

Supporting Teams Through A Crisis

A critical incident occurs where there is an actual or potential risk, peril, or danger to a person or an entity and therefore needs to be addressed urgently. Managing a Critical Incident means managing the situation and the unfolding events that it produces. A critical incident may be harmful when a person has demands and expectations that are out of keeping with their needs, abilities, skills and coping strategies.

Impacts of a Crisis Situation

The psychological impacts of a critical incident will vary between people. Some people may dust themselves off and get back to work, while others may experience the following:

- Perception of immediate serious harm to self or others – creates intense feelings.
- Feeling overwhelmed or strained coping resources.
- Disrupted sense of power and control.
- Disruption of normal beliefs and assumptions regarding self, society, security, the workplace and the world.

It is important to recognise that there are different responses to a critical incident. Some people may have little patience for those still affected and may make comments to “get over it”. Other people may have a strong reaction but refuse to seek help. Symptoms may be immediate or might be delayed.

A distressed person may exhibit the following:

- Only see their own point of view.
- Cannot reason logically.
- Personalise rather than focus on the issues.
- See the problem and not the solution.
- Find it hard to remember the details.
- Do not hear other perspectives.
- May make quick decisions without thinking.

How to Support Colleagues and Employees

- Normalise common reactions.
- Show compassion and understanding.
- Check people’s wellbeing in both the short and long term (in the days and weeks after an event).
- Offer your assistance and a listening ear, even if they have not asked for help.
- Allow people to cry, even if you are embarrassed by such displays of emotion.
- Encourage full use of support services available

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How to Have a Conversation

- Communicate your observations & concerns clearly & factually.
- Seek understanding and persist gently.
- Involve the employee in identifying solutions.
- Give reassurance and offer support.
- Develop a plan to remain at work or return to work.
- Provide information re. support services available, including MyCoach.
- Encourage appropriate professional help.
- Agree on next steps and ensure to follow up.
- Show compassion and understanding.

Your Role and Responsibility

Understand that your role as a leader has boundaries:

- You cannot diagnose mental health problems.
- You should not try to provide psychological counselling or therapy.
- Do not make yourself the only point of contact – know your limits and refer on.
- You shouldn’t be expected to have all the answers.
- Do not try to give advice unless it is about the role.
- If you are going home worrying about the issue – you are doing too much. Seek support for yourself.

What to avoid

- Don’t try to get the person to put the event in perspective before they are ready by saying things like “it could have been worse”.
- Don’t give generic advice like “just try and forget about it” or “you have to get straight back on the horse” – these things may be impossible for the employee to do straight away and may cause extra stress and confusion.
- Don’t ignore staff who appear unaffected on the surface. Speak to everyone individually and check how everyone is going over the days and weeks following the event.
- Do not make yourself the only point of contact, know your limits and refer on.