

# CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS: WHAT TO EXPECT AND HOW TO COPE

## CRITICAL INCIDENT

- ◆ Any event outside of the range of normal human experience.

## EVENTS THAT CAN CAUSE STRESS REACTIONS

- ◆ Death: Child victim, rescue victim, emergency worker victim, especially line of duty death or traumatic loss of co-worker.
- ◆ Threatening event: Being physically or emotionally attacked, exposure to hazardous material, perceived safety threat.
- ◆ Extraordinary media coverage: Death or threatening event coupled with extreme negative publicity.

## SOME NORMAL SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF ACUTE DISTRESS

### ◆ Physical:

- ✓ Nausea, upset stomach, tremors, feeling uncoordinated
- ✓ Profuse sweating, chills, diarrhea, rapid heart rate
- ✓ Muscle aches, sleep disturbance, dry mouth
- ✓ Shakes, vision problems, fatigue

### ◆ Cognitive:

- ✓ Confusion, lowered attention span
- ✓ Memory problems, calculation difficulties
- ✓ Poor concentration, flashbacks, distressing dreams
- ✓ Disruption in logical thinking, blaming others
- ✓ Difficulties with decision-making
- ✓ Heightened or lowered alertness
- ✓ Increased or decreased awareness of surroundings
- ✓ Preoccupation with vulnerability or death

### ◆ Emotional:

- ✓ Anticipatory anxiety, denial, fear, survivor guilt
- ✓ Uncertainty of feelings, depression, grief
- ✓ Feeling hopeless, overwhelmed, lost, vulnerable, helpless

◆ **Emotional: (Continued)**

- ✓ Feeling abandoned, worried, angry, wanting to hide
- ✓ Feeling numb, identifying with the victim
- ✓ Feeling alienated, disenchanting
- ✓ Panic, generalized anxiety
- ✓ Intensified or reduced emotional reactions

◆ **Behavioral:**

- ✓ Change in activity, withdrawal
- ✓ Less or more communicative, increased smoking
- ✓ Change in interactions with others, excessive humor
- ✓ Increased or decreased food intake
- ✓ Overly vigilant to environment, unusual behavior
- ✓ Increased alcohol intake
- ✓ Avoidance behavior
- ✓ Acting out, antisocial acts, angry outbursts
- ✓ Suspiciousness
- ✓ Intensified fatigue
- ✓ More frequent visits to the physician for nonspecific complaints

◆ **Grief and Bereavement Process:**

- ✓ Denial: "This can't be happening!"
- ✓ Anger: "How could something like this happen!"
- ✓ Bargaining: "If only . . . !"
- ✓ Depression: "This is sad."
- ✓ Acceptance: "Sometimes bad things happen to good people."
- ✓ Not everyone goes through all the stages in order; it takes as long as it takes

◆ **Coping After the Incident:**

- ✓ Eat well: Avoid caffeine, alcohol, salt, sugar, and fat
- ✓ Drink more fluids (water and fruit juices), eat complex carbs, low-fat and non-fat foods, whole grain bread
- ✓ Get rest but avoid boredom
- ✓ Physical exertion exercise as soon as possible after demobilization, moderate intensity to work out potentially damaging stress chemicals

◆ **Coping After the Incident: (Continued)**

- ✓ Attend and participate in a debriefing
- ✓ View your reactions as normal reactions to an abnormal situation -- anyone who experienced what you did may feel the same way.
- ✓ Allow yourself the freedom to talk about your reactions to what happened
- ✓ Seek peer, clergy, or professional assistance as necessary allow yourself time to heal
- ✓ Work on accepting that anyone in your situation would have responded similarly
- ✓ Talk with your family, check in with your peer
- ✓ Be gentle with yourself, move away from beating yourself up
- ✓ Use crisis as an opportunity for growth and positive change

◆ **When to Seek Additional Assistance:**

- ✓ Intense feelings of discomfort
- ✓ Significant symptoms that persist longer than six weeks
- ✓ Suicidal thoughts or planning
- ✓ Other self-destructive acting-out (sexual, aggressive, or substance)
- ✓ Intense family conflict
- ✓ Feel like you're losing control of your impulses
- ✓ Just want to check in to see if you're "normal"