Workplace safety - coping with a critical incident
Workplace safety - coping with a critical incident
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.

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:

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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

Send us your feedback

- Rate this website
- Your comments
- Questions
- Your details

Please note that we cannot answer personal medical queries. If you are looking for health or medical advice we recommend that you:

- talk to your doctor or pharmacist
- dial triple zero (000) in an emergency
- ring NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24.

2/4 Your Comments

Tell us who you are  

Enter your comments below (optional) 

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3/4 Questions

What are you here to do?  Looking for information on

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- Yes
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More information

Safety

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Safety basics
- Child safety
- Safety in and around the home
- Safe lifestyle and entertainment
Outdoor, weather and sports safety
Travel and transport safety
Fire, flood and other disasters
Work and environmental safety
Farm safety

Safety basics

- Bites and stings – first aid
  If you are bitten or stung by an insect or animal, apply first aid and seek medical treatment as soon as possible.

- How to survive a rip current (video)
  Learn what to do if you find yourself in a rip current.

- Ladder safety matters – Mick (video)
  Stop and think before you use a ladder.

- Ladder safety matters – Nick (video)
  Stop and think before you use a ladder.

- Ladders Safety Matters - Paul (video)
  We can keep our pools safe, healthy, and most importantly fun.

- Look after your health at harvest time (slideshow)
  Farmer health, wellbeing and safety are often neglected when facing the pressures of harvest. Simple safety measures can dramatically reduce the risk of injury and illness.

Child safety

- Animals and child safety
  Children should always be closely supervised near animals and taught how to behave safely around pets.

- Babies and safety
  Most injuries to babies do not occur by chance - many are predictable and largely preventable.

- Baby care - moving from cot to bed
  Some children are unsettled the first few nights in a 'big bed'. Try to be patient, loving and reassuring.

- Baby furniture - safety tips
  Even if your baby furniture meets every safety standard and recommendation, your child still needs close supervision.

- Bicycle safety and children
  As they grow and develop, and with the help of adults, children become increasingly aware of how they can manage their own safety and become safer road and bicycle users.

- Burns and scalds - children
  Most hot tap water scald injuries to children happen in the bathroom.

- Child safety and injury prevention
  By making a few practical changes to your home, you can dramatically reduce the risk of injury to your child.

- Child safety in the car
  Taking care to restrain children correctly while travelling in a car is the best way to prevent injuries.

- Eating tips for young toddlers
  Children have a natural ability to sense when they are hungry and when they are full.

- Farm safety – children
  Children who live on farms are at greater risk of injury and death than their parents or other farm workers.

- Hot weather and child safety
  Babies and children can quickly lose body fluids in hot weather, which can lead to dehydration.

- Internet safety for children
A child's digital footprint can be as easy to follow as their real footprints...

**Look after your health at harvest time (slideshow)**

Farmer health, wellbeing and safety are often neglected when facing the pressures of harvest. Simple safety measures can dramatically reduce the risk of injury and illness...

**Mobile phone safety for children**

Teach your child strategies for responding to mobile phone bullying...

**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...

**Road and traffic safety for children**

As they grow and develop, and with the help of adults, children become increasingly aware of how they can manage their own safety, and become safer road users...

**Scooters and child safety**

Scooters can travel at fast speeds and falls and collisions are disturbingly common...

**Water safety for children**

Toddlers are most at risk of drowning because they are mobile and curious but don't understand the danger of water...

**Safety in and around the home**

- **Animals and child safety**
  
  Children should always be closely supervised near animals and taught how to behave safely around pets...

- **Asbestos in the home**
  
  Asbestos fibres breathed into the lungs can cause a range of health problems including lung cancer and mesothelioma...

- **Chemicals in the home**
  
  Learn how to safely store and dispose of household chemicals, and how to respond when a person is poisoned...

- **Electric shock**
  
  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...

- **Ladder safety matters – Mick (video)**
  
  Stop and think before you use a ladder...

- **Ladder safety matters – Nick (video)**
  
  Stop and think before you use a ladder...

**Ladder Safety – Mick's story**

Injuries associated with ladder falls have been steadily increasing in Australia, especially among men aged 60 years and older doing work in and around the home...

**Ladder Safety – Nick's story**

Injuries associated with ladder falls have been steadily increasing in Australia, especially among men aged 60 years and older doing work in and around the home...
• Ladder Safety – Paul’s story
  Paul was sanding the exterior of his house when he overreached and fell more than two metres from his ladder.

• Ladders Safety Matters - Paul (video)
  We can keep our pools safe, healthy, and most importantly fun.

• Look after your health at harvest time (slide show)
  Farmer health, wellbeing and safety are often neglected when facing the pressures of harvest. Simple safety measures can dramatically reduce the risk of injury and illness.

• Medicines - safety issues
  Make sure your doctor knows about every medicine you take, including vitamins.

• Older people – preventing falls at home
  Falls are a major cause of injury for older people. Find out how you can prevent falls around your home.

• Pest control in the home
  If you use pesticides to control pests around the house, make sure you use as little as possible.

• Vision loss - safety around the home
  There are many ways to improve home safety for people whose vision is deteriorating.

• Water quality in tanks, bores and dams
  Make sure your private drinking water supply is safe.

• Water safety for children
  Toddlers are most at risk of drowning because they are mobile and curious but don’t understand the danger of water.

Safe lifestyle and entertainment

• Internet safety for children
  A child's digital footprint can be as easy to follow as their real footprints.

• Mobile phone safety for children
  Teach your child strategies for responding to mobile phone bullying.

• Partying safely – tips for teenagers
  Don't advertise a party via SMS or the internet to limit the risk of gate-crashers and violent situations.

• Solariums (sunbeds and tanning beds)
  There is no such thing as a safe solarium tan.

Outdoor, weather and sports safety

• Exercise safety
  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.

• Hot weather and child safety
  Babies and children can quickly lose body fluids in hot weather, which can lead to dehydration.

• How to cope and stay safe in extreme heat
  Know the effects of extreme heat, who is at risk and how you can prepare yourself and others.

• How to survive a rip current (video)

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Learn what to do if you find yourself in a rip current...

- **Hypothermia**
  The early responses to hypothermia will be moving around, seeking shelter, hair standing on end (goosebumps) and shivering...

- **Walking - safety and environmental issues**
  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...

- **Water from natural resources**
  Drinking untreated water, such as creek water, bore water and sometimes even rainwater can lead to illnesses including gastroenteritis...

- **Water safety for children**
  Toddlers are most at risk of drowning because they are mobile and curious but don't understand the danger of water...

**Travel and transport safety**

- **Bicycle safety and children**
  As they grow and develop, and with the help of adults, children become increasingly aware of how they can manage their own safety and become safer road and bicycle users...

- **Child safety in the car**
  Taking care to restrain children correctly while travelling in a car is the best way to prevent injuries...

- **Look after your health at harvest time (slideshow)**
  Farmer health, wellbeing and safety are often neglected when facing the pressures of harvest. Simple safety measures can dramatically reduce the risk of injury and illness...

- **Motor vehicle crashes**
  Motor vehicle crashes continue to be one of the biggest killers and causes of injury in Victoria...

- **Road and traffic safety for children**
  As they grow and develop, and with the help of adults, children become increasingly aware of how they can manage their own safety, and become safer road users...

- **Safe driving**
  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...

- **Scooters and child safety**
  Scooters can travel at fast speeds and falls and collisions are disturbingly common...

- **Travel safety tips**
  You can reduce your risk of being mugged or robbed while travelling by taking a few simple precautions...

**Fire, flood and other disasters**

- **After a flood – animal and insect related hazards**
  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...

- **After a flood – returning home safely**
  When returning to your home after a flood, take precautions to reduce the possibility of injury, illness or disease...

- **Bushfire aftermath - safety tips**
  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...

- **Emergencies - floods**
  You and your family should work out an emergency plan in case of flood...

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• Smoke from planned burns
  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.

Work and environmental safety

• Asbestos and your health
  When asbestos fibres become airborne, people working with asbestos may inhale particles which remain in their lungs.

• Cadmium
  Low-level exposure to cadmium over a long period of time may cause health effects because cadmium can accumulate in the body.

• Computer-related injuries
  Using a computer can contribute to problems of the muscles and joints, eyestrain and overuse injuries of the arms, wrists and hands.

• Eye safety at work
  Wearing eye protection appropriate for the task can significantly reduce the risk of injury.

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• Q fever
  Q fever is caused by a micro-organism that can be carried by cattle, sheep and goats.

• Shiftwork
  A person working the night shift is at greater risk of various disorders and accidents.

• Skin cancer - protecting outdoor workers
  People who work outdoors are in one of the highest risk groups for skin cancer.

• Workplace conflict
  A clash of personalities at work is bad for business, because it can affect productivity and increase absenteeism.

• Workplace safety - confined spaces
  Around 60 per cent of people killed in confined spaces were trying to rescue someone else.

• Workplace safety - coping with a critical incident
  Stress responses can develop over time after trauma, and support may be required by some workers or groups.

• Workplace safety - dangerous goods
  Dangerous goods are objects or substances that are potentially harmful to people or the environment, such as explosives or chemicals.

• Workplace safety - hazardous substances
  A hazardous substance can be inhaled, splashed onto the skin or eyes, or swallowed.
• **Workplace safety - infection control**
  The spread of many pathogens in the workplace can be prevented with regular hand washing...

• **Workplace safety - manual handling injuries**
  A person can be injured when handling objects in a variety of ways including pulling, pushing, holding or restraining...

• **Workplace safety - noise pollution**
  There are many ways to reduce exposure to excessive noise in the workplace...

• **Workplace safety - overuse injuries**
  Occupational overuse syndrome, also known as RSI, is caused by repetitive movements or awkward postures...

**Farm safety**

• **Chemicals and spray drift**
  Sprayed chemicals can drift over neighbouring properties or water sources, and can affect human health, animals or the environment...

• **Farm safety and handling agrochemicals**
  To reduce risks on the farm, use hazardous chemicals according to manufacturer guidelines or replace them with less dangerous options...

• **Farm safety - children**
  Children who live on farms are at greater risk of injury and death than their parents or other farm workers...

• **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...

• **Farm safety - crush injuries**
  Hand and finger injuries are the most common crush injuries that occur on Victorian farms...

• **Farm safety - falls**
  Falls are a common farm hazard, especially for older farmers...

• **Farm safety - handling animals**
  Any animal-handling practices can increase the risk of injury to farmers, farm workers and the animal...

• **Farm safety - machinery**
  Poorly used or faulty machinery is a major cause of death and injury on farms...

• **Farm safety - manual handling**
  Farm workers often experience muscle and ligament strain, but good manual handling techniques and safe work habits can prevent most injuries...

• **Farm safety - quad bikes**
  Most injuries and deaths involving quad bikes (all-terrain vehicles) are caused by the bike rolling over the rider...

• **Farm safety - risks and hazards**
  Farms can be dangerous places for workers and family members, but the risks can be reduced...

• **Farm safety – sheep and shearing**
  Handling sheep can cause manual injuries and badly designed shearing sheds can present a range of hazards...

• **Look after your health at harvest time (slideshow)**
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**Related Information**

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Related information on other websites

- Critical Incident Stress Management Foundation Australia Inc. (CISMFA)
- International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, Inc.
- Resource guide for critical incident stress and debriefing in human service agencies.
- Return To Work Knowledge base
- Victorian Trades Hall Council's - Occupational Health and Safety Unit

Support Groups

- Critical Incident Stress Management Foundation Australia Inc. (CISMFA)

Content Partner

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by: Better Health Channel - (need new cp)

Last updated: July 2011

Page content currently being reviewed.

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