



Critical Incident Coping Strategies

A critical incident is any unexpected, traumatic event that affects a person's emotional life, feeling of safety or ability to cope. That may include a crime, sudden accident or death in the workplace, a natural disaster, act of terrorism or any event that significantly impacts a large number of employees. The impact can last for weeks or even months afterward.

First Steps

When a critical incident occurs in your workplace, it's crucial to coordinate an immediate, appropriate and compassionate response to the situation.

- **Ensure the safety of all employees.** Notify company personnel and emergency and security institutions as necessary. Inform the appropriate department including Human Resources and media relations personnel.
- **Call the EAP+Work/Life program.** A Licensed Professional Counselor will discuss ways to respond to the crisis. When you call, be sure to:
 - Describe the incident—who, what, when, where, why and how.
 - Describe the reactions of employees and how your company has responded.
 - State your own needs, and the needs of your company.
 - Let the counselor know if there are any concurrent stressors.
- **Acknowledge the critical incident.** Provide a factual message to employees to allay concerns and thwart rumors. Before making any announcements, check company guidelines or policies about critical incidents.
- **Consider legal implications** before responding to media or employees. Let the designated spokesperson speak to the press. Instruct employees, receptionists and other personnel about what to do if approached by the media. Guard affected persons and family from the media.
- **Remember that traumatized employees need structure,** support and facts. They may need instructions on what to expect next, especially if they lack adequate support at home. Encourage employees to spend time with friends or family.
- **Encourage the most affected employees to go to a quiet place.** Do not force them to be isolated.

Emotional Reactions

Employees may feel overwhelmed, afraid, unsafe or may be physically or mentally stressed. Reactions vary in intensity and length with each individual and can include shock, anger, confusion, emotional outbursts, withdrawal and, most commonly, severe anxiety and sleeplessness. Reactions may be immediate, delayed or ongoing.

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How to Respond

Immediately after a critical incident, the primary concern is to provide safety, support and stabilization.

- **Remind employees about resources including the EAP+Work/Life program** for one-on-one assistance from a Licensed Professional Counselor or support services.
- **Consider organizing a group meeting** to talk about the emotions and reactions.
- **Encourage employees to express their feelings** with friends and family and others who understand the details of the experience.
- **Allow employees to feel emotions.** Don't ignore your own feelings, or expect to "fix it all" yourself.
- **Look for signs of obvious distress** and refer distressed employees to the EAP+Work/Life service for help. Signs include: wandering aimlessly, angry outbursts, uncontrollable crying and disorientation.

Communicating Facts

Consider distributing a "fact sheet" that follows these general guidelines:

- **Stick to the facts.** Let employees know you will keep them accurately informed.
- **Express your organization's concerns.** Demonstrate awareness of feelings and concerns.
- **Let them know** how to use the EAP+Work/Life program.
- **Announce the time and location** of an on-site debriefing, if offered.

Talk with other managers

Be sure to seek support for yourself and make use of available resources.

Remember... In a crisis, EAP+Work/Life support is available 24/7.

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