

Coping with Critical Incident

Overview

This section will provide you with a definition of a critical incident and descriptions of the ways in which you could react (immediate and delayed). There are also suggestions on how you could cope to facilitate your recovery.

Key Points

- Critical incidents, such as a mudslide or IED (improvised explosive device) explosion, have an effect on all of us regardless of our seniority and experience.
- It is important to understand the effect they can have on us and to learn how to manage effectively.

Description

Definition

A critical incident is defined as an event out of the range of normal experience - one which is sudden and unexpected, makes you lose control, involves the perception of a threat to life and can include elements of physical or emotional loss. They include IED explosions, being near gunfire, sudden attacks by anti-government elements (AGE), sudden mudslides, earthquakes, etc.

Reactions to a Critical Incident

We can have a range of *immediate* and *delayed* reactions to a critical incident even if we were not actually present at the time but were nearby. These are 'normal reactions to an abnormal situation.'

Immediate Reactions

Initially there is shock and this can be followed by difficulties in speaking, thinking, difficulty making decisions, volatility in emotions and/or feeling hopeless. Bodily reactions can include muscle tremors, dizziness, chills, increased heart rate and blood pressure.

Delayed Reactions

These can include feeling tired, hyper-vigilance (over-reacting to stimuli in the environment that remind you of the event), increased use/misuse of substances including alcohol, problems concentrating and remembering and sleeping difficulties.

You could also feel resentment or abandoned or want to withdraw and have flashbacks of what happened.

Coping Mechanisms

It is vital that you have a session with a counselor within 72 hours of the incident. It will greatly aid your recovery. The session will provide you with basic facts about what has happened, describe the process and path that you will go through to recover from the incident. The counselor will also give you some of the suggestions below.

1. If you have any of the physical symptoms described above, then it is important to see a doctor first and make sure that there are no underlying medical problems.
2. If you have concerns about your behavior during the incident, remember that, at the time, everyone did their best. Later on, you can reflect and learn from what you did and said.
3. Contact family and friends when you are ready. They are likely to have heard about the incident through the media.

Remember to use secure communication equipment if needed.

4. Try to carry out some ordinary activities, e.g. drinking fluids such as water, eating healthy food, maintaining your night time routine.
5. It is not a good idea to keep discussing what happened. Talking about the event again and again will not help you to psychologically process what happened. If you keep repeating what happened, you could relive the incident and this will not help you.
6. A short break from the mission should be negotiated and can help.
7. You can continue to seek counselling help for as long as needed.

Contacts

If you have any questions, please contact the Staff Welfare Officer, Elizabeth Openshaw at eopenshaw@iom.int.

For matters on gender, disability inclusion, race equity and equality, please contact Xavier Orellana (xorellana@iom.int) and/or the Gender and Diversity Coordination Unit (gdc@iom.int).

Document last updated: Nov 2022