



National  
Defence

Défense  
nationale

A-MD-007-144/JD-004



Preparing

*for*

**CRITICAL**  
*incident*  
**Stress**

Canada

## Foreword

This publication is presented as a resource for the Department of National Defence (DND) community, which includes Canadian Forces (CF) personnel, Regular and Reserve, and DND civilian employees, as well as members of their families.

The purpose of this pamphlet is to assist readers to recognize, accept, and normalize reactions to Critical Incident Stress (CIS), for themselves and their loved ones. This resource may be used to complement and reinforce pre-deployment and post-deployment education and training, or to serve as a stand-alone source of information on Critical Incident Stress.

Comments and suggestions for future editions are welcomed by:

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D Med Pol would like to thank the many people who generously shared their expertise and experience in the initial preparation and current review of this pamphlet, as part of the Deployment Readiness Project. Valuable contributions were made by a cross-section of CF personnel, DND civilians and military families.

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# What is a Critical Incident (CI)?

- an event outside the range of normal experience that is sudden, unusual, and unexpected, disrupts one's sense of control, involves the perception of a threat to life, and may include elements of physical or emotional loss

## *Examples of Critical Incidents:*

Natural Disasters

Bombing Of Buildings

Multiple Casualty Accidents

Mining Of Roads

Sexual Or Other Assault

Attacks On Vehicles Or Convoys

Death Or Serious Injury Of A Child

Armed Attacks

Hostage-Taking

Suicide

Being A Powerless Spectator Of Violence

Large-Scale Massacres, Epidemics And Famines

Traumatic Death In Family

Duty-Related Death Of Co-Worker

Severe Physical Harm Or Injury

War-Related Civilian Deaths



While a CI may occur anywhere, anytime, there are occupational groups that are at increased risk of exposure to psychologically traumatic events. These include:

- firefighters
- emergency health care workers
- police officers
- search and rescue personnel
- disaster relief and humanitarian aid workers
- United Nations Peacekeepers, Observers, Monitors

## What is Critical Incident Stress (CIS)?

- a **normal** reaction to an **abnormal** event
- the unusually strong physical and emotional reactions experienced in the face of a CI which could interfere with one's ability to function during or after the event

A strong reaction is a normal reaction; few remain unaffected by a CI, although reactions may differ. Some reactions are immediate and some may occur and/or recur days, even weeks later.

### *Reactions May Be:*

Physical

Cognitive (thinking)

Emotional (feeling)

## Common Immediate Physical Reactions

Nausea

Muscle tremors

Sweating

Dizziness

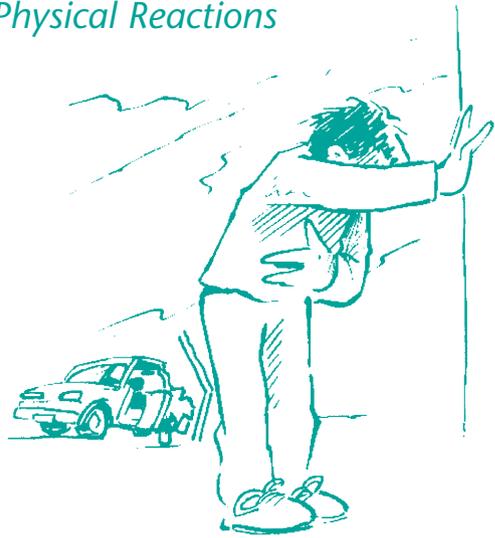
Chills

Increased heart rate

Increased blood pressure

Hyperventilation

(fast, deep breathing)



## Common Delayed Physical Reactions

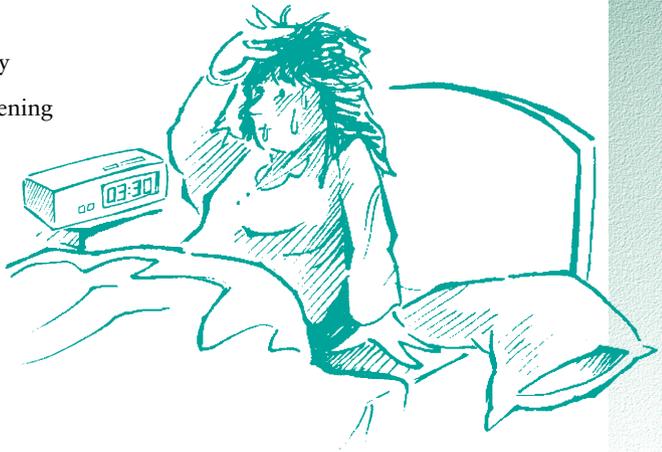
Fatigue

Exaggerated startle response

Increased use/misuse of alcohol and drugs

Sleep-related difficulties

- difficulty falling asleep
- nightmares
- night sweats
- restlessness
- awakening early
- difficulty awakening



## *Common Immediate Cognitive Reactions*

Confusion

Difficulty making decisions

Impaired thinking

Difficulty problem solving

Memory loss

Calculation difficulties

Anomia (difficulty remembering  
the names of things)



## *Common Delayed Cognitive Reactions*

Decreased attention span

Poor concentration

Memory problems

Flashbacks (reexperiencing the event)



## Common Immediate Emotional Reactions

- Anxiety
- Anger
- Fear
- Irritability
- Guilt
- Overwhelmed
- Grief
- Hopelessness



## Common Delayed Emotional Reactions

*(all of the above immediate reactions, plus)*

- Feeling abandoned
- Resentment
- Feeling of alienation
- Withdrawal
- Numbness
- Depression



The severity of reactions depends on several factors:

- **Factors related to the incident:**  
suddenness, intensity, duration, available social support, severity and nature of the event
- **Factors related to the person:**  
past experience, personal loss, perception of threat, personal coping abilities, degree of personal danger, the present circumstance of person's life, behaviour of others, role and level of responsibility

Critical Incidents cannot be predicted, nor can Critical Incident Stress be prevented. However, you can increase your resistance by being healthy.



### *Some Suggestions for Staying Healthy*

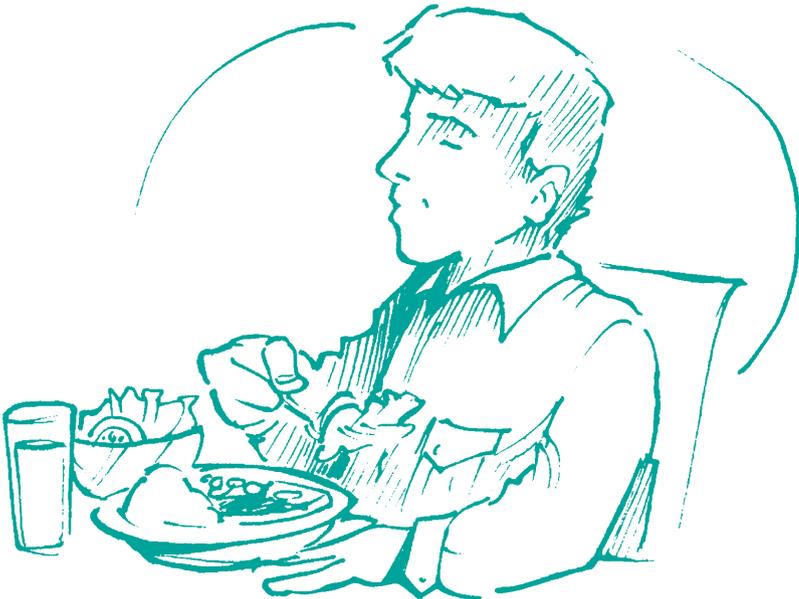
- S** sensible eating
- T** take time — to enjoy life
- R** rest and relaxation
- E** exercise and education (about cis)
- S** social support (family, friends)
- S** satisfying expressions of spirituality and sexuality

# What Can You Do About CIS?

Research and experience with people who have been exposed to traumatic events (critical incidents) provide a variety of techniques to assist you, both during and after the event.

## *During the Critical Incident:*

- Recognize the signs of cis and traumatic stress
- Maintain a positive attitude
- Try to control breathing — slow, regular
- Focus on the immediate task
- Stay in contact with others by talking
- Care for yourself — food, water, clothing, rest, exercise
- If prolonged exposure, take breaks and rotate tasks



## *After the Critical Incident:*

- Talk ... about the event — what you saw, head, smelled, did, etc. ... about your reactions, particularly how you felt. Tell your story.
- Practise stress management techniques, such as:
  - deep breathing exercises
  - progressive relaxation
  - meditation and/or prayer
  - physical activity
  - music, reading
  - writing in a journal
- Expect the incident to bother you.
- Use humour to facilitate acceptance of reactions.
- Participate in critical incident stress defusing as soon as possible after the event, and later in critical incident stress debriefing (CISD).
- Watch your fixation on the incident (allow time to recover).

## **Critical Incident Stress Defusing**

- a group meeting of those involved, directly after the event

### *The Purposes of CIS Defusing Are:*

- to allow those involved to tell what happened, and to talk about their reactions
- to provide information about normal stress reactions, about available support services, and about details of the follow-up CISD

# Critical Incident Stress Debriefing:

- a process designed to mitigate the impact of a CI
- a structured intervention by specially trained members of a Critical Incident Stress Team
- an organized group meeting that allows and encourages those involved in a CI to openly share their thoughts, feelings, and reactions in a safe, non-threatening environment
- ideally takes place 48–72 hours after the CI

CISD should **not** be confused with an **Operational Debriefing** or a **Reunion Briefing**.

The purpose of CISD is not to provide counselling but rather to provide a safe opportunity to deal with reactions to a stressful traumatic event.



**REMEMBER** Reactions to a Critical Incident are normal symptoms experienced by normal people following an abnormal event. These symptoms can temporarily interfere with a person's ability to cope at work or at home.

For most people most symptoms will diminish both in intensity and in frequency within a few days or weeks. This process will be greatly assisted by a formal CISD and by discussing concerns with trusted family members, friends and, if you wish, a trained counsellor. If the symptoms persist then the CF member should contact a medical officer, social worker or chaplain.

## Common Concerns Following a CI:

Sleep disturbances

Fear of event repetition

Feelings of guilt, anxiety, anger, fear

Fluctuating moods

Preoccupation with the event

Feeling of isolation

Startle reaction

Flashbacks



*\*Talking about these concerns will help.*

# Suggestions for Coping Skills to Assist Recovery:

## *Do*

- expect the incident to bother you
- remind yourself that your reactions are normal
- spend time with family, friends and co-workers
- maintain a balanced diet with minimum caffeine and sugar
- exercise on a daily, moderate basis
- take time for leisure activities
- learn as much as possible about CIS
- talk to trusted family, friends, counsellor
- minimize use of alcohol and drugs
- treat yourself especially well — you deserve it!
- take time for fun

## *Don't*

- think you are going “crazy”
- try to resist recurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks
- withdraw from family, friends, co-workers
- think you are the only one who has been affected
- drink alcohol excessively
- have unrealistic expectations for recovery — it takes time!

# Suggestions for Family and Friends:

- listen carefully and encourage them to talk
- don't be intrusive
- spend time with the affected person
- let their emotions flow
- reflect their feelings, but don't tell them how they are feeling
- do not minimize their situation
- no false promises
- reassure them that they are safe and normal
- help them with routine tasks like cleaning, cooking, caring for the family
- allow them some private time
- don't take their anger (or other feelings) personally
- tell them you are sorry such an event has occurred and you want to understand and assist them
- call for help or support as soon as you feel you need it
- learn about Critical Incident Stress
- take care of yourself



# Perhaps You Have Heard the Term **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

## *What is PTSD?*

- a medical diagnosis made by a medical professional according to specific criteria
- chronic symptoms of CIS that interfere with work and social life after the event

PTSD occurs in only a small minority of people exposed to psychologically traumatic events.



# **Where is More Information and/or Support Available?**

- Base Health Care Centre
- Social Work Office
- Chapel
- Operational Trauma and Stress Support Centre
- Canadian Forces Member Assistance Plan 1-800-268-7708
- Military Family Resource Centre
- Civilian health care facility

## **Pamphlets in This Series**

- A-MD-007-144/JD-001 Stress and You
- A-MD-007-144/JD-002 Le stress et vous
- A-MD-007-144/JD-004 Preparing for Critical Incident Stress/  
Se préparer au stress provoqué par un incident critique
- A-MD-007-144/JD-005 Preparing for Deployment Stress/  
Un déploiement moins stressant
- A-MD-007-144/JD-006 Preparing for Reunion Stress/  
Retrouvailles moins stressantes