

Critical Incident Stress Management Guidelines for Ministries and Employees

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The guideline is intended to assist ministries, particularly supervisors and managers, in preparing for and responding to a workplace critical incident and making decisions on setting up and supporting Peer Support Teams.

Definitions

Critical Incident is a single or series of events or incidents that have the potential to cause a person to experience strong emotional reactions, overwhelm their natural coping mechanisms and interfere with their ability to function. Some examples of critical incidents include death of (including death by suicide) or serious injury to an employee/family member/client, mass casualty incident, threat to safety and/or a natural disaster. Physical and emotional responses to a critical incident will vary from person to person.

In some cases, a critical incident may also be referred to as a traumatic event.

Workplace Critical Incident Stress Management response

When a critical incident occurs in or affects the workplace, it is called a workplace critical incident. A workplace critical incident requires a workplace critical incident stress management response. Best practice is for employees directly involved in a workplace critical incident to first attend a defusing (within 24hrs of critical incident), followed by the debriefing (to occur 24 hours to 72 hours post critical incident)

Defusing (performed by Internal Peer Support Team or EFAP Trauma Counsellor)

A defusing typically occurs soon after or within 24 hours of the critical incident and provides an opportunity for employees to understand their initial reaction to a workplace critical incident. The major focus is to provide information about what the employees may experience following the exposure and offer some suggestions regarding self-care.

Debriefing (performed by EFAP Trauma Counsellor)

A debriefing typically occurs 24 to 72 hours following the critical incident and provides an opportunity for employees to understand their initial reaction to a workplace critical incident. Debriefings generally run for 1.5 to 2 hours and give employees an opportunity to share their reactions.

A debriefing meets two primary objectives:

- to allow for mutual support; and,
- to help the participants recognize that the feelings and thoughts they are experiencing are normal reactions to an abnormal event.

Peer support team composed of Government of Saskatchewan employees trained to provide a defusing and support debriefing after a workplace critical incident. A peer support team can help the workplace by recognizing critical incidents and assisting the manager/supervisor of the affected workplace in responding to the critical incident.

- Trained internal peer support teams, where available, can provide workplace defusing with/without the support of an EFAP trauma counsellor.
- Debriefing is led by an EFAP trauma counsellor; internal peer support teams, where available, may assist.

No workplace is required to have a Peer Support Team. Establishing a peer support team may be considered in workplaces where critical incidents are common.

Process

1. Preparing for a critical incident

Work units within each ministry requires a clear and known response process for all employees *before* a critical incident occurs. Ensure all employees in the workplace know what a workplace critical incident is and the process to follow if one occurs.

Choosing whether or not to have a peer support team

When deciding whether a peer support team is the right choice for your work unit, consider that each peer support team member:

- Requires initial and refresher training which has budgetary costs and turnover management.
- May require defusing or debriefing, along with the supervisor/manager of the effected work unit, to limit the risk for psychological injury in the course of this duty.
- Should be immediately available on duty or on-call, which requires scheduling diligence and appropriate compensation.
- Must be respected and trusted by their peers to supports effective response (i.e., reduce mistrust).

The [Peer Support Team Selection, Criteria and Training Guidelines for Executive Government](#) outlines peer support team roles and responsibilities, best practices regarding selection, and training/support of peer support teams.

For more information, contact your [Healthy Workplace Steering Committee member](#).

2. Responding to a workplace critical incident

Appendix A: Post Critical Incident Checklist for Managers/Supervisors provides a detailed step by step process for responding to a critical incident.

3. Post-critical incident

The supervisor/manager should maintain communications with employees, the peer support team (where available), and/or EFAP trauma services. Follow-up discussions are an opportunity to assess the lingering impact of the event on the workplace and employees and the need for further workplace interventions or support.

Resources and Tools

- Critical Incident Stress Management Guidelines for Ministries and Employees Toolkit consists of:
 - Appendix A: Post Critical Incident Checklist for Managers/Supervisors
 - Appendix B: How Can Supervisors/Managers Support the Team?
 - Appendix C: Post Critical Incident Handout
 - Appendix D: Post Critical Incident Review for Supervisors/Managers and/or Peer Support Teams
 - Appendix E: Bereavement in the Workplace
- [Peer Support Team Selection, Criteria and Training Guidelines for Executive Government](#)
- [Conversation Guide for Managers: Employee and Mental Health](#)
- [OHS Incident Reporting and Investigation policy](#) including [Appendix G: Procedure in Event of Employee Death](#)
- [Manager's Guide to Accommodation and Return to Work](#)
- [Employee and Family Assistance Program](#)
- [Workplace Benefits](#)

Appendix A: Post Critical Incident Checklist for Managers/Supervisors

Primary checklist

- Secure the scene and provide first aid assistance, if needed, and/or call EMS.
- If applicable, review [Procedure in the Event of Employee Death](#).
- Activate internal communication measures according to internal ministry policy and processes.
- Managers/supervisors can call the EFAP to access free critical incident consultation and/or schedule fee-for-service onsite trauma counsellor to lead defusing. For more information (i.e., costs, EFAP contact information) visit the [EFAP page](#).
- Mobilize internal peer support team, where available, to lead or support the EFAP trauma counsellor in the delivery of workplace defusing.
- Communicate details of the defusing (i.e., logistics, process and what to expect, benefits of participating) to employees directly involved in the workplace critical incident. Participation is voluntary, but strongly recommended regardless of whether employees feel they need it.
- Connect with Human Resource Business Partner(s) so they can assist with operational needs.
- Encourage employees affected to be accompanied home. Assist employees with this task where appropriate.

Secondary checklist

- Ensure employees exposed to a workplace critical incident complete an incident report as per [PS 818 OHS Incident Reporting and Investigation](#) and [other applicable procedures](#) (i.e., E1 WCB form, Form 111).
An incident report is required if an employee is exposed to a [traumatic event](#) that arose out of and in the course of employment that may result, or has resulted, in a psychological injury. This includes but is not limited to: (1) direct exposure to an actual or threatened death or serious injury to worker and/or others; (2) an event or series of events that are specific or sudden and generally accepted from a public perspective as being unusually shocking or horrific; (3) workload or work-related interpersonal incidents that are excessive and unusual in comparison to pressures and tensions experienced in normal employment. These must be beyond the normal scope of maintaining employment from a public perspective.
- Managers/supervisors can call the EFAP to access free critical incident consultation and/or schedule fee-for-service onsite trauma counsellor to lead debriefing. For more information (i.e., costs, EFAP contact information) visit the [EFAP page](#).
- Communicate details of the debriefing (i.e., logistics, process and what to expect, benefits of participating) to employees directly involved in the workplace critical incident. Participation is voluntary, but strongly recommended regardless of whether employees feel they need it.
- Where applicable, activate the [medical accommodation process](#) using the Be At Work application in PSC Client.

Tertiary checklist

- Check in with employees individually, and in confidence, following the trauma. Understand delayed reactions are possible. An employees' first trauma related symptoms may surface days, weeks, months, or years following the trauma. Treat employees experiencing delayed onset the same way as post critical incident (i.e., availability of defusing and debriefing services, incident reporting, medical accommodation, etc.). Remind the employee of available resources such as [healthcare supports](#) (i.e., their own health care provider), [community resources](#), [workplace benefits](#) and [EFAP](#).
- Meet with the peer support team lead, where available, to discuss the strengths and opportunities of the workplace critical incident response (See **Appendix D**: Post Critical Incident Review for Supervisors/Managers and/or Peer Support Teams).

Appendix B: How Can A Supervisor/Manager Support the Team?

Reference: The Mental Health Commission of Canada's The Working Minds Program

"These are challenging times. Whatever you're feeling is OK."

Acknowledge and Listen

- ✓ Acknowledge that something happened.
- ✓ Review the facts without going into details.
- ✓ Listen and provide an opportunity for discussion.

"Here are some ways that can help keep us safe right now..."

Inform and Remind

- ✓ Help your team check-in with themselves about their mental health.
- ✓ Emphasize the importance of taking care of themselves.
- ✓ Remind them about using healthy coping strategies.
- ✓ Share available resources.

"How else can I support you?"

Respond and Follow-up

- ✓ Observe your team and follow-up with members in the upcoming hours, days, and weeks.
- ✓ Walk the talk by modeling healthy coping strategies and seeking help if needed.

Appendix C: Post Critical Incident Handout

The handout is intended for employees affected by a workplace critical incident.

Critical Incidents

A critical incident is any situation that has the potential to cause a person to experience strong emotional reactions, overwhelm their natural coping mechanisms and interfere with their ability to function. Some examples of critical incidents include death of (including death by suicide) or serious injury to an employee/family member/client, mass casualty incident, threat to safety and/or a natural disaster.

Common reactions

Physical and emotional responses to a critical incident will vary from person to person. Immediately after a critical incident an initial period of shock and disbelief may include:

Physical Symptoms			Emotional Symptoms		
Chest pain	Heart palpitations	Shaky feeling	Anger/rage	Helplessness	Easily startled
Dizzy spells	Lack of energy	Restlessness	Denial	Flashbacks	Irritability
Headaches	Neck or back pain	Insomnia/nightmares	Anxiety	Suspiciousness	Loss of interest in intimacy

Following a critical incident, common reactions may include:

- **Intrusion:** Repetitive involuntary memories, distressing dreams and vivid flashbacks of a traumatic event where people feel they are re-living the traumatic experience with at least one of their senses (seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, feeling).
- **Avoidance:** Avoiding people, places, activities, objects, and situations that may trigger distressing memories. People may resist talking about the event or their feelings.
- **Alterations in cognition and mood:** Inability to recall important aspects of the event, negative thoughts and emotions, distorted beliefs, blaming, and feelings of fear, horror, anger guilt or shame. People may lack interest in activities they used to enjoy or feel detached from others.
- **Alterations in arousal and reactivity:** Irritability, outbursts, reckless behavior, and self-destruction. People may act suspicious, be easily startled, and may have problems with sleep or concentration.
- **Thoughts of suicide:** Suicidal thoughts may be the result of feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope resulting in tunnel vision and the mistaken belief that suicide is the “only way out”.

Reminders

- Avoid trivializing your reaction to trauma (i.e., I shouldn't be crying, I should/not be bothered by this); reactions following a critical incident are common.
- Spend time in spaces where you feel safe and comfortable.
- Try to take care of yourself the best you can (i.e., sleep, nutrition, exercise).
- Communicate your needs to others; never assume they know what you need or want (i.e., let others know if you are not ready to talk about the trauma, if you need alone time alone, or if you want help with daily living tasks).
- Monitor negative coping strategies such as working too hard or engaging in self-destructive behaviours. Professional help may be beneficial if drugs and alcohol are used as a coping mechanism.
- If at any time you experience a health emergency (i.e., becomes suicidal) seek professional support immediately.

Self-care

Self-care means taking the time to do things that help you live well and improve both physical and mental health. This may include regular exercise, eating healthy, staying hydrated, sleeping well, relaxing, setting goals/priorities, practicing gratitude, and staying connected with friends and family for support. Self-care looks different for everyone, and it may take trial and error to discover what works best.

You can contact the following organizations for help and support.

- Call HealthLine 811 or 1-877-800-0002 or visit <https://www.saskhealthauthority.ca/your-health>
- For more information about the Government of Saskatchewan's Employee and Family Assistance Program, visit <https://taskroom.saskatchewan.ca/health-and-safety/employee-and-family-assistance-program>
- For more information about the Government of Saskatchewan's employee benefits visit <https://taskroom.saskatchewan.ca/employee-resources/employee-benefits>
- For more information on community resources, visit <https://sk.211.ca/>

Appendix D: Post Critical Incident Review for Supervisors/Managers and/or Peer Support Teams

The form below is intended to be used by the organization (i.e., peer support team leader, safety division) to identify strengths and opportunities in the workplace Critical Incident Stress Management program.

Background

The Post-Critical Incident Assessment is intended to be used by the organization (i.e., peer support team leader, safety division) to identify strengths and opportunities in the workplace Critical Incident Stress Management program. Opportunities for improvements can be addressed through corrective action or through the [work planning process](#).

Procedure

The ministry or work unit can determine how to best use this tool and collect responses. For example:

- Peer Support Team Leads may facilitate regular and scheduled conversations with their team and collectively provide a response to the statements in this assessment tool.
- Peer support teams may seek confidential feedback from employees who have participated in a defusing and/or debriefing in the workplace by using this assessment tool.

Post Critical Incident Assessment

Phase One: Preparation for a critical incident.

Statement 1: The peer support team plays an active and ongoing role in breaking down stigma in the workplace.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree N/A

Statement 2: The peer support team plays an active and ongoing role in modeling and promoting self-care.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree N/A

Statement 3: The peer support team actively works to build trust and rapport with those they support.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree N/A

Statement 4: The peer support team works within the scope of their role, recognizing limitations and respecting them.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree N/A

Statement 5: The peer support team promotes the benefits of participating in defusing and debriefings, ensuring a clear understanding of the difference between a defusing/debriefing and professional counselling.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree N/A

Statement 6: The peer support team demonstrates effective communication skills, verbal and non-verbal. This includes expressing empathy, paraphrasing, reflection, and questioning.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree N/A

Phase Two: Defusing (Responding to a Critical Incident)

Introduction phase

Statement 7: Peer support team members introduced themselves and the EFAP Trauma Counsellor, if present.

Yes No

Statement 8: Peer support team members informed participants of confidentiality principles, including confidentiality exceptions.

Yes No

Statement 9: Peer support team members provided a brief summary of what is known about the critical incident.

Yes No

Phase Two: Defusing (Responding to a Critical Incident)

Exploration phase

Statement 10: Peer support team members encouraged participants to talk about their reaction to the incident.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Statement 11: Peer support team members informed participants that the conversation focus is not on the details of the event itself, but on how participants reacted to the event.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Statement 12: Peer support team members used active listening skills.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Statement 13: Peer support team members asked participants if there is any specific component of the incident that they are having difficulty with.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Statement 14: Peer support team members summarized what they heard and checked for understanding.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Information sharing/offer of support phase

Statement 15: Peer support team members informed participants about common reactions to critical incidents.

Yes No

Statement 16: Peer support team members reinforced the notion that reactions are normal, and it is the event that was abnormal.

Yes No

Statement 17: Peer support team members provided an informational handout to participants and encouraged them to share the handout with their support person(s).

Yes No

Statement 18: Peer support team members discussed self-care tips and ask participants to share their favorite stress relieving strategies.

Yes No

Statement 19: Peer support team members discussed supports available to participants.

Yes No

Statement 20: Peer support team members asked for permission to follow-up with them at a later date.

Yes No

Phase Three: Debriefing (Responding to a Critical Incident)

The EFAP trauma counsellor with support from the internal peer support team will facilitate seven phases to a debriefing: Introduction, facts, thoughts, reactions, symptoms, teaching and re-entry.

Statement 21: The peer support team supported the EFAP Trauma Counsellor as needed during the debriefing.

Yes No N/A

Overall

Statement 22: Participating in the critical incident stress management program was a positive experience.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Statement 23: The peer support team maintains confidentiality principles of peer support.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Optional

Statement 24: Written feedback regarding the Critical Incident Stress Management Program

(Peer Support Team Members Only)

Post Critical Incident Care for Peer Support Team Members

Statement 25: The peer support team encouraged one another to reach out to EFAP to debrief with a counsellor.

- Yes No, provide a reason below
-

Statement 26: The peer support team members encourage one another to engage in healthy self-care practices.

- Yes No

Statement 27: Was there impacted employees that required follow up in the days and weeks following the incident?

- Yes No

Statement 28: The peer support team embodies a one team approach to managing challenges and difficulties.

- Yes No

Statement 29: # of attendees = _____

Appendix E: Bereavement in the Workplace

This document provides information on providing emotional support to employees or colleagues who have experienced a loss.

Bereavement is known as grieving after one's death. Feeling and expressing grief is unique to everyone and the nature of their loss. Grieving employees may experience immediate, delayed or long-term emotional reactions to loss which may include crying, guilt, anger, fear and sadness. There is no time limit to grieving and situations can trigger an emotional response at any time.

Providing support after a loss

Some of the ways you can support a grieving colleague experiencing a loss may be to organize a card or flowers from your team; ask how you can help; and/or provide an opportunity for them to talk about their loss.

When employees return to work

Managers and colleagues can support employees returning to work after experiencing a loss by:

- Showing concern and asking what they can do to help;
- Treating the employee as normal as possible;
- Be understanding if they are emotional; and,
- Reminding the employee of workplace supports available to them (i.e., [EFAP](#), [benefits](#)).

Acknowledging grief and loss

Finding the right words can be difficult but you should not avoid those who are grieving out of fear of saying the wrong thing. Avoidance increases feelings of isolation and may make people feel unsupported. By saying something as simple as "I am sorry about your loss" will allow them to say "thank you" or to take the opportunity to talk about it. Below are a few examples of language that can be used.

<i>Instead of saying....</i>	<i>Try saying....</i>
I know just how you feel.	I am so sorry.
They had a very full life.	I know you will miss them.
It's time to move on with your life.	Take the time you need.
Be strong.	This must be very hard.
Something good always comes out of tragedy.	<Silence> and <Listen>.
You must be strong for the team.	How are you managing?

If in doubt, be honest. Some of the best conversations and learning experiences may occur when you simply state "I don't know what to say" or simply listen. Your vulnerability will be genuine and will allow your employee/colleague to be honest with you without fear.

Resources

- [Procedures in Event of an Employees Death](#)
- [Grief and Grieving](#) (Saskatchewan Health Authority)
- [Grief and Bereavement](#) (eMentalHealth.ca)