

# REACTIONS FOLLOWING CRITICAL INCIDENTS



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Individuals who witness or experience critical incidents will often be exposed to life threat and strong impressions. Such events therefore lead to different normal psychological after-reactions. In the following some of the most usual reactions will be described, and some advice on how to cope with these situations will be given.



## **UNREALITY**

During or following the event, many people experience a feeling of unreality. It feels unreal, like a dream or like it did not really happen. This shock reaction helps us get through the first time period. Critical incidents often lead to a change in time perception, as if time stand still or rushes. This allows us time to handle the event, make decisions and face the threat. The mental apparatus is mobilized, the senses sharpened, and the situation can be optimally dealt with. However, the price paid for this heightened ability to perceive the environment is that sensory impressions can be "burnt" into one's memory with great detail and intensity. Many get their emotional reactions postponed by the shock, while others Increased anxiety is another usual reaction following critical

show more immediate emotional reactions.



Shortly following the critical event, a variety of reactions may start. Physical reactions, such as shivering, heartbeat, feeling sick, becoming dizzy and feeling cold and hot at the same time, are common. Feeling helpless, overwhelmed, frightened or sad also characterize the emotions shortly after the event.



However, it is often after one has had the time to digest or think about the event, that emotional reactions can occur. Sometimes people think there is something wrong because they react too little, and it is important to state that one do not have to have emotional reactions to be normal. Usual reactions are:



## **INTRUSIVE IMAGES**

In the time after the event the strong sense impressions can return as intrusive images and thoughts. These impressions can be visual or auditory sensations or memories from what one smelt, touched or tasted. These impressions can return as detailed, memorized pictures or like a video or film. Flashbacks to the traumatic experiences are one of the most usual after-reactions following critical incidents. Often these images or thoughts occur at bedtime and lead to sleep disturbances. Shortly following the event these memories return without one being able to control them.



## **FEAR & ANXIETY**

incidents. Fear can be triggered by everything that reminds of the

event, or it may be felt as a more general anxiety and fear that a disaster will strike the family. The feeling of safety that was present in our life before the event is shattered. The increase in anxiety can be accompanied by a feeling of constant alertness. People may become more jumpy and react to sudden noises or lights. The anxiety can also lead to physical reactions such as bodily tension, digestion problems, etc.



### **IRRITABILITY & SELF-REPROACH**

Another common reaction is irritability and impatience. If a family member, colleague, and/or friend have been killed, sadness and grief will be apparent. These emotions can be felt even though the person was a more distant acquaintance. Feelings of self-reproach and guilt may often occur, even when there is no reason to feel this way. "There must have been something I could have done to avoid this", or "If only ..." are usual thoughts after critical events. Sometimes we start thinking about the short time span between life and death, and become more concerned about our close family.



### **LACK OF UNDERSTANDING**

Some people experience more tense relations with their family and friends in the first period after a critical event. They can feel that family members or friends do not understand what they have gone through. To avoid this feeling, it is important to share one's experiences with significant others. Then they can better understand and support the affected person in, and be available to listen to thoughts, impressions, memories, etc.



### **RETURNING TO NORMAL LIFE**

It usually takes some time to return to ordinary routines after a critical incident. Everything may feel unimportant when compared to the event. Difficulties regarding concentration and memory may also reduce the work capacity in the days and weeks following the critical event. Comments or obtrusive questioning from others (friends, colleagues) can be very painful, and it may be helpful to mentally prepare for questions and curiosity from others.



The duration and strength of long-term reactions vary from person to person. Some do not experience strong reactions while others have intense reactions. For some people the situation is normalized after a few days, while for others it will take a longer period of time to return to ordinary life.



### **WHEN TO SEEK HELP**

If reactions last longer than the first month or increase in intensity over time, contact should be made for individual follow-up. Through professional help such reactions can be worked-through and the risk for disturbing long-term effects prevented or reduced. It should be noticed however, that normal grief reactions following the loss of a loved person have a time course that usually lasts much longer than the first months.

### **POINTS OF ADVICE**

Some brief points of advice can be useful:



Accept your own reactions as normal reactions to an extraordinary event. Do not try to avoid reactions during the first weeks after the event. Confront thoughts and impressions to get a better understanding

of the incident.



Try to carry out your ordinary daily routines. Go to work, but remember that your work capacity can be reduced for some time, and that you can feel more tired than usual.



Make sure that you have somebody to talk to. Talk about what actually happened as well as your thoughts, impressions and reactions during and after the incident.



It has proven very helpful to put incidents into words by writing about an event. Not only write about what happened, but about your innermost thoughts and feelings about the event.



Be careful in not taking in more coffee than usual, because this adds to tension in the nervous system. Refrain from alcohol as this will interfere with dream sleep level that helps in processing the event.