with a peaceful and restful vision.

### Four: See the event as a call to action...

And do something about it. Firefighters mobilized by a tragic death ensure that every house in their community had a working smoke detector. Coast Guard personnel take it upon themselves to teach every boater they come across about the value of wearing a proper personal flotation device. Sometimes the call for action is within your personal life.