

Mental Health Support
for First Responders



CISM Handout Family

Your loved one has been involved in an emotion-charged event, often known as a critical incident. They may be experiencing normal stress responses to such an event (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 from critical incident stress, regardless of past experiences or years of service. Your loved one may experience critical incident stress at any time during their career.

Important things to remember about critical incident stress:

- The signs of critical incident stress are physical, cognitive, emotional and behavioral. You can find these at the bottom of this handout.
- Critical incident stress response can occur right at the scene, within hours, within days, or even within weeks.
- Your loved one may experience a variety of signs/symptoms of a stress response or they may not feel any of the signs at this time.
- Suffering from the effects of critical incident stress is completely normal. Your loved one is not the only one suffering: other emergency personnel shared the event and are probably sharing the reaction.
- All phases of our lives overlap and influence each other, personal, professional, family, etc. The impact of critical incident stress can be intensified, influenced mitigated by our own personal, family and current developmental issues.
- With understanding and your support, any stress reactions usually pass more quickly. Occasionally, the traumatic event is so painful that professional assistance from a counselor may be necessary. This does not imply weakness. It simply indicates that the particular event was just too powerful and outside our realm of common experience for someone to manage by themselves.
- You may have your own feelings and reactions to your spouse's symptoms and healing. Some common feelings are: Feeling abandoned by spouse, anger/irritability towards children and/or spouse, fear for spouse, sadness, loss, feeling isolated from spouse, feeling unappreciated by spouse, increased worry about spouse's safety, avoidance of spouse, numbness and isolation, etc.

What can you do to support your spouse?

- Encourage, but do NOT pressure, your loved one to talk about the incident and their reaction to it. Talk is the best medicine. Your best way of helping is to listen and reassure. Remember that even if the event is upsetting to you and your loved one, your children may be affected, also. They may need to talk, too.
- Take care of yourself. Though not involved in the incident, you are a participant of the incident, through your spouse. Make sure there is someone with whom you can talk things out. It can be difficult and exhausting to care-take for others, so it is important that you “put on your oxygen mask” first.
- Spend times with the traumatized person, but also ensure you give them private time.
- Reassure them that they are safe.
- Help them with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, caring for family, minding children, etc.
- Don't take their anger or sad feelings personally. It's not unusual for a traumatized person to express extreme sadness or other emotions at times.