

When a Serious Incident Occurs at Work

A critical incident is defined any traumatic event that is outside a person's normal experience and normal ability to cope with that experience. In other words, "an abnormal, traumatic event that causes a normal stress response to that event". There are situations in which the work environment may be the place where a critical incident occurs, either directly or indirectly. A co-worker may suffer a serious on or off-the-job injury or death. Acts of workplace violence or terrorism may occur, including robbery. An accident may occur that involves one or more people from the company. A business may suffer a fire, flood or other natural disaster. A critical incident can be any significant powerful event which is out of the employee's typical range of experience. When these types of trauma occur, everyone close to the situation is affected although individual reactions may vary from person to person. A person's reaction to a stressful event is called a **stress reaction**. This is generally a normal reaction to an unusual and traumatic event. This stress reaction may cause physical and emotional pain, cognitive, behavioral and productivity changes and ultimately work performance problems. Even the so-called strongest individuals can have a stress reaction to a situation when it arises. When these events occur, the correct response by management is crucial.

When a critical incident occurs in the workplace, management can provide affected employees a way to cope and manage their stress reactions by using a system known as Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD).

What is a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing?

A CISD is a planned and facilitated group meeting that occurs at the workplace, and is designed to minimize individual's stress reactions. The meeting can last anywhere from 1-3 hours. The debriefing is designed to reduce the overall impact of a stressful event and accelerate the process of recovery. It provides a structure for employees to normalize their stress reactions, obtain information about the event, and get some education regarding their reactions. **Debriefings are not designed as a form of counseling or therapy**, but rather an opportunity to discuss a traumatic incident in a supportive, non-threatening and structured manner.

The facilitator(s) are professionals that have been trained and certified to provide CISD debriefings. They have experience in working with grief, loss, trauma, and situations involving injury and death.

What purpose does a CISD serve?

Employees react to traumatic events in all different ways. Much of their reactions may depend on the person's history, the event itself, issues that have occurred in the work setting, and each employee's ability to cope with crisis and stress. Unless a planned approach is taken you may be leaving it up to employees to figure out how to manage the situation. It is important to manage the psychological aspects of trauma in the workplace. One could argue that it is management's responsibility to respond to these situations because of how these events affect employee health, sense of well-being, job performance, and overall quality of work environment. The purpose of debriefings is to maintain the health and productivity of employees, prevent any long term stress effects, mitigate short term stress effects, restore employees back to normal functioning, effectively speed the recovery process, and enhance the overall environment in which employees work. The goal of debriefings is to reduce and or eliminate absenteeism, turnover, increased sick time, accidents, low morale, conflict, low productivity, illness, and other work-related problems of workers under stress.

What can Ingenuity First EAP do to help with critical incident situations?

Ingenuity First EAP has trained professionals to assist companies and their employees when a critical incident occurs. These people are available to provide on-site planning when an incident occurs, debriefing sessions, educational seminars and, in addition, individual counseling for those most affected by the crisis. Ingenuity First EAP also serves as a resource center for information on local support groups and community resources.

What would be some examples of incidents that Ingenuity First EAP can be called upon to assist?

- Death of a co-worker
- Severe injury/death of a child
- Suicide
- Robbery
- Automobile accident
- Life-threatening experiences
- Workplace violence situation
- Accidental injuries
- Unexpected deaths
- Diagnosis of a terminal illness of a co-worker
- Any natural disaster
- Bombing or bomb threat

After the incident, when does the CISD occur?

In the initial stages of a stress reaction employees will be in shock. It is, however, important to attend to employees at this time. For immediate response just after an event, we recommend a brief **defusing meeting**. This type of meeting is designed to provide employees information and defuse from what has just occurred. The defusing is done immediately after the incident and can last twenty minutes to one hour. The purpose of defusing is to reduce the impact of the event and bring some structure to the recently experienced crisis situation. After the initial shock begins to pass, individuals begin to experience other symptoms. This is when the **debriefing** becomes the most appropriate intervention. General response time for providing debriefings is best between 24-48 hours. This response time is designed to maximize the effectiveness of the debriefing process. It is **not** effective to provide a debriefing session too soon after an event. Individuals are more able to discuss and identify their reactions to the event once the shock over the situation subsides. Please don't assume the best course of action is the immediate response of providing the debriefing. Wanting to help and respond to the needs of employees who just went through a crisis is normal. Planning how to best respond to their physical and emotional needs is crucial. Plan with your EAP professional the most appropriate interventions for your situation.

When I call Ingenuity First EAP, what information do they need to have?

It is important you call as soon as possible after the incident. Inform the receptionist a critical incident has occurred at your company and you need to talk with the Critical Incident Coordinator immediately. The Coordinator will ask you details of the incident- what happened, where did the incident occur (at the workplace, employees place or residence etc.), when did the incident occur, how many people are affected, and who is the contact person for the company.

The planning stage is critical to determine how best to respond to a situation and develop a plan as to what resources may be needed. You do not need to know all the answers. The Coordinator has experience in this area and will plan with you an effective response to your situation. Effective planning is key to a successful outcome. Timing and good communication are critical. Remember, after a crisis you may not always recognize the signs of people experiencing stress reactions unless you are trained to do so.