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Workplace safety - coping with a critical incident

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Summary

- A critical incident is any event or series of events that is sudden, overwhelming, threatening or protracted. This may be an assault, threats, severe injury, death, fire or a bomb threat.
- Critical incident stress management aims to help workers deal with emotional reactions that may result from involvement in or exposure to unusual workplace incidents.
- It is desirable that as many workers as possible are trained in Psychological First Aid and that at least one worker in every section of the workplace has specialist critical incident stress management training.

A critical incident is any event or series of events that is sudden, overwhelming, threatening or protracted. This may be an assault, threats, severe injury, death, fire or a bomb threat.

Critical incident stress (CIS) management aims to help workers deal with the normal physical and emotional reactions that may result from involvement in or exposure to critical incidents in the workplace.

Exposure to a critical incident can lead to a stress response

A critical incident can be overwhelming and threatening and may lead to distress. This can be harmful when a person has demands and expectations that are out of keeping with their needs, abilities, skills and coping strategies. Distress can result in a decline in performance and in overall levels of wellbeing.

Involvement in, or exposure to, abnormal workplace incidents can lead a person to experience distress. It is normal to react emotionally to a critical incident. This may involve recurrent thoughts about the event, feeling uneasy or anxious, mood changes, restlessness, feeling tired and disturbed sleep.

Critical incident stress management

Critical incident stress management provides support to assist the recovery of normal individuals experiencing normal distress following exposure to abnormal events. It is based on a series of comprehensive and confidential strategies that aim to minimise any adverse emotional reaction the person may have.

Critical incident stress management strategies in the workplace include:

- Preparing workers for a possible critical incident in the workplace
- Demobilisation (rest, information and time out – RIT)
- Defusing (immediate small group support)
- Debriefing (powerful event group support)
- One-on-one support sessions
- Follow-up support.

Preparing workers for a possible critical incident

Strategies include:

- Develop positive working relationships (employee/supervisor, between employees).
- Develop workers' morale in the workplace.
- Establish contacts with suitably trained internal or external debriefers.
- Provide training for workers in the provision of Psychological First Aid (PFA)
- Assess the work environment for the potential for critical incidents.
- In consultation with workers, develop procedures for responding to identified critical incidents.
- Make sure that workers are familiar with these procedures.

Demobilisation

Critical incidents may trigger a wide range of physical and psychological symptoms, including increased heart rate, high blood pressure and anxiety. Demobilisation (rest, information and time out) is a way of calming workers following a critical incident and ensuring that their immediate needs are met. A supervisor or manager who was not involved in the incident, or affected by it, carries out the demobilisation.

A demobilisation takes place before the end of a shift or before those involved in the incident disperse. Strategies include:

- Convene a meeting for those involved as soon as possible.
- Summarise the incident and clarify uncertainties.
- Invite questions and discuss issues of concern.
- Show care and support, including the provision of Psychological First Aid.
- Draw up a plan of action, taking into account the needs of the workers.
- Make short-term arrangements for work responsibilities.
- Offer information on defusing and debriefing.

Defusing

Defusing (immediate small group support) is conducted by a trained staff member and is designed to bring the experience of the incident to a conclusion and provide immediate personal support. The aim is to stabilise the responses of workers involved in the incident and provide an opportunity for them to express any immediate concerns. This step should take place within 12 hours of the incident.

Strategies include:

- Review the event.
- Clarify workers' questions and concerns.
- Encourage workers to talk about what happened.
- Identify current needs.
- Offer workers advice, information and handouts on referrals and support agencies.
- Arrange debriefing and follow-up sessions to provide additional information about the event when available.

Debriefing

Debriefing (powerful event group support) is usually carried out within three to seven days of the critical incident, when workers have had enough time to take in the experience. Debriefing is not counselling. It is a structured voluntary discussion aimed at putting an abnormal event into perspective. It offers workers clarity about the critical incident they have experienced and assists them to establish a process for recovery.

Trained debriefers help the workers to explore and understand a range of issues, including:

- The sequence of events
- The causes and consequences
- Each person's experience
- Any memories triggered by the incident
- Normal psychological reactions to critical incidents
- Methods to manage emotional responses resulting from a critical incident.

Follow-up support

Stress responses can develop over time and follow-up support may be required by some workers or groups. Perspectives may change after the first debriefing session and additional sessions may need to focus on new aspects of the incident or stress reactions.

It is also common for critical incidents to bring up a range of personal issues for workers. Short-term counselling may be required to prevent further difficulties. Where counselling sessions identify other or more complex needs, it may be important to refer a worker to an appropriate service for additional support.

Where to get help

- Your supervisor or manager
- Human resources manager or officer
- Occupational health and safety officer
- Health and safety representative
- Your doctor

References

- *Resource guide for critical incident stress and debriefing in human service agencies*, 1997, Human Resources Branch, Department of Human Services, Victorian Government. [More information here.](#)
- *About trauma*, 2010, Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health. [More information here.](#)

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- [Baby furniture - safety tips](#)
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- [Playgrounds and child safety](#)

[Play environments can be safe and beneficial for your child. With proper planning, you can make sure your child gets plenty of playtime activity...](#)

- [Poisoning and child safety](#)

[Call the Poisons Information Centre on 13 11 26 immediately if you suspect your child has been poisoned or given the wrong medicine or the wrong dose of medicine...](#)

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[Always disconnect the power supply before trying to help a victim of electric shock...](#)

- [Gas heating - health and safety issues](#)

[If you service your gas heater regularly and use it correctly, it will be safe and economical to use...](#)

- [Greywater - recycling water at home](#)

[When handled properly, greywater can be safely reused for the garden...](#)

- [Groundwater](#)

[Groundwater quality varies across Victoria; in some areas, groundwater is not suitable for use...](#)

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[Paul was sanding the exterior of his house when he overreached and fell more than two metres from his ladder...](#)

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[Falls are a major cause of injury for older people. Find out how you can prevent falls around your home...](#)
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[Check your swimming pool regularly to make sure the water is safe for swimming...](#)
- [Vision loss - safety around the home](#)
[There are many ways to improve home safety for people whose vision is deteriorating...](#)
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[Don't advertise a party via SMS or the internet to limit the risk of gate-crashers and violent situations...](#)
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[There is no such thing as a safe solarium tan...](#)

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[Training too hard or fast is a common cause of sports-related injuries...](#)
- [Heat stress and heat-related illness](#)
[Heat kills more Australians than any natural disaster. Find out how you can treat and prevent heat-related illness...](#)
- [Heat stress and older people](#)
[People aged 65 years and over are at increased risk of heat-related illnesses and need special care in hot weather...](#)
- [Heat stress – preventing heatstroke](#)
[Heatstroke is a life-threatening emergency that can be avoided by following simple prevention measures...](#)
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[The early responses to hypothermia will be moving around, seeking shelter, hair standing on end \(goosebumps\) and shivering...](#)

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[Choose a route that is appropriate for your age and fitness level. Warm up and cool down with a slow, gentle pace to ease in and out of your exercise session...](#)

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[Drinking untreated water, such as creek water, bore water and sometimes even rainwater can lead to illnesses including gastroenteritis...](#)

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[Safe driving is up to every individual on the road. You can be a safe driver by being alert and ready to take action at any time...](#)

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[You can reduce your risk of being mugged or robbed while travelling by taking a few simple precautions...](#)

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[When returning to a flood-affected area, remember that wild animals, including rats, mice, snakes or spiders, may be trapped in your home, shed or garden...](#)

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[Houses, sheds and other buildings or structures burnt in a bushfire can leave potential health hazards...](#)

- [Bushfire preparation advice](#)

[Being prepared for a bushfire helps you cope better in an emergency...](#)

- [Bushfire smoke](#)

[Bushfire smoke can reduce air quality in rural and urban areas, and may affect people's health...](#)

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[Bushfire smoke can reduce air quality in rural and urban areas, and may affect people's health. Planned burns are an important part of reducing the risk of bushfires...](#)

- [Talking to children about bushfire risk](#)

[Children can be affected by information regarding bushfire risk and they may become concerned about issues of safety. Talking to children openly in a way that suits their age, while also involving...](#)

- [Urban flash floods - FAQs](#)

[Urban flash flooding can happen quickly and without warning. Heavy rain causes runoff to collect in dips, car parks and roads, and there is a risk of contamination, injury and disease...](#)

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[When asbestos fibres become airborne, people working with asbestos may inhale particles which remain in their lungs...](#)

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[Using a computer can contribute to problems of the muscles and joints, eyestrain and overuse injuries of the arms, wrists and hands...](#)

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[Wearing eye protection appropriate for the task can significantly reduce the risk of injury...](#)

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[To reduce risks on the farm, use hazardous chemicals according to manufacturer guidelines or replace them with less dangerous options...](#)

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- [Farm safety - confined spaces](#)

[Any confined space on a farm can be dangerous and the threat may not be apparent until it's too late...](#)

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[Hand and finger injuries are the most common crush injuries that occur on Victorian farms...](#)

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[Any animal-handling practices can increase the risk of injury to farmers, farm workers and the animal...](#)

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