

Critical Incident and Trauma¹

What is a Critical Incident?

The incident has the following elements:

- The situation is unexpected.
- It's different from predictable life patterns.
- The incident destabilises a person's control.
- It involves physical or emotional threats to life – actual or perceived
- It puts excessive strain on the person's mental coping abilities

What is Trauma?

Trauma is associated with life threatening events or events perceived as life threatening. A person suffering from psychological trauma has been psychologically damaged by the event.

Events that can cause psychological trauma include accidents, death, emotionally damaging thoughts, harassment, injury, robbery, and threats. What causes trauma for one person may not do so for another – it is unique to each person. Trauma affects psychological wellbeing and everyday functioning. Depending on how well you manage it, trauma can be brief or long-lasting.

Common reactions to trauma include:

- Anxiety, fears, nervousness, numbness
- Changes to eating habits
- Depression or stress
- Flashbacks and recurrent thoughts
- Physical symptoms such as, shock, palpitations, trembling, sweating
- Psychological symptoms such as, aggression, confusion, excitement, poor concentration
- Headache and nausea
- Mood swings, guilt, negativity
- Rapid breathing and feelings of panic
- Sleep disturbances and frequent waking

Managing Trauma

Identify the experience of trauma as soon as possible. Help given early can minimise psychological damage. Allow yourself to grieve and heal. Be patient with yourself and don't expect too much too soon. Emotions can be volatile and unpredictable. Trauma counselling can help reduce traumatic stress and assist the person to return to normal functioning. Importantly, it could help prevent Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Ways to help reduce trauma symptoms include:

- Avoid stimulants, especially caffeine and nicotine
- Don't rush important decisions
- Avoid drugs and alcohol, as these can depress feelings and may cause dependency
- Maintain a normal routine: Return to work and normal duties as soon as possible
- Healthy eating, exercise, relaxation & sleep
- Talk to others, maintain your social contacts

If the incident occurred at work, have an activity that separates work and private life once you get home. This could be changing your clothes, going for a walk, having a meditation practice, a cup of tea, playing a particular piece of music. Be conscious of the separation at the time, and that you are entering a different 'head-space.'

Other things you can do:

- Self-observation: tune into yourself regularly – am I tense? Am I dwelling on negative thoughts? What else could I think about?
- Maintain a normal routine: Return to work and normal duties as soon as possible
- Process what has happened: don't let events linger in your mind. Allow yourself to feel what you feel. But do not ruminate on negative thoughts about it
- Calming practices: progressive muscle relaxation, breathing and body scanning, go for a walk, look at the sky, listen to music, talk to a colleague/ friend, have a cup of tea.
- Positive thoughts: remind yourself of what is still okay. There are things that are still good in your life. Think about them. List them Read the list often.
- Work-life balance: check that you are giving time to the important things in your life, not just work – family, friends, movies, music, pleasure, reading, relaxation, spiritual practices.

¹ Compiled from <http://www.traumacentre.com.au/what-is-trauma/> and other sources.