

## **Critical Incident Stress Information for Significant Others**

Eastern PA Regional CISM Team

Emergency response personnel operate under a variety of stressors:

- The human tragedies of some calls
- The uncertainties of some calls
- The intensity of some calls
- The hazards associated with some calls

Under most situations, emergency services personnel can cope with these stressors and consider them “part of the job”, and manage the stress on a day-to-day basis. Some events, however, have significant emotional power, strong enough to produce unusual or distressing reactions and can be a challenge to that person’s ability to function on the job or at home. Such events are called **critical incidents** and may include line of duty death, serious line of duty injury, emergency worker suicide, multi-casualty incidents, significant events involving children, police use of force resulting in injury or death, victims known by the rescuer, excessive media interest, “failed” mission after extensive effort, community disasters, and any event that has powerful meaning to the worker.

When your loved one has been involved in a **critical incident**, he/she may experience normal stress responses to the event called **critical incident stress**. Critical incident stress affects up to 87% of all emergency personnel exposed to a critical incident. No one in emergency services is immune to critical incident stress, regardless of past experiences or years of service. Your loved one may experience critical incident stress at any time during his/her career. Sometimes the emotional after-shocks (or stress reactions) appear immediately after the traumatic event. Sometimes they may appear a few hours or a few days later. And, in some cases, weeks or months may pass before the stress reactions appear. The signs and symptoms of this stress reaction may be physical complaints or ills; various emotional states such as increased irritability, anger, sadness, depression; changes in normal thinking such as difficulty maintaining focus or making decisions, forgetting or mislaying things; changes in behavior patterns such as withdrawal, sleeping or eating habit changes; and changes in spiritual belief systems.

The signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last a few days, a few weeks, or a few months and occasionally longer, depending on the severity of the traumatic event. With understanding and the support of peers and loved ones, the stress reactions usually pass more quickly. The **Critical Incident Stress Management Team (CISM)** is available to help with recovery from these stress reactions. The CISM Team is made up of trained volunteers from the mental health and emergency service professions. Peers from law enforcement, fire/rescue service, emergency medical service, dispatchers, and hospital ER staff are represented on the Team. The goal of the CISM Team is to accelerate **normal** recovery for **normal** people having **common** and necessary reactions to **abnormal** events and to provide information and education about critical incident stress. One of our highest priorities is to maintain confidentiality and to respect the feelings of the individuals involved. The Team can provide group programs or 1:1 crisis intervention after a critical incident. Occasionally, the traumatic event is so painful that the professional assistance of a qualified counselor may be needed. This does not imply that the worker is crazy or weak. It simply indicates that the particular event was just too powerful to manage by him/herself at this time. The CISM Team can help with a referral to a qualified professional who knows about emergency services stress.

### **Things to Keep in Mind for Family Members and Friends:**

- Encourage, but do **NOT** pressure, your loved one to talk about the incident and his/her reaction to it. Talk is the best medicine. Your primary job is to listen and reassure. Remember that if an event is upsetting to you and your loved one, your children may be affected also. They may need to talk too.
- Spend time with the traumatized person but respect their need for some private time. Be guided by what they want and let them set the pace. When in doubt, ask them what would be helpful to them.
- Offer love and support even if it is hard for you to understand what your loved one is going through at this time. At the same time, don't assume responsibility for "making" them feel better. Their healing will proceed with time and your support.
- Help them with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, caring for the family, and minding the children. Try to get back to a normal routine as soon as possible.
- Try not to take their anger or other feelings personally. This is part of the stress reaction and not aimed at you.
- Don't tell them that they are "lucky it wasn't worse" – traumatized people are not consoled by those statements. Instead, tell them that you are sorry that such an event has occurred and you want to understand and assist them. You may want to reassure them that they are safe.
- Exercise is a great stress reducer.
- Encourage a balance of work, rest, and play.
- Watch intake of stimulants such as caffeine and sugar, and intake of alcohol. Excessive use of these substances will make the situation worse.
- Encourage eating good food regularly, even if they don't feel like it.
- If the signs of stress your loved one is experiencing do not begin to subside within a few weeks or if they intensify, consider seeking further assistance. The CISM Team can help you and your loved one find a professional who understands critical incident stress and how it can affect you.

Remember that your loved one is a **normal** person experiencing **common** reactions to an **abnormal** event.

**If you have any further questions or need more help,  
you can reach the CISM Team by calling  
the Hotline at 610-973-1624,  
available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.**