



ADVANCING SCIENCE AND PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF TRAUMATIC STRESS

For Leadership: The First Weeks Following a Critical Incident

The first weeks following a critical incident in a work setting should involve support, facilitation of benefits, linkage with resources, fostering of peer and leader support, and brief education about stress and coping.

It is important to note that in many studies, distress in the immediate aftermath of a critical incident is not a good indicator of long-term functioning. Only a minority of individuals will require and/or desire early formal interventions. Early reactions are expected to be changeable and individualized, and are often not related to long-term outcomes.

Immediate Aftermath

It is recommended that Supervisors or Employee Assistance Program (EAP) providers check in with all employees to make sure they are okay, and to discuss what would be most helpful for them. For those most strongly affected employees:

1. Let them know that your primary goal is to help and support them.
2. Ask if there is anything you can do for them *right now*.
3. Informally assess the person's stress reactions, focused on how the person feels about returning to work versus receiving some work relief.
4. Determine if any assistance is needed, such as linking them with sources of information, with work relief, or with peer support.
5. Provide support, empathy, and normalization for potential reactions as needed. For instance, if a person says: "I'm just all over the place, I just can't seem to rest," normalize what they are experiencing, let them know they're not "crazy," and tell them some of the other coping actions those who have been through similar situations have employed.
6. Provide brief, supportive education about effective coping actions, as needed.
7. Facilitate peer / leader support, such as the Stress First Aid (SFA) model described below.
8. Offer to check back in in a few days to see how they are doing.

Stress First Aid for Supervisors

As an administrator, manager, or supervisor responding to a critical or potentially traumatic event, your role may sometimes require you to help manage and mitigate one of these difficult situations. You have an important role in the outcome of these types of critical incidents. How you approach the personnel involved can make a very real difference in their ability to recover from the experience and return to their work duties.

Stress First Aid

Studies have revealed that there are processes that are effective in minimizing the effects of exposure to trauma. These studies tell us that if we ensure that the response to a critical incident is orderly and compassionate, then the effects of that exposure can be minimized. The essence of the essential elements related to better recovery from stressful experiences have been captured in the Stress First Aid (SFA) model, whose five basic principles are:

- » **Cover:** Establish that the emergency is now in other hands and the employee can disengage from the urgent demands of the situation.
- » **Calm:** Give the employee an opportunity to express their reactions and identify their needs while providing presence, support, and reassurance.
- » **Connect:** Provide opportunity and means to make contact with people of their choosing to advise of the event and let them know that they're okay.
- » **Competence:** Remind them of their competence in the work they do, as well as their ability to pull together in times of adversity, and advise them that many resources are available to help them recover.
- » **Confidence:** Reaffirm your confidence in them and the systems in place to help them recover and move forward.

Making First Contact

The most critical challenge facing the *first* arriving supervisor is to bring order, predictability, and direction as the accident response unfolds. Your own sense of calm, focus, and self-assurance can play a significant role in alleviating the stress of those you came to assist. These events may be infrequent for any one supervisor.

Before you respond to the scene:

- Take a moment to review the things you need to do and to ensure that you have in your possession the items you will need to do them.
- Determine the exact location of the incident and your possible routes in and out of the scene.

- Gather any preliminary information available.
- Determine personnel on schedule and their roles in the response.
- Be certain you have necessary materials/forms for first contact.
- Take a moment to organize your own thoughts and plan your approach. Orient yourself to the scene and the circumstances, and then gather the information you need to proceed:
 - Identify who is in charge of the scene as you arrive.
 - Determine the extent of injuries to staff, patients, or other individuals.
 - Determine what needs and expectations they have respecting staff members and when they anticipate completing those functions (e.g., preliminary interviews).
 - Explain any regulations required.

Ensuring the safety and care of staff, patients, and bystanders, and protecting the scene are the first responsibilities of all employees. Some possible actions include:

- Staff who request relief should be relieved of these responsibilities as soon as others are available to assume those roles.
- Verify that you have accounted for all affected staff.
- Work within the principles of the *Stress First Aid* model as you make contact and execute required procedures. While all situations create their own set of requirements, and how you communicate these components depends on the circumstances, your personality, and the needs of staff, here are a few examples of statements that map onto the *Stress First Aid* components:
 - » **Cover:** “We’ve got this now. Here is what we’re doing to keep you all safe...” Give you best understanding of timelines and advise of any variables.
 - » **Calm:** “How are you doing? What do you need? How can we help?” Allow them to tell you whatever they wish to tell you about the event, their reactions, and their concerns.
 - » **Connect:** “Who do you need to reach? Do you need to use my phone?” Encourage them to consider contacting those important to them, both to let them know that they’re okay and to touch their sources of support and connection.
 - » **Competence:** “You have lots of resources to help you through. A workplace peer, chaplain, and/or an EAP counselor will be contacting you to ensure that you get all the help you need.”
 - » **Confidence:** “We’ll make it through this together. We value you and the work you do.”

Making Contact in the First Few Weeks after an Incident

The SFA model can be more tailored as an informal assessment and/or group framework following a stressful event. This use may look similar to a psychological debriefing model in that it systematically uses a framework to lead a discussion, but there are some important differences:

- No one is required to attend if they don't want to attend, and the group doesn't need to occur within any specific window of time following the event. Those involved should determine the best time for the group.
- The stressful event is *not* revisited or described in detail.
- The discussion is focused on how the event is impacting individuals in the present moment, and into the future, within the SFA frame of five essential human needs (the needs for cover, calm, connectedness, competence, and confidence)

These are some *sample* questions to address the impact of an event. They are *not* mandatory, and you may pick and choose the questions that best fit the context, and change them as needed to fit the situation and your style of interacting.

- » **Cover:** How has the incident affected your sense of safety? What helps, or could help?
- » **Calm:** What changes have occurred regarding sleep, feelings of being on edge, or ability to keep calm? What helps, or could help?
- » **Connect:** Has there been an impact on how you talk with each other, work morale, or connecting with family and friends? Is there someone you feel comfortable talking with about this? Has anyone you know done or said something that really helped? Does anyone here feel the need for any practical support right now?
- » **Competence:** Do you have any concerns about being able to handle what's going on in your life, deal with your stress reactions, or do your work? What are some things that you have done to cope that have been helpful in the past, or have been helpful since this incident? What else could help?
- » **Confidence:** Have you noticed any change in your confidence in your ability to do your job in the same way as before the event, or your confidence in leadership? Are you feeling guilty or wish you had done something differently? Does this incident hold special meaning or connect with other experiences in any way? What can we learn from this event? What else could help?

After the discussion prompted by the questions, you can include a short discussion about the importance of being particularly disciplined in self-care and looking out for each other for a period of time, including:

- Participating in more healthy forms of coping
- Being diligent about getting enough sleep by reducing any distractions that one can control
- Minimizing negative coping (such as isolation, using alcohol or substances to sleep)
- Making use of available resources.

Finally, ask if there is any other support they need.

Checking on Need for Time Off or Referral to More Intensive Support

Because in this time period following a critical incident there is no clear pattern of reactions that reliably predict long term functioning and adjustment, the following questions are meant as a general guide to help you determine concerns and issues that might affect return to work, and/or warrant additional relief or further specialized treatment. They are organized into categories, and include common reactions that are likely to affect functioning following critical incidents:

*I. Have you been affected **mentally**, such as:*

- Trouble concentrating, focusing, or multi-tasking
- Trouble remaining alert or aware of your environment
- Being more distractible or restless
- Being disoriented and/or having an altered sense of time

*II. Have you been affected **physically**, such as:*

- Changes in sleeping, eating, or hydration
- Decreased physical stamina, shakiness / tremors, or pain

*III. Have you been affected **emotionally**, such as:*

- Anxiety, worry, or depression
- A loss of emotional steadiness or ability to stay calm
- A loss of confidence in yourself, the future, or the world

*IV. Have you been affected **socially**, such as:*

- A reduced ability to interact effectively with others

V. Do you feel that you require time off? If so, why?

Practicing Self-Care as a Manager

Your role in providing critical leadership during these difficult incidents is vital to the organization. Your own wellbeing is a paramount consideration if you are to do your job safely and well. Additionally, your example as a role model can have a profound effect on how the staff values their own self-care.

Remember to use the core principles of *Stress First Aid* to care for yourself as well as those you came to aid.

Should you desire additional assistance, consider reaching out to a person in your position who may have had experience with similar situations, or consider using EAP or other available support as needed.

Materials Adapted from:

Gist, R. (2015). *Working Together Through Troubling Times*. Amtrak Employee Assistance Program Publication.

Gist, R. (2015). *First Contact First Aid*. Amtrak Employee Assistance Program Publication.

Watson, P., Gist, R., Taylor, V. Evlander, E., Leto, F., Martin, R., Vaught, D., Nash, W.P., Westphal, R., & Litz, B. (2013). *Stress First Aid for Firefighters and Emergency Services Personnel*. National Fallen Firefighters Foundation.

Watson, P.J., & Gist, Richard. (2015). *Amtrak Employee Assistance Program. Assessment Toolkit*. Amtrak Employee Assistance Program Publication.

Example of e-Mail from Leadership to Staff

The people who work in this setting are proud of what we do and proud of how we do it. We have earned a hard-won reputation for service and reliability, and it is the consistent hard work of employees here that made this happen.

This has been a difficult week for everyone in the organization. It may be some time before we know all the details with any certainty. As questions swirl and people in many quarters speculate, we all struggle to sort through our own feelings and reactions.

We will make all efforts needed to ensure your safety and that of our customers. But as we do, know that our commitment to the people we serve and our pride in the work every employee contributes has never been greater and will never waiver.

We are all likely to face some trying moments as we return the system to normal functioning, and we need to be prepared to work through any difficulties we encounter. We have been working with some of the nation's leading experts to ensure that our employees will have the best help available when workplace tragedies occur, and that help is just a confidential phone call away anytime you feel the need.

Below are a few suggestions that may help you along the way:

- ***There are no set rules for working through something like this.*** No two persons experienced this quite the same way nor will they share the exact same reactions. None of us will navigate it quite the same way, either. The range of normal reactions is extremely broad—it's the situation that's abnormal, not you or your reactions to it.
- ***Be patient with yourself.*** You can expect the personal impact to come and go—sometimes when you're least expecting it, often when it's least convenient. When you can, just let yourself react. If you need to step away for a couple of minutes or take a moment by yourself, do what you need to do. But try to come back and complete whatever you were doing as soon as you feel able—that's how we regain control.
- ***Be sensitive to those around you,*** especially the people closest to you. We tend to turn inward when processing a major life disruption and this can sometimes lead us to pull away from others right when we need them the most. A simple touch on the shoulder when someone else is having a tough moment or saying, "I'll be okay" to someone concerned for your wellbeing can help more than you may know. It really is the little things that count right now and a little attention from each of us can help us all get through it together.

- ***Talk when you need to; listen when you can.*** It's really that basic in the long run. The real work of moving ahead happens one person at a time, one person to another. Don't try to go it all alone, and pick the people, places, and times that work the best for you.
- ***You don't have to talk when you don't need to.*** It's important not to run away from your reactions but you also need to let yourself have some distance from the event and its impacts. Lots of people, many of whom may have no connection to what happened, will have comments, questions, or suggestions. Some may be welcome but others—even those sincerely wanting to be helpful—may seem intrusive, calloused, or clumsy. It's perfectly acceptable to say, "I'd really rather talk about something else right now" and take it in another direction.
- ***Don't let the worst elements of the event overshadow your pride in what you do.*** As difficult as this event is for all of us, we will emerge stronger, safer, and more committed than ever to the people we serve and the service we deliver. Every one of us is crucial in helping us move ahead.
- ***One day at a time.*** It takes much more than a day or two to work through something this big and some days will be much better than others. Try to take each day as a fresh challenge and don't be too distracted by an occasional false start or seeming setback.
- ***If it works for you, pass it on.*** We become stronger when we work through things together. Catastrophic events can seem like overwhelming obstacles but there is real strength in getting through them intact and together. We've each mastered other difficulties in our lives and we will master this, too. Share your strength with others.
- ***Heart, brains, and courage.*** What we need most right now has always been somewhere inside us—what we need now is to remember where to find it and how to pass it on.
- ***Help is there whenever you need it.*** Don't wait until it gets really bad to reach out for help. Our EAP is ready to provide confidential help 24/7. Other resources for employees include:
 - [Insert resource information]
 - [Insert resource information]

If it's a concern to you, it's worth a call or visit.

When Critical Incidents Happen: What You May Experience

There are a wide variety of reactions that can happen after a critical incident. These include:

Domain	Negative Responses	Positive Responses
Cognitive	Confusion, disorientation, numbness, disbelief, worry, intrusive thoughts and images, self-blame, ruminating over the event, decreased productivity, difficulties making decisions, intrusive thoughts about the incident	Determination and resolve, sharper perception, courage, optimism, faith
Emotional	Shock, sorrow, grief, sadness, fear, anger, numb, irritability, guilt and shame	Feeling involved, challenged, mobilized
Social	Extreme withdrawal, numbness towards others, interpersonal conflict	Social connectedness, altruistic helping behaviors, appreciation that family and friends are precious and important
Physiological	Fatigue, headache, muscle tension and aches, stomachache, increased heart rate, exaggerated startle response, difficulties sleeping, nausea, shakiness, clumsiness	Alertness, readiness to respond, increased energy, adrenalin rush

WHAT DOESN'T HELP		
Using alcohol or drugs to cope	Working too much	Extreme avoidance of thinking or talking about the event
Not taking care of yourself	Violence or conflict	Extreme withdrawal from family or friends
Withdrawing from enjoyable, meaningful, or rewarding activities	Overeating or failing to eat	Doing risky things (driving recklessly, substance abuse, not taking adequate precautions)
Excessive TV or computer games	Blaming others	Avoiding seeking help

WHAT HELPS	
Focusing on something practical that you can do right now to manage the situation better	Talking to another person for support / spending time with others
Engaging in positive, rewarding, meaningful, or distracting activities (sports, volunteer work, family time, hobbies, reading)	Talking with a mentor / counselor before making big life changes
Deliberately shifting from thoughts that increase stress to thoughts / actions that reduce stress.	Participating in a support group
Using relaxation methods (breathing exercises, meditation, calming self-talk, soothing music)	Exercising in moderation
Meeting the challenge of by taking positive action steps, changing the focus of thoughts, using humor, acceptance	Getting adequate rest, hydration, and eating healthy meals
Letting family know what to expect, so they don't take your reactions personally	Talking with a workplace peer or mentor
Shifting expectations about what to expect from day to day and about what is considered a "good day"	Taking breaks more often than usual
Shifting priorities to focus more on quality time with family/friends	Trying to maintain a normal schedule

When Critical Events Happen handout adapted from: Brymer, M., Layne, C., Jacobs, A., Pynoos, R., Ruzek, J., Steinberg, A., et al. (2006). *Psychological First Aid Field Operations Guide* (2nd Edition). Los Angeles, CA: National Child Traumatic Stress Network and National Center for PTSD. Available at: www.ptsd.va.gov