

Critical Incidents

Most of the time, people will cope following a traumatic event in the workplace—but support from trained personnel will minimise any long-term effects.

When confronted by a traumatic event in the workplace, our coping mechanisms are stretched to the limit. That's when we need the help of a trauma support service.

The type of events that tip the balance beyond our ability to cope are called 'critical incidents'. A critical incident is any incident, either unexpected in itself or unexpected in its degree of impact, that has the potential to overwhelm us and shut down our coping abilities—either at the scene or later.

The key issue is the impact of the event. A little stress is normal and most of us need it—in fact, we have to have everyday stress or we don't function. However, stress related to a critical incident has the potential to overwhelm our coping strategies altogether.

Critical Incident Stress Management Services are part of a standard of care that recognises people are complex emotional creatures and that some may suffer long-term effects from a traumatic event if not acknowledged at the time.

Essentially, such services provide psychological first-aid. A traumatic event will often leave people with associative triggers— such as a sight, a sound, a touch, a smell or a taste, which can return suddenly and away from the original incident. A critical incident service uses trained staff to help defuse these events so people are less vulnerable to future triggers by being taught how to deal with them.

The first part of Vitae's trauma support service takes place before any event occurs— helping organisations put in place the policy and procedures for the care of staff in the event of an incident. It is important that such policies are written down and are owned and understood by the organisation—and that everyone knows how to activate the service should the need arise. If a critical incident does occur, the process is a simple one: The service is accessed through a 24-hour freephone number;

- An immediate needs assessment is done over the phone (assessing factors such as the nature of the incident, the number of people involved, and the ongoing risk);
- We determine the urgency and timeframe of the response required and arrange for our Responders to attend the site (in most cases we're usually on the road within minutes of the call);
- Our Responders meet the designated contact person at the site and, after a quick briefing, begin the most appropriate CISM process with those affected by the event;

- This may be done either in a group, if a number of people are involved, or one-on-one and typically takes 20 to 40 minutes—an hour at the most
- People receive supporting material to take away before we ensure they're safe to go home;
- Finally we follow up with a phone call to individuals or a key contact 24/48 hours later or more frequently if needed and then again 30 days later.

The Critical Incident Stress Management process is designed to help people stabilise their emotions and return to their normal state of emotional wellbeing as soon as possible. Acknowledging the impacts of an event is a key part of this process.

These days, there's a move away from only seeing 'big bang' crises as critical incidents. Traditionally, critical incident services have been primarily associated with heavy industry such as rail, freight, and manufacturing where the risk of physical trauma is higher. Today, clients activate our critical incident service for a range of scenarios, including 'near misses' or the death of a colleague—expected or otherwise.

The impact on others vicariously should not be ignored either. The view that people just have to 'get over it' is increasingly something of the past. Trauma support is like an insurance policy for your staff, one always hopes it won't be needed — but, it needs to be in place before an event occurs.

After all there's truth in the saying: 'it's too late to build the ark after you hear the thunder!'

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