

## Critical Incident Stress

Critical incident stress (CIS) is a reaction to a sudden, overwhelming, threatening or protracted event sufficient to overwhelm the usually effective coping skills of an individual. These events may cause an adverse psychological and/or physiological reaction, even in the most experienced person. These are normal reactions to abnormal situations.

CIS management aims to help workers deal with the normal physical and emotional reactions that may result from involvement in or exposure to critical incidents. Strategies include preparing workers for a possible critical incident, defusing (immediate support), debriefing (group support), and follow up support including one-on-one support sessions.

### Preparation:

- Ensure positive work relationships and workplace morale
- Provide access to suitably trained internal and external debriefers
- Assess the workplace for potential critical incidents
- Develop procedures for responding to identified critical incidents, in consultation with workers
- Ensure workers are familiar with critical incident procedures through training, induction and briefings
- Provide opportunities (eg daily debrief) to assess workers for stress symptoms or abnormal behaviour

### Defusing:

Conducted by a trained staff member immediately after the event to conclude it, provide immediate personal support, and may cover:

- Review of event
- Reassurance that their feelings are normal
- Clarification of questions and concerns
- Identify current needs
- Advice, information and handouts (referrals and support agencies)
- Contacts if they wish to talk
- Arrangements for debrief and other follow up sessions

### Debriefing:

Debriefings are usually conducted within 72 hours of the event, when workers have had enough time to take in the experience. It is a structured voluntary discussion aimed at putting an abnormal event into perspective and assists them to establish a process to recovery.

Trained debriefers assist workers explore and understand a range of issues, including:

- The sequence of events, causes and consequences
- Each person's experience
- Any memories triggered by the incident
- Normal reactions to critical incidents
- Methods to manage emotional and physical responses resulting from a critical incident

### Follow up support

Follow up with workers is usually conducted within a week of the debriefing session. Stress responses can develop over time and some workers or groups may require follow-up support, such as counselling. Employee Assistance Programs are available to provide counselling if required.

### Where to get help

- Your supervisor or manager
- Safety officer/advisor
- Health and Safety Unit in your workplace
- Your doctor

### Further information

- Workplace Assistance Program information – available in your workplace