



CRITICAL INCIDENT SELF-CARE

Best practices for protecting your mind and body following a serious incident

First responders experience traumatic incidents at a rate much higher than the general public. A vehicle crash with an entrapped child, a mother engulfed in a house fire, witnessing a fellow first responder physically harmed in the line of duty. These incidents and countless others expose law enforcement officers, firefighters, EMS professionals and dispatchers to chronic stress.

Knowing how to care for yourself when you experience a traumatic or critical incident is essential to processing the incident, allowing you to move on and return to work in a healthy state. Left unprocessed, such incidents can lead to post-traumatic stress, depression and hypervigilance—all of which will make you less effective at your job.

Taking steps to protect yourself immediately following a critical incident can reduce the trauma, promote healthy coping strategies and help you address any lingering issues before they become destructive.



Physical Care

- Avoid drugs and alcohol
- As much as possible, maintain a normal and active routine
- Exercise regularly
- Get plenty of sleep and rest
- Maintain a nourishing diet comprised of regularly scheduled, healthy meals



Outreach and Connection

- Reach out to trusted family, friends and co-workers who support you
- Be open to receiving support from those you trust
- Consider reaching out to others who may be having difficulties. Reassuring and helping others can be one of the most effective ways to recover as a team.
- Communicate your needs to others in a clear and unambiguous manner
- Be patient and compassionate with yourself and others who may also be experiencing stress



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Processing and Decision-Making

- Consider writing down your thoughts and emotions to help organize your internal experience (remember to shred the writing if you wish to ensure your privacy)
- Avoid major life decisions you may later regret (e.g., deciding whether to get married or buy a new house)
- Focus on “inconsequential” decisions (e.g., selecting what to eat for lunch or what time to go for a run) to help reestablish a sense of control



Emotional Management

- Understand that having strong feelings (including anxiety, anger, worry and fear) following a traumatic event is normal, and the “normal” range of personal responses following a traumatic incident varies widely from person to person
- Give yourself permission to feel however it is that you feel, while not imposing upon yourself any sense of obligation to maintain or preserve negative emotions
- Understand that emotional states are temporary and most people “bounce back” following a traumatic event
- Keep in mind you are only human, we are all prone to error, and even people who are the best in the world at what they do routinely make mistakes



Red Flags

Above all, be aware of “red flags” that signal you need help. If you observe any of these red flags, please seek assistance from peer support, a trusted friend or religious advisor, a qualified therapist or a vetted help line.

- Depression, persistent sadness, feelings of hopelessness or helplessness, or frequent crying
- Insomnia or other sleep difficulties
- Thoughts of suicide, wanting to die or indifference to death
- Shutting down or feeling withdrawn
- Avoiding reminders of critical incidents
- Flashbacks, intrusive memories or nightmares
- Excessive or persistent hypervigilance
- Rage, increased anger or chronic irritability
- Confusion, inattention or memory problems
- Heightened anxiety, fearfulness or panic attacks
- Loneliness or feelings of being isolated or unsupported
- Increased use of alcohol or other substances

The days following a traumatic incident may be difficult, but with self-awareness and responsiveness you can draw on your natural ability to be resilient and return to work even stronger and better prepared for the next incident.