



Ambulance Service

**Critical Incident Stress Management**

Committee

### WHAT IS CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS (CIS)?

A Critical Incident is an incident or stressor event (crisis event) which appears to cause, or be associated with, a crisis response and which has the ability to overwhelm a person's usual coping mechanism (Everly and Mitchell, 1999). The most severe forms of Critical Incident (CI) may be considered traumatic incidents.

Ambulance personnel are more commonly exposed to smaller scale traumatic events such as road traffic accidents, suicides or COT deaths (Clohessy and Ehlers, 1999). An event may occasionally be so traumatic or overwhelming that emergency personnel may subsequently experience a significant stress reaction.

**Critical Incident Stress (CIS)** is the stress reaction of a person or a group to a Critical Incident (or CI) and is characterised by a wide range of cognitive, physical, emotional and behavioural signs and symptoms which are likely to diminish over time (Lavan & McManamly, 2003). It may be viewed as a collection of symptoms which develop in response to unusual or abnormal life events.

### Common signs of Excessive Stress can include:

- Feeling overwhelmed
- Loss of motivation
- Dreading going to work
- Becoming withdrawn
- Racing thoughts
- Confusion
- Difficulty making decisions
- Poor concentration
- Poor memory
- Anger
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Racing heart, breathlessness and rapid breathing
- Feeling hot and flushed, excessive sweating
- Dry mouth, churning stomach
- Diarrhoea and digestive problems
- Frequent desire to use toilet
- Muscle tension
- Restlessness, tiredness, sleep difficulties, headaches
- Increased drinking or smoking
- Over eating, loss of appetite
- Loss of interest in sex
- Self-neglect



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## POST TRAUMATIC STRESS REACTIONS

Following a single traumatic event or regular exposure to such events, as is found in the rescue/emergency services, post traumatic stress may occur. All the usual symptoms of stress may appear in this instance, but the following may also become evident.

### Anger

- At the injustice and senselessness of it all
- At the shame and indignities
- At how things have turned out

### Sadness & Depression

Caused by an awareness of how little can be done for the severely injured and dying, sense of foreshortened future, poor concentration, inability to recall things as well as before.

### Guilt

Through believing that you should have been able to do more, or that you could have acted differently.

### Fear

- Of "breaking down" or "losing control"
- Of not having done all you could have done

- Of being blamed for something
- Of a similar event happening to you or your loved ones

### Avoidance

Of the scene of the trauma or of anything that reminds you of it.

### Intrusive Thoughts

Memories or flashbacks which intrude and cause distress and the same emotions which occurred at the time.

### Hyperarousal

Irritability, outbursts of anger, easily startled, constantly on guard for threats.

### Numbing

Loss of your normal range of feelings e.g. inability to show affection, detachment and estrangement from others.

## STRESS RELATED ISSUES FOR CONTROLLERS

- Abusive/threatening callers
- Caller known (close friend or relative) to the Controller
- Reduction in resources (i.e. particularly busy period, lack of crews available)
- Alone on duty
- CI criteria outlined on next page

## SOME STRESS RELATED DISEASES

**Chronic stress can be associated with:**

- Coronary heart disease
- High blood pressure
- Strokes
- Migraine
- Ulcers
- Increased vulnerability to common illness



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### NATURE OF CRITICAL INCIDENT/TYPE OF TRAUMA

- Death or serious injury of an infant/child
- Physical, sexual abuse of children or serious neglect
- Death/injury of colleague/relative
- Suicide incidents
- Breakdown of equipment which results in death of patient
- Serious/grotesque mutilation of patients
- Making a mistake which affects patient welfare
- An event which has an individual meaning for the EMT
- Physical assault

### SOME SELF HELP GUIDES FOR CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS MANAGEMENT

It is very common, in fact quite **normal**, for people to experience emotional aftershocks when they have experienced a critical incident. If you are experiencing signs of excessive stress – you may find the following guides helpful in coping with the symptoms.

- DO** express your emotions
- DO** talk about what happened
- DO** find opportunities to review the experience
- DO** discuss what happened with colleagues
- DO** look to friends and colleagues for support
- DO** listen sympathetically if a colleague wants to speak with you, unless it is too distressing
- DO** advise colleagues who need more support where they can get appropriate help
- DO** try to keep your life as normal as possible
- DO** try to keep to daily routines
- DO** drive more carefully
- DO** be more careful around the home
  
- DON'T** use alcohol, nicotine or other drugs to hide your feelings
- DON'T** simply stay away from work – seek help and support
- DON'T** allow anger and irritability to mask your feelings
- DON'T** bottle up feelings
- DON'T** be afraid to ask for help
- DON'T** think your feelings are signs of weakness



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Occasionally, the traumatic event is so painful that support or sometimes professional assistance may be necessary. This does not imply weakness or inadequacy. These feelings can be very common and simply indicate that the particular event is just too powerful for the person to manage by themselves (International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, 2001).

### WHEN TO SEEK SUPPORT

- If you feel you cannot handle intense feelings or body sensations
- If your stress reactions do not lessen in the weeks following the event
- If you continue to have nightmares and poor sleep
- If you have no one with whom to share your feelings when you want to do so
- If your relationships seem to be suffering badly, or sexual problems develop
- If you become clumsy or accident prone
- If after the event, you smoke, drink or take more medication, or other drugs
- If your work performance suffers
- If you are tired all the time
- If things get on top of you and you feel like giving up
- If you take it out on your family
- If your health deteriorates

Consult your **Peer Support Worker** or any of the persons listed below. Seek guidance regarding **stand down** from emergency calls if necessary. \*

### WHERE TO FIND HELP

- The Ambulance Service has a **peer support network** and it is recommended that you contact them for help and advice. There is a poster in each ambulance base with local numbers and contact names, these are also available on the CISM website [www.cism.ie](http://www.cism.ie)
- By consulting your own GP
- The HSE also have a staff support system which you can contact directly
- The contact numbers for Private Counsellors' who have specialised in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder can be found through your local coordinator, details on [www.cism.ie](http://www.cism.ie)

\* It may not always be possible to grant stand down immediately.