

# Critical incidents: Management and stress debriefing

## What is a critical incident?

A critical incident is a significant and **overwhelming emotional event** that may be the result of a experiencing a traumatic event, witnessing trauma to another person or significant near-miss. (E.g., just miss being hit by a car or being involved in a motor vehicle accident.)

**As trauma is processed cognitively, some people cope well, while others need support.** Affected employees may experience reactions which are easily recognized, while others will experience emotional reactions that are delayed, variable, and/or unpredictable.

Critical incidents in the workplace have the potential to exhaust an employee's usual coping mechanisms, resulting in emotional distress, disruption of functioning and the ability to adapt. **Responding to these incidents is key to reducing the negative impact on the organization** overall.

## Having a planned response

Developing a critical incident management system ensures a consistent response to these types of incidents and impacted employees.

While it is imperative that employees are supported through all critical incidents, **responses to these critical workplace incidences vary – and don't always have to be formal and/or structured.** A critical incident management (CIM) system, however designed, can:

- Aid in identifying all affected /vulnerable employees
- Promote open communication and disclosure
- Ensure dependable employer involvement and support for all incidents
- Result in timely intervention (which prevents long term disability)
- Facilitate awareness of delayed reactions during planned follow up
- Reduce feelings of abandonment by impacted employees

- Include acknowledging suffering / grief to facilitate recovery and wellness
- Promote flexible, sensitive and creative alternate work plans
- Create trust within the work environment
- Foster a workplace of respect, possibly preventing future critical incidents
- Promote reporting and documentation of adverse events for future reference if required

## Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD)

To help employers manage traumatic employee reactions, a critical incident stress debriefing (CISD) is key in a critical incident management (CIM) system.

The goal of a CIM system is to help employees regain their sense of safety, security, and wellbeing while promoting a return to normal life with greater emotional stamina and reduced stress. Poor early response can lead to poorer recovery outcomes and, of course, a greater negative impact on the organization.

CISD is a planned and strategic process that promotes resiliency, recovery and wellness for employees who have been exposed to higher levels of stress and/or trauma. Ideally, the debriefing is completed within 24 to 72 hours of the event. Follow up is important as it may take time for symptoms to arise for some individuals.

There are many early signs of trauma such as fear, anger, tearfulness, or anxiety. Other symptoms include sudden absenteeism, decreased productivity, and the use of drugs/ alcohol to cope with traumatic or emotional work events. These symptoms can be exacerbated if employees do not feel they can safely disclose their reactions.

## How to conduct a CISD

- Provide a safe space to talk about the critical event and its aftermath



- Consider privacy needs - confidentiality must be assured in all debriefing processes
- Use non-judgmental communication when allowing employees to reflect on and process the event
- Stay attuned to employees moods, perceptions, worries, thoughts, withdrawal, or anger
- Validate responses to the critical incident as normal and valid
- Reassure employees that 'they are not alone'
- If the employee states that they need to leave the space, let them leave
- Ensure all employees know their resources, such as employer assistance, 24-hour distress lines or counselling
- Take cultural differences and/or resources into consideration
- Keep in mind that the employee's family may require support as well
- Do not make the debrief mandatory; it may not be helpful to all people
- Document both informal and formal debriefings (date, time, incident discussed, who was present) and provide all staff involved with copy of the documentation
- Indicate you will follow up with employees – ask each employee when and how follow up should happen
- Invite the employee to disclose any emotional reactions they are experiencing right away
- Encourage workers to seek medical attention/ psychological support if they have emotional struggles
- Provide them with the modified work abilities form to bring to their physician or other service provider.

## Organizational support

- Debriefing should be part of a broader critical incident management approach to prepare and assist all employees to cope effectively with the complexities of

their working environment and/ or in the face of a critical event. Employers may also consider covering this in employee orientation.

- Ongoing reminders of supports available to employees struggling with psychological wellness
- We recommend an annual review with all employees of clear and required workplace of respect guidelines

**TIP:** It can feel intimidating to have a debriefing conversation. Try to remember that what is valued most is a genuine offer of support rather than saying "all the right things."

## Assess the impact

As an employer, you are encouraged to become familiar with the occupational health & safety (OH &S) requirements for documenting critical incidents. Details can be found on the Alberta government's website, [www.alberta.ca](http://www.alberta.ca) and searching OH&S, or directly at <https://www.alberta.ca/occupation-al-health-safety.aspx>

## Additional psychological tools available to employers

- Psychological injury fact sheets available on [wcb.ab.ca](http://wcb.ab.ca)
- 'Psychological injuries in the workplace' seminar offered by WCB-Alberta at no-charge to employers
- National Standards of Canada – Psychological health and safety in the workplace, [mentalhealthcommission.ca](http://mentalhealthcommission.ca)
- JOB Accommodation Network – JaN.ORG for modified work ideas
- Alberta 211 - a free helpline that connects you to community and social services in your area 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, in over 150 languages.
- 24-hour distress lines throughout Alberta

