Critical Event Stress

After a Critical Event

Trauma overloads the mind and emotions and may cause immediate or delayed reactions. It destroys normal expectations and confidence in predictability, and personal safety. It may cause confusion and disorientation, as people do not know what to do with themselves in such an unusual situation. They may be reluctant to leave the scene, feel locked into it or attached to the people involved. It is important not to tell them what to do without first trying to understand what they need.

The following suggestions may help people who have experienced a sudden critical event:

1. Accept that you have been through a highly stressful experience, things will be different for a while and you will have strong reactions; acceptance is the first stage of recovery.
2. Allow time for the memories, dreams or flashbacks to fade; when they intrude, give them attention and then put them aside, don’t try to fight or suppress them, confronting the reality bit by bit helps come to terms with it.
3. If memory, concentration and planning are affected, use aids, writing things down and do things in short bursts.
4. It is normal to have changing moods after critical incidents, respect your emotions even if they are not normal for you; feeling bad usually passes quite soon, tolerate it and see what it means rather than take it away with distractions or numb it by alcohol or other means, these only make it worse by stopping real resolution, which will come in time.
5. If emotions are unstable try to plan the day so that you are not overstimulated or exposed to upsetting or unhelpful stimuli.
6. If sleep is affected, plan for quality rather than quantity of sleep, wind down at night and spend time preparing to go to sleep; arrange to take catnaps during the day.
7. Find people you trust to talk to about the event and your reactions; talking helps to defuse feelings and make sense of things and builds bridges with others.
8. Adjust your lifestyle to your need as they are now and don’t just do things out of habit or because you planned them some time ago if they no longer feel appropriate.
9. Avoid making important life decisions until you’re recovery is well in hand and you can be objective; but make many small decisions on a day to day basis to ensure you have control over your life.
10. Take extra care of yourself.

Participating in an Individual or Group Debrief

Debriefing can lead to a structuring of the critical event experience by:

- Tying together the different experiences and perspectives of the individual group members into a whole.
- Demonstrating to employees the caring role of their organisation
- Generating feelings of hope and control
- Allowing for peer support
- Providing an opportunity for catharsis
- Positively affecting the behavioral and cognitive-affective structure including:
  » improved communications between group members
  » enhanced group cohesion
  » improved readiness for future exposure
  » symbolisation and attribution of meaning to the event

‘Debriefings’ and other ‘support groups’ are described by participants as emotional support and information. Groups often report that they benefit:

- By the feeling of being accepted
- By being given a chance to verbalise what happened and increased knowledge about the situation
- Through the normalisation of experience

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- The opportunity to hear different perspectives and how they handle their reactions
- The sense of being cared for
- Emotional release and feelings of hope
- The feeling of relief and reassurances, and hopefully an increased feeling of competence

A reminder that debriefings are:

- Confidential, voluntary, impartial and non-judgemental
- Participants are divided into groups based on their level of immediate involvement with the critical event
- Verbal participation is optional
- Follow up is made available through the voluntary access of the EAP service and a cognitive-behavioural therapeutic model is applied

The Role of the Debriefeer

Debriefers can help by listening, supporting, giving information and helping with practical needs. Give clear, simple guidance as soon as possible and restore confidence so people can begin their own personal recovery processes. People need information about their reactions, and to understand what is happening and simple advice about how to help themselves through it.

- Look to see what people want and need. They may not be able to express it. If necessary inform managers who may not be aware of their needs.
- Help them feel in control of themselves by letting them make whatever decisions possible about their own welfare.
- If they are distressed, provide comfort and companionship. Do not reassure or talk them out of their feelings, but offer them calm, confident empathy.
- Confirm they have good reason to be upset, it is normal and the current distress will pass, but be sure that the situation is not minimised in any way.
- Help them recover their composure in their own way and their own time. Often it is best to sit quietly with them till the emotion subsides.
- Listen respectively to everything they say and indicate it is important and you wish to understand them.
- If dazed or shocked, gently give advice about what to do to look after themselves and where to go next. Ask them to tell you what they need, concentrate on simple needs first, e.g. drink, warmth, family members.
- Help people to find their companions as quickly as possible and encourage them to stay together. Encourage them to support each other.
- Advise them to take time to settle down before they leave, and not to rush away till they are ready, or until there are others to meet or take care of them.

General Advice

The following general advice will help to minimise the impact of traumatic stress soon after an event:

- Recognise you have had a distressing experience and you will react to it. Do not try to talk yourself out of it or see it as weakness.
- Talk and think about what happened; blocking it out will make it worse. It is healthy to be upset, but unhealthy to suppress it.
- Be careful on the way home, concentration may be impaired, accidents are more likely.
- Take time out to recover over the next few days and watch your reactions so you know how to look after yourself.
- You may take time to calm down afterwards, do things to help yourself to relax and unwind.
- If you are numb and switched off, try to involve yourself in some of the simple routines of life to get going again.

Treating Stress Symptoms

The following list identifies a range of techniques and strategies for alleviating or managing stress symptoms. They can be provided as part of the educational phase of a debriefing. It is important to assist people to identify and clearly label the stress symptoms so that they’re clear why they are experiencing them. The specific suggestions need to be linked to the symptoms so they do not continue to suffer them without some attempt to actively do something about them.

**Diet:** High protein, complex carbohydrate, low sugar, fats, or stimulants. Emphasise routine and frequency even if no appetite – i.e. many small snacks rather than a single big meal.

**Exercise:** Low impact, relaxing and sustained activity to metabolise brain chemicals, such as swimming, walking, cycling.

**Health:** Care for lowered immunity, treat psychosomatic conditions, headaches, general stress ailments, accidents, recurrence of past ailments. Maintain good medical care. It may be a good time to have a check-up and get the GP to monitor your health.

**Sleep:** Naps – quality rather than quantity, prepare for and relax into sleep more deliberately and with more planning than normal.

**Lifestyle:** Reorder and assess current needs, breaks and leisure, social contact time, recovery time. Preserve routine and rhythm of life, keep in touch with former lifestyle.

**Relationships:** Balance contact with time to be alone. Avoid isolation, talk about the experience to those who will listen sympathetically.
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Relaxation: Breathing, meditation, and progressive relaxation, yoga, music, nature. Take extra time to rest and relax.

Thoughts: Give thoughts their space, don't fight them, but at the same time don't let them take over. Think and then stop thinking. Understand what to expect and what is normal.

Emotions: Accept the feelings and time necessary to recovery. Bad feelings are OK, they will pass, accept your need to feel bad and respect feelings, they are justified. Fluctuating emotions and problems of control can be helped by patience and protecting oneself from unnecessary emotional interactions and taking time to calm down.

Life Management: Avoid major decisions and plans. Review priorities and plans in light of the current needs. But take control of life make small decisions about daily needs and recovery requirements.

Work: Return as soon as possible and take on light duties. Re-negotiate activity and responsibility levels to permit time to process the event. Respect limits of the stressed state, e.g. memory, attentions, concentration responsibility, stress tolerance. Review needs of leave and time off.

When to seek additional help: Sometimes it is important to provide some guidelines for people to know when their own recovery activity requires additional help. Indications for this are:

1. If recovery has stalled or does not seem to be improving
2. If physical or other symptoms are causing concern
3. If there is no one to talk to or relationships are being affected by the stress
4. If there is emotional numbness, depression or continuing anxiety.

References:
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