

Signs & Symptoms of Critical Incident Stress

A critical incident is defined as an event that is outside the range of a normal human experience. It differs from everyday stress because it is usually sudden and unexpected, and the event has the potential to overwhelm one's usual coping mechanisms resulting in psychological distress and impairment of normal adaptive functioning.

Signs and symptoms of critical incident stress may last a few days or a few weeks. Occasionally the signs and symptoms last for longer periods indicating the need for further intervention if the symptoms persist. With understanding and support from loved ones, friends and/or colleagues, these reactions usually pass more quickly. Listed below are some of the more common signs and symptoms of critical incident stress. Contact YoUR Support/EAP at (585) 276-9110 for guidance about obtaining support for staff experiencing signs & symptoms of critical incident stress.

PHYSICAL	COGNITIVE	EMOTIONAL	BEHAVIORAL	SPIRITUAL
Fatigue	Blaming someone	Anxiety	Change in activity	Anger at God
Nausea	Confusion	Guilt	Change in speech patterns	Loss of meaning/purpose
Muscle tremors or twitches	Poor attention	Grief	Withdrawal	Belief that God doesn't care
Shock symptoms*	Poor decisions	Denial	Emotional outbursts	Questioning beliefs
Chest pain*	Poor concentration	Emotional shock	Suspiciousness	Rituals seem empty
Difficulty breathing*	Raised/lowered alertness	Fear	Change in usual communications	Withdrawal from spiritual activities
Elevated BP*	Memory problems	Uncertainty	Restlessness	Anger at those who represent spirituality
Thirst	Hyper vigilance	Emotional control problems	Increased alcohol use	Belief that God failed
Headaches	Difficulty identifying familiar objects	Depression	Loss/increase in appetite	
Visual problems	More/less awareness of surroundings	Inappropriate emotions	Acting out; antisocial behavior	
Vomiting	Flashbacks/intrusive images	Apprehension	Changes in sleeping patterns	
Grinding teeth	Poor problem solving ability	Feeling overwhelmed	Hyperalert to environment	
Weakness	Poor abstract thinking	Intense anger	Intensified startle response	
Dizziness	Loss of orientation	Irritability	Pacing	
Profuse sweating	Impaired thinking	Agitation	Erratic movements	
Chills	Nightmares	Severe panic	Increase/decrease in sexual drive	

*Indicates need for medical evaluation.

Recommended Self Care Following a Critical Incident

- Drink plenty of water, especially during the first 24 hours following a critical incident.
- Stay active. Aerobic activity especially during the first 24 hours following a critical incident can reduce stress levels.
- Eat a healthy diet. Sugar, caffeine and alcohol can increase stress levels.
- Let others take care of emergent situations that may be too much for you right now.
- Engage in relaxing activities and/or social activities.
- Take a break when your energy fades or when you become overwhelmed.
- Pay attention to unusual aches, pains, and sleep patterns. Contact your physician if they continue.
- Share information about critical incident stress with your support system.
- Consider seeing a mental health professional.
- You may contact EAP for an appointment at (585) 276-9110.