

# CRITICAL INCIDENTS:

*A Guide for Managers*



## **What is a Critical Incident?**

A critical incident is any unexpected, traumatic event that affects employees' feelings of personal safety, their ability to perform daily activities, and their ability to concentrate on their normal job duties. Examples include: workplace robberies, assaults, accidents, domestic violence that affects the workplace, or an unexpected death, murder, or suicide of an employee.

Critical incidents may also occur outside of work and still impact large numbers of employees. Such examples include natural disasters like tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes, or events such as plane crashes or acts of terrorism. Whatever its nature, a traumatic incident may negatively affect employees and your organization's productivity for sometime afterward.

Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can play an instrumental role in helping minimize such impact and disruption by providing private, confidential counseling services to affected employees, by offering immediate consultation and resources to managers, and by offering Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) groups at the workplace.

## **What is a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD)?**

When faced with a critical incident, a person's normal coping abilities may be temporarily overwhelmed by the significant psychological reactions that often accompany such an event. A CISD is a structured crisis intervention process led by a mental health professional specially trained in trauma interventions. CISDs are conducted with small groups of voluntary participants who were exposed to the traumatic event.

A CISD is not psychotherapy or counseling. It is not treatment for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and it is not intended as a substitute for such. Neither is the CISD a critique nor an investigation of the traumatic event. It is also not a part of any problem-solving process for administrative problems. Notes are not allowed and participants in a CISD are assured of confidentiality. Participants are urged not to discuss who said what outside the meeting. Group members may speak as much or as little as they desire during the CISD.

## What to expect from a CISD

CISDs are usually conducted 24 - 72 hours after the traumatic incident. Participation is voluntary and managers should ask employees if they would like to participate and not require attendance. CISDs typically last one to two hours depending on the number of participants, the intensity of the traumatic event and the amount of discussion. The best setting for a CISD is a conference room, classroom or similar setting. The room should be big enough to comfortably accommodate the participants. It should afford privacy and, whenever possible, not be in close proximity to the location of the traumatic event.

### Goals

*The main goals of a CISD are to:*

- 1. Lower the tension and mitigate the group's reaction to a traumatic event.**
- 2. Facilitate and accelerate the natural recovery process of normal people to a very unusual event.**
- 3. Identify employees within the group who may be in need of additional counseling services through their Employee Assistance Program and offer these services as a follow-up to the CISD.**

### Risks

Like any psychological service, there is some risk to a CISD. For example, learning more details about the event during the CISD can sometimes further traumatize a participant who was not directly exposed to the event. This risk can be minimized by ensuring that employees who participate in the CISD all experienced about the same level of exposure to the traumatic event.

### Process

As the debriefing begins, the counselor will outline the process for the group. The counselor will facilitate the sharing of group members' experiences and reactions to the critical incident, giving participants the opportunity to ventilate feelings arising from the traumatic event in a safe, helpful environment. Participants are educated about stress and grief reactions and the best ways to cope with a traumatic event. The CISD itself can provide structure to a chaotic period and can impose a degree of closure to a traumatic experience. Participants also learn of additional supportive resources, such as the EAP, should they feel a need for counseling services.

## **First Steps for Managers After a Critical Incident**

As a manager, you play a critical role in your organization's initial response to a traumatic event.

*Here are some suggestions:*

1. First, make sure employees are safe.
2. Notify the appropriate authorities like your Security staff, or the Police or Fire departments. Inform appropriate personnel in your company such as Human Resources, Executive Management, or designated trauma response or media relations coordinators.
3. Acknowledge to employees that the critical incident has occurred. By providing factual information to your employees, you can help prevent rumors from spreading. Provide a consistent message to all groups. Address any rumors that may be circulating, or concerns employees may voice. Before making employee announcements, check to see if your company has relevant guidelines or policies about critical incidents.
4. Consider any legal implications before responding to the media or communicating to employees. Most companies will designate a spokesperson to speak to the press and other media. Instruct employees, particularly those like telephone operators or receptionists who have routine contact with the public, what to do if approached by the media. Take precautions to insulate directly affected employees and their family from the media.
5. Remember that traumatized employees need structure, peer support, facts and instructions on what to expect next. This is particularly crucial if the individual has inadequate supports at home. Before employees leave, find out what they are planning to do with their time once they leave work. And encourage them to spend time with friends or family members.
6. Identify the employees most affected by the traumatic event and offer them a quiet place to be, but don't force them to be isolated if they'd prefer to stay with their co-workers.

## **Important Information About The Grief Process**

Grief is a normal, natural reaction to any type of loss, from the loss of a coworker to the loss of a formerly held sense of safety and security. Grief is a healthy process that enables the griever to deal with a loss over time and eventually return to normal functioning. When a critical incident or traumatic event occurs in the workplace, those affected may show signs that they are grieving. By being aware of the grief process, you will be better prepared to support your employees.

### *Stages of the Grieving Process*

#### **Denial**

Disbelief  
Numbness  
Shock

#### **Anger and Guilt**

Anger, sometimes misdirected  
Guilt, sometimes misdirected

#### **Sadness and Despair**

Sadness  
Loneliness  
Tearfulness  
Depression  
Reminders that bring new waves of grief

#### **Acceptance and Hope**

Acceptance of loss  
Adjustment to changes

#### **Aftermath**

Gradual lessening of feelings of grief

Grieving is unique to each person. Keep in mind that there is no set time frame for how long it will take someone to fully resolve his or her grief. People may also move back and forth through these stages of grief. Expect that while a person affected by a trauma may be functioning normally now, certain events or situations weeks or even months after the traumatic event may trigger an intense emotional response.

## Supporting the Grieving Employee

As a manager and supervisor you are responsible for fostering a safe, productive and respectful work environment. When a co-worker or employee you are supervising is grieving or recovering from a traumatic event, the needs of the workplace and the needs of affected workers may conflict. Below are some tips that may be helpful in this situation.

### *Your Role:*

- Remember that this grief is important and necessary. “Snapping out of it” will not return the employee to a comfortable and productive life.
- The hard work of grief is also lonely work, and you can’t make it go away. What you can do is help create an environment that is supportive of the grieving process.
- Set an example. Your caring support and professionalism will set a standard that will last long after this experience.
- If the employee has not returned to work, stay in touch. Co-workers might agree on one person to represent them, but supervisors should make sure they stay in touch as well.
- Consider a referral to the Employee Assistance Program to ensure additional support for yourself and the employee. EAP counseling services are private, confidential and are available at no cost to employees.

### *Strategies for Talking with a Grieving Employee:*

- Offer specific help. Many people are too tired or numb to decide what help they need. Co-workers can make a meal, offer to help with errands, or help with childcare.
- Acknowledge their loss and their grief. Don’t wait until the right thing to say comes to you. There is no right thing. The wrong thing is to say nothing.
- Avoid comparisons. “I know just how you feel, because my brother Jim died recently, too.” What you know is how you felt, but we never really know another’s feelings. Everyone’s relationships and reactions are unique.
- Expect to hear the story told, again and again. Telling the story is a part of healing. You need to speak up if the time isn’t right. For example, say “John, I’m sorry I can’t talk with you right now. Let’s continue this over coffee this afternoon.”

## **How Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) Can Help**

Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can play an instrumental role in helping minimize the impact and disruption caused by a critical incident. It does so by providing counseling services to affected employees, offering consultation services to managers, and by offering Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) services at the workplace.

**Your Employee Assistance Program is provided by EAP Consultants, LLC**

**The EAP may be accessed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by calling 800-869-0276. Services and information are also available on the Member Access page of the EAP's website at [www.eapconsultants.com](http://www.eapconsultants.com)**