A Manager's Guide Following a Traumatic Event

As a manager or supervisor, you play an important role in providing support to employees following a traumatic event or critical incident. During this time, your staff may experience a variety of changes in productivity and conduct. Employees will need emotional support and understanding while you focus on maintaining a stable work environment. How you respond to these demands is vital. Your company can help you and your employees work toward returning to the pre-trauma level of functioning.

Reviewing this guide can help you anticipate and prepare for common employee responses to trauma and severe stress. As a manager, remember that you are also affected by stress in the workplace. We encourage you to use any Employee Assistance Program resources for yourself as well.

About Critical Incident Stress Management

What is a "Critical Incident?"
A critical incident is an abnormal or traumatic event "which has the potential to overwhelm one's usual coping mechanisms resulting in psychological distress and an impairment of normal adaptive functioning."[1] In the workplace, this might be an event that could result in deficits in employee conduct or productivity. Examples of critical incidents in the workplace include: suicide; homicide; robbery; assault; threats of violence; worksite accidents; industrial and natural disasters; and organizational changes like restructuring or reductions in force. Critical incidents may affect a few individuals or an entire company.

What is Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM)?
CISM describes a wide array of services designed to support individuals who have experienced a critical incident. A CISM team addresses incidents that impact the workplace. The ICISF offers a continuum of services that are based on factors such as incident type, severity, and employee, manager and company needs.

What are CISM services?
A range of CISM services can be offered following a critical incident. These include:
• Seven-step Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD)
• Defusing
• Crisis Management Briefings (CMB)
• Management Consultations
• One-on-One services
Research has found that using an integrated approach combining different CISM interventions has a greater positive effect than using just one intervention. [2] Skilled intake clinicians are available for consultations 24 hours a day to assist you in identifying which services may be appropriate.

Why should I use CISM services?
Providing an immediate response to a trauma is designed to lessen the effects of the trauma and to identify individuals who may need additional support. Group interventions allow employees to process feelings and concerns in a guided environment with a mental health professional. The confidential nature of the services provides an additional level of reassurance to employees who may be experiencing anxiety or stress in the workplace and are unsure about where to find resources and support.

What to Expect from a CISM Group Intervention
At the beginning of a group intervention, the on-site counselor outlines what will happen. The counselor facilitates an exploration of the critical incident, including the facts, thoughts, feelings and reactions to the event. Employees are encouraged to participate at their own comfort level.

The objectives of CISM groups are:
• To provide employees with an understanding of normal responses to abnormal events;
• To equip employees with healthy coping skills and identify risk behaviors;
• To identify employees who may need additional support;
• To increase cohesion within a group following a critical event;
• To decrease risk of developing more stress-related symptoms;
• To return employees to their previous level of functioning in the workplace

Based on the group process, the on-site counselor may recommend a follow-up group intervention or other service to be provided at a later date. If you would like additional on-site services, please call the ICISF hot line for support.

Stress-related problems are real. Unresolved emotional distress can cause poor work performance and the loss of good employees. Making sure that employees know where to find help and making that help easily accessible can significantly improve the recovery process after a critical incident.

Key Issues Managers Face Following a Critical Incident
- <u>Work Performance</u> - Employee work performance may be directly or indirectly affected by a critical incident. Temporarily taking a more tolerant approach may be helpful when dealing with employee schedules and time off requests.
- <u>Productivity</u> - Productivity remains a key supervisory responsibility. Employees should be aware that the company expectation is for employees to resume previous performance levels.
- <u>Threats of Violence</u> - Threats of violence sometimes follow a critical incident due to increased levels of stress and frustration. All threats of violence should be reported to appropriate authorities. If you become aware of a threat of violence, call 911 immediately. You may also call the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation for consultation.
- <u>Inappropriate Behavior</u> - Stress is never an acceptable excuse for inappropriate behavior in the workplace. Address issues according to company policy.
- <u>Limitations</u> - Recognize your limits as a manager or supervisor. You are not expected to be a counselor or social worker for employees. Focus on work performance. For non-work related issues, refer employees to available resources such as the EAP and mental health services.

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Other helpful tips for workplace recovery

1. Address safety and physical needs first.
   a. If safety is an issue, assist employees in moving to a safe location as soon as possible.
   b. Ensure employees' physical needs are met (e.g., food, water, tissues).
2. Be aware of common stress and trauma reactions.
   a. Anger, frustration, irritability
   b. Withdrawal, isolation
   c. Tearfulness, uncontrollable crying
   d. Shock, confusion, disorientation, denial
   e. Shaking, dizziness, chest pain, other physical complaints
3. Confirm your support.
   a. Remember that everyone responds to stress differently.
   b. Employees may experience many different feelings at the same time.
   c. Sometimes just being present is the most supportive thing you can do.
   d. It's okay if you don't know the "right words" to say.
4. Don't try to fix the problem.
   a. Avoid statements with good intentions like "I understand how you feel" and "Everything will be just fine."
   b. There is often no satisfying explanation for what has happened. Don't try to explain or make sense out of a critical incident.
   c. Give information only if you are sure it has been verified. It is common in crisis situations for the "facts" to change and result in miscommunication and confusion.
5. Ensure practical resources are available for employees.
   a. If possible, offer employees a quiet area for making calls or taking a break.
   b. Allow flexibility with employees' schedules and time-off. Employees may need time to arrange funeral services, run errands, and/or support family members.
   c. Have appropriate handouts available on related topics, such as coping with stress or dealing with grief.
   d. Provide the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) toll-free number to any employee who may need one-on-one assistance.
   e. Post the EAP toll-free number where all employees can see it.
   f. Encourage employees to rest and take time for personal activities.
6. Find time for yourself. Be aware of your own emotions and needs. It's difficult to support others when you've neglected to take care of yourself.

The Grief Process

We normally associate grief with death. In the workplace, grief may be the result of a critical incident or traumatic event. Having a practical understanding of the grief process will enable you to better support your employees. It may take employees weeks, months or even longer to fully process their grief. Although tears and sadness are the most common expressions of grief, grief can be much more complex.

There are three basic phases of grief:
Avoidance: During this phase, common feelings include shock, denial and disbelief. The bereaved will commonly avoid all talk of the deceased or the circumstances of death.
Confrontation: This phase is described as a "highly charged and emotional state." The bereaved often experience feelings of anger and frustration. In some circumstances, they may feel guilt or remorse.

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Accommodation: This phase typically signals the beginning of the healing process. The feelings of acute grief begin to decline and the bereaved is able to return to their previous level of functioning. This is often referred to as acceptance of the loss.

Myths about Grief:
• All losses are the same.
• Grief gradually decreases over time.
• All people grieve in the same way.
• Managers should be able to "fix" the problem.
• Grief does not cause physical illness.
• Time heals all wounds.
• When grief is resolved, it never comes up again.
• Anger is wrong.
• Children need to be protected from grief and loss.
• We can always return to "business as usual."
• Grief can be handled without support from others.
• Crying is a sign of weakness.
• Ignoring feelings will make them go away.
• Memorials and funerals are unimportant to employees.
• Strong employees don't show emotions at work.

What Do I Say? Basic communication skills following any critical incident
As a manager or supervisor, you will be expected to support employees following a critical incident. You may worry that you will say "the wrong thing" in these circumstances. Your presence and compassion are the most important resources during this time. The following is a list of basic supportive communication skills to guide you in talking with employees.

• Use accurate language. When referring to a death, for example, use died rather than a euphemism such as passed away.
• Expect employees to talk about the event and their reactions and feelings to it.
• Familiarize yourself with the basics of the grieving process. As you listen to and work with employees, take note of any significant changes in behavior. Examples include attendance issues, forgetfulness, irritability, and decreased productivity.
• Know when to refer an employee for professional help. This may be based on observed changes in behavior or from concerns the employee brings directly to you.
• Make resources easily available through the EAP and support materials.
• Respect employee confidentiality—regardless of whether the details of a critical incident are widely known or the media has gotten involved.
• Recognize that employees may indirectly try to get you to make decisions for them. Instead, direct them to the EAP and their own support network (friends, family).
• Respect cultural and social diversity among your employees. This is particularly important in times of crisis, when employees are more likely to talk about their personal values and beliefs.
• Avoid statements that, although well intended, may devalue an employee's experiences or feelings. Some examples include: "I don't understand why this is still bothering you. Everyone else seems to be handling this just fine." "I know how you feel. I had the very same thing happen to me." "Everything will be just fine."

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Guidelines for when notified of the critical incident:
- Get information about the situation.
- Address safety and physical needs.
- Be supportive. Just listening is often the most supportive thing you can do.
- Be available.
- Use accurate language.
- Use a gentle, calm tone of voice.
- Expect chaos.
- Encourage employees to express grief.
- Be flexible.
- Recognize your limits. You are not expected to be a therapist for employees.
- Refer to the EAP or other community resources.
- Report all threats of violence to appropriate authorities.
- Respect employee confidentiality.
- Respect cultural diversity.

1 Everly Jr, George S. and Mitchell, Jeffrey T. (1999). Critical Incident Stress Management–CISM: a new era and standard of care in crisis intervention. Ellicott City, MD: Chevron Publishing Corp. 2nd ed., 11.

2 Everly, G.S., Jr., Flannery, R.B., Jr., Eyler, V., and Mitchell, J.T. (2001). Sufficiency analysis of an integrated multicomponent approach to crisis intervention: Critical Incident Stress Management. Advances in Mind-Body Medicine, 17, 174-183.

3 Rando, Therese A. (1988) Grieving: How to Go on Living When Someone You Love Dies. New York, New York: Lexington Books. 19-20.

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