

# COPING AFTER A CRITICAL INCIDENT

MENTAL WELLBEING FACT SHEET 2

January 2020

A critical incident is an incident that involves some element of threat or surprise. Sometimes the threat turns out to be less than was thought while the incident was unfolding, and sometimes the threat results in serious and lasting harm. Regardless of how serious the consequences of the incident are, people who are exposed to critical incidents will often experience some emotional and physical reactions to the stress of their experience. These reactions are part of a healthy human response and they are part of moving towards recovery. Reactions can range in intensity, with most gradually fading with time, social support, and active self-care.

## Is feeling this way normal?

It is common to feel distressed, think a lot about the event, have vivid memories of the incident, and question why the event happened and what could have been done to prevent it. Feelings such as shock, anger, sadness, and fear are normal, and can occur with physical reactions such as appetite loss, muscle tension, fatigue and restlessness.

## How can speaking to a Benestar EAP Trauma Counsellor help me?

Benestar Complete Support services are provided free of cost to you and are generally phone based or can be face-to-face where needed. The counsellor will firstly listen to what happened and to how the experience has affected you. They will answer any questions you have, and talk through the ways you typically cope with stress. If there are additional things you can do to help yourself adjust to what has happened, your counsellor will discuss these with you so that you have a good plan for putting yourself in the best position for a healthy recovery.

After the first conversation, the counsellor is likely to make a plan with you to follow up over the coming days and weeks to provide further support in line with your needs. Where considered helpful, the counsellor may encourage you to talk with your NSW RFS Leader about what you are going through. Your permission will be asked before any information is disclosed, and no personal information will be shared that does not directly relate to the current incident and your wellbeing.

## How can speaking to a NSW RFS Peer Support Officer help me?

Similar to speaking with a Benestar EAP Trauma counsellor a NSW RFS Peer Support Officer can provide free assistance to mental health care. Peer Support Officers will guide you through coping strategies and support you in your recovery from the critical incident.

Additionally, a Peer Support Officer will provide further information on stress, resilience and recovery. These officers are NSW RFS volunteers who are specially trained and skilled to provide these services.

## What should I let the counsellor or Peer Support Officer know?

It is helpful to speak with your counsellor or Peer Support Officer about any initial reactions that are not fading or reactions that have you thinking or acting differently to how you normally do. Some examples of this are; difficulty concentrating, pulling away from people you are usually close to, persisting low mood or anxiety, increased tension and irritability. If there is an element of your work that you are concerned about, it helps to discuss this so that where possible measures can be put in place to assist you to build up your sense of safety or confidence.

## What can I do to help myself?

- Connect with others, even if you may not feel like it at times.
- Spend time with supportive family, friends or NSW RFS Colleagues.
- Express any worries and fears and talk about your current state, should you feel like it.
- Keep your social plans, even if you don't feel like participating.
- It's alright to offer help and support to others who are going through a similar experience.

## Stay grounded in the here and now

- Let memories or thoughts of the event come and go. Just notice them when they are there and allow them to go out of your mind again – you don't have to push them away and you don't have to be swept up in trying to think your way through them.
- Stay physically grounded. You can use slow deep breathing for 1 minute, or use physical activity or exercise to help you be connected with exactly where you are.
- Think about your strengths and abilities. Know what they are and think about how they are going to help you.
- Do one thing every day that you usually enjoy.
- Be patient and kind to yourself, accept that it might take time to adjust.
- Though it's normal to sometimes ask yourself what if, refrain from dwelling on hypothetical.
- Gradually face the situations and memories you may wish to avoid.

## Make health-promoting choices

- Allow yourself time on your own to rest, think, and feel.
- Go back to your usual routine as soon as possible.
- Eat appropriate amounts of nutritious food.
- Reduce, DON'T increase, use of caffeine, alcohol and cigarettes.
- Exercise as you normally would, even if you don't feel like it.

## Is there anything I should be careful NOT to do?

- Don't try to block out thoughts or feelings, even if they are unpleasant. Thinking and feeling the reactions we have to critical incidents are part of our adjustment process. That process can happen in the quickest and healthiest way if we don't block those thoughts and emotions.
- Don't avoid people or places that make you think about the incident. Though it may be uncomfortable or distressing to be reminded, letting yourself be gently or gradually exposed to those things will be part of your recovery.
- Don't tell yourself you are going crazy, or that you are weak or helpless. Let your reaction be what it needs to be, without judging yourself.
- Don't wait until you are so overwhelmed that you can't fully benefit from help. Get help early to make sure you are on the right track for recovery from the very beginning.
- Don't make big, permanent decisions when you are feeling distressed. Your best decisions are made when you are at your best, physically and emotionally. So wait until the stress has passed before making big decisions again.

## I've noticed some unexpected changes, are these normal?

- It's normal to feel an extra level of closeness to others, including those who went through the experience with you.
- It's normal to have an enhanced appreciation of family and friends.
- People coming through critical incidents often have more enjoyment of the here and now, and find themselves appreciating the small things.
- Following a critical incident, people can report increased inner strength and knowledge that difficulties can be handled.
- It is also common to have an increased appreciation of the value of life.

Contacts (available 24/7)

 <b>CISS TEAM</b> <b>1800 049 933</b> <small>Ask for the CISS Duty Officer to be paged.</small>	<b>BENESTAR EAP</b> <b>1300 360 364</b> <small>Counselling and support for all NSW RFS members and their immediate families.</small>
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Senior Chaplains and family support are also available.

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