



Tips for Employees: **Response to Critical Incidents or Disasters**

We all have varying responses following critical incidents including natural disasters, traumatic accidents, and violent events. Call **C-SEAP at 1-800-821-8154** if you have questions or need support.

Critical Incidents - Disasters and Traumatic Events (APA, 2016; NIH, 2015)

- **Critical Incident** is a term used to describe a situation or event, created by natural or human-made factors, that causes risk of death or physical injury and/or risk to or destruction of personal possessions and property, the workplace, or entire communities. Critical Incidents can include large-scale or more personalized situations involving natural destruction, violent and/or criminal acts, or devastating accidents.
- **Trauma** is our “emotional response” to terrifying or destructive events or situations (APA, 2016).

Stress and Trauma Responses (APA, 2016; NIH, 2015; VA Center for PTSD, 2015)

- The human **stress response** is similar in disasters, violence, and trauma; certain situations and conditions can impact the severity of our response to these situations (see *Risk and Resiliency* below).
- **Emotional responses** can include – sadness, denial, fear, shock, guilt, shame, helplessness, numbing of emotions, loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities, lower motivation.
- **Physical responses** may include – anxiousness, fatigue, tension, sleep disruptions, body aches/pains, startling easily, changes in appetite, nausea, and changes in sex drive.
- **Interpersonal reactions** may include – performance concerns or problems at work or school, irritability, disinterest in intimacy, feeling abandoned, increased conflict with others.
- More **severe reactions** to distressful events include nightmares, flashbacks, absence of emotion, increased substance use, panic attacks, extreme agitation, and violence. Severity of stress reaction can be impacted by risk and resiliency factors listed below.

Risk and Resiliency (VA, 2015)

- Experiencing a critical incident or disaster **first-hand** increases risk of lasting impact. However, those who are close to victims, experience impact in their community, or are exposed to news stories of the event(s) can also experience stress or a trauma response.
- Typically traumatic events and disasters are more stressful to those who are caring for other in distress, are juggling multiple responsibilities or stressors, were not well prior to the incident, experienced threat-to-life during the incident, suffered significant property loss and/or were displaced or separated from family as a result of the situation or event.
- Those who fair better following a traumatic event or disaster are those who have social supports, and can access practical assistance with post-disaster or trauma problems, and have practical resources i.e. housing, job, food, money.
- Protective attitude or outlook is also important during and following a critical incident. In particular, those who manage the impact of an incident well can identify with one or more of the following - that their responses are normal, they have confidence that the situation will improve, or are able to see that they have some control over the future.

Sources:

American Psychological Association (2016). *Trauma*.
National Institutes of Health, DIMRC (2015). *Coping with disasters, violence, and traumatic events*.
National Center for PTSD, US Department of Veterans Affairs (2015). *Common reactions after trauma*.
National Center for PTSD, US Department of Veterans Affairs (2015). *Effects of Disasters: Risk and Resilience Factors*.
National Center for PTSD, US Department of Veterans Affairs (2015). *Mental Health Reactions After Disaster*.

