



CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS MANAGEMENT (CISM) INFORMATION SHEET



Stress is a normal part of every significant job. At different times during your career with the Department your level of stress may reach a significant or critical point. An **acute stress** reaction is frequently related to a specific unusual event (death of a co-worker, multi-casualty incident, severe dismemberment or disfigurement of victim, death of a child, personally knowing or relating to the victim, etc.). A **delayed** reaction may happen days, weeks, and/or years after an event. This typically occurs after you are re-exposed or “triggered” by a similar sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, situation, etc. **Cumulative** stress is the buildup of stress over time, and/or when you are experiencing significant amounts of stress simultaneously in your life. This buildup may eventually reach a critical mass resulting in a stress reaction.

A stress reaction is an important signal – it is your body’s way of coping with the temporary state of being overwhelmed by a situation. The duration of the symptoms (hours, days, weeks, or months) depends on your personal circumstances. However, once properly addressed, most acute stress reactions will significantly lessen within 24 – 72 hours and a thoughtful combination of stress management strategies will lessen the impact of most situations.

Some common signs and symptoms of a stress reaction are:

Physical	Cognitive	Emotional	Behavioral
Rapid heart rate Elevated BP Increased respirations Profuse sweating Nausea Dizziness Muscle tremors Twitches Head aches Thirst Chills Fatigue Muscle weakness Grinding of teeth Visual difficulties Vomiting Physical Voiding of GI track Fainting *Chest pain *Difficulty breathing *Shock symptoms, etc. *Needs immediate medical evaluation.	Poor &/or Impaired: ➤ Concentration ➤ Problem solving ➤ Attention ➤ Decision making ➤ Abstract thinking Memory problems Confusion Heightened awareness Hypervigilance Heightened &/or lowered alertness Difficulty identifying familiar objects or people Loss of time, place, or person orientation Cognitive Disturbed thinking Morbid thinking Nightmares Intrusive images, etc.	Shocked, numb Indifference/cut off Denial Feeling overwhelmed “Inappropriate” emotional response Indecisiveness Loos of control Intense anger/rage Blame (self&/or other) Guilt Hate Irritability Agitation Anxiety Apprehension Emotional Fear Grief Extreme sadness Depression Relief, etc.	Increased&/or Decreased: ➤ Appetite ➤ Sleep ➤ Sex drive ➤ Drug/alcohol cravings ➤ Energy level Change in activity Change in speech Change in usual communication Emotional outbursts Withdrawal Crying Non-specific bodily complaints Somatization Internalizing Intensified Startle Reflex Behavioral Hyper alert to environment Inability to rest Erratic movements Anti-social acts Suspiciousness, etc.

Any of the symptoms above may indicate the need for a medical evaluation. When in doubt, contact a physician.
Information directly modified from The International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, Inc. www.icisf.org

CISM INFORMATION SHEET (CONTINUED)

Potential Ways to Reduce a Stress Reaction:

- Remember, you are a **NORMAL** person, having **NORMAL** reactions to an extremely difficult situation.
- Four natural physiological stress relievers are: **laughing, crying, exercise, and touch**. The more you can include these in your life, the greater the potential for reduced stress level.
- Especially within the first 24 – 48 hours (if possible), include periods of strenuous physical exercise alternated with relaxation to alleviate some of the physical reactions.
- Drink lots and lots and lots of **water**.
- Eat well-balanced and regular meals (even if you do not feel like it).
- Get plenty of rest.
- Be aware of wanting to alter yourself with caffeine, nicotine, drugs, or alcohol. These chemicals tend to intensify the physiological stress reactions you are already experiencing. Additionally, you do not want to complicate the situation by adding substance abuse to the list of problems.
- Do things that feel good to you: read, write, pray/meditate, listen to music, walk, sit quietly, cook, watch a movie, take a hot shower/bath, get a massage, do progressive relaxation & deep breathing exercises, etc.
- Talk and spend time with others – many find that talking is the most healing medicine.
- Help your co-workers as much as possible by checking out how they are doing and sharing your thoughts and feelings with them.
- Realize those around you may also be under stress.
- Allow yourself some down time to just relax and temporarily do nothing.
- Maintain as normal schedule as possible – structure your time and keep busy.
- Make as many daily decisions as possible which will give you a sense of control over your life (i.e. if someone asks you what you want to eat – give an answer even if you are not sure).
- Postpone *major* life decisions (moving, leaving the job, ending a relationship, making major financial investments, etc.) for a minimum of 30 days.
- Recurring thoughts, dreams, or flashbacks are normal. Typically, they are just signals that your body needs to further process the details of the event(s). Find constructive ways to understand and integrate these details (talk, write, draw, pray, meditate, etc.).
- If you get “stuck,” consider consulting trained CISM peers, clergy, mental health professionals, and/or your physician – let the helpers do their job to serve you. It can make a significant difference.

How Can I Help My Loved One:

- There is no “right” thing to say. **Listening** is often the best thing to do.
- Remember, the healing process is very dynamic and there is a wide range of normal reactions. Some individuals will want to share specific details, others will prefer a quiet, compassionate presence – most will want a combination of support. Remain flexible to his/her needs rather than “expect” certain reactions.
- Spend time with the affected individual – offer your assistance and a listening ear even if he/she has not asked for help.
- Assist with practical things like cooking, cleaning, caring for the children, grocery shopping, etc.
- Give him/her some private time.
- Don’t take anger or other feelings directed at you personally.
- Don’t tell him/her that they are “lucky it was not worse” – impacted individuals are not consoled by these statements. Instead, tell them that you are sorry that such an event has occurred, and you want to understand and assist them.
- **Take care of yourself.** You will not be able to help anyone if you do not first care for yourself.

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