

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS ON SITE:

- Nausea
- Muscle tremors (trembling and shaking)
- Profuse sweating
- Chest pain/hyperventilation
- Increased heart rate (pulse)
- Increased blood pressure
- Headaches
- Muffled hearing
- Disorientation/lack of co-ordination
- Confusion
- Difficulty in making decisions/solving problems
- Short-term memory problems
- Poor concentration
- Difficulty understanding or communicating with co-workers
- Flashbacks to previous scenes
- Fear
- Anxiety
- Frustration
- Self-doubt
- Irritability
- Anger and resentment
- Feelings of emotional numbness

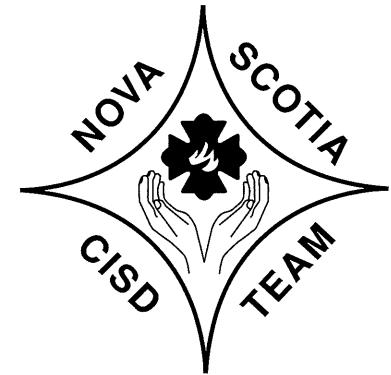
SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS: DELAYED REACTION

*(May appear hours, days, weeks,
months or years later)*

- Sleep disturbance
- Overall sense of fatigue
- Nightmares / repetitive dreams
- Waking up in a cold sweat
- Changes in eating habits
- Decreased sexual drive or changes in menstrual cycle
- Headaches
- Nausea
- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Depression
- Sense of loss
- Feelings of isolation / withdrawal
- Guilt
- Grief
- Visual Flashbacks

For more information go to
www.nsfirecism.ca

Fire Service Association of Nova Scotia



CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS In Firefighting

1-800-559-3473

www.nsfirecism.ca

This pamphlet will explain Critical Incident Stress, its causes and symptoms. This brief description cannot explain everything about critical incident stress and how to cope with it. But, hopefully, the information will help you to understand how this type of stress can affect you and those close to you.

WHAT IS CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS?

People who respond to emergencies often must deal with traumatic or very stressful events such as the death of a child, the loss of a fellow firefighter or multiple casualties. Sometimes the event is so overwhelming that normal methods of coping do not work. When this happens those involved in managing the crisis may experience strong or unusual physical and emotional reactions.

Stress reactions can appear immediately (at the scene), a few hours later, or even a few days later. Critical incident stress reactions can affect the way a person thinks, feels or behaves. Such reactions can be worrisome, but they are all normal responses to an abnormal event.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE SYMPTOMS OF CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS?

Critical Incident Stress, also referred to as CIS, can affect people in a variety of ways. It is important to remember that not everyone is affected in the same way or to the same degree. A critical incident for one person may not affect in the same way, another colleague who was involved.

PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS can include fatigue, nausea, stomach upsets, rapid heart rate, sweating, shakiness, and lack of coordination.

EMOTIONAL RESPONSES often are feelings of guilt, anger, frustration, fear, depression, grief, self-doubt, and a general feeling of detachment and numbness.

COGNITIVE RESPONSES can affect thinking, bringing about problems with short term memory and one's ability to concentrate. It may be difficult to make decisions, solve problems, or have an accurate sense of time.

BEHAVIORAL SYMPTOMS can include sleep disturbances, changes in eating habits, nightmares or recurring dreams, becoming withdrawn, changes in sexual drive, increased use of alcohol or tobacco and any out-of-character behavior.

It is normal for symptoms to last as long as three to six weeks. If they are very severe or last beyond six weeks, professional counseling may be necessary.

WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS?

The most important thing is to realize that the symptoms of Critical Incident Stress are normal reactions to an abnormal event. Do not be hard on yourself or others. Talking to peers about the incident and stress reactions is very helpful.

Sometimes those involved in a critical incident participate in a structured group process called Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD). This procedure is conducted by a team consisting of professional counselors and firefighters trained in CISD. During the session,

participants are able to talk about what happened, their thoughts and feelings about the incident and what symptoms of Critical Incident Stress (CIS) they may be having. Helpful hints on how to cope with CIS are also provided.

Responding to a critical incident is a shock to the entire system and physical well-being is very important following such an event. Exercise, rest, and nutritious meals, low in fat, salt and especially sugar will help your body and your emotions return to normal. It is wise to limit intake of caffeine and alcohol as these drugs can interfere with your body's natural recovery process.

REMEMBER. Try to remain positive, but if things do not return to normal after a few weeks, it may be necessary to seek additional help from a physician, pastor, CISD team member or a mental health professional.

HOW CAN A DEBRIEFING SESSION BE ARRANGED?

If you feel your department has experienced a critical incident, debriefing sessions have been found to be very helpful in returning the department to its normal level of performance. A trained CISD team can be dispatched to your department simply by contacting the:

Provincial Fire Marshal's Office 424-5721 or 1-800-559-3473.

All CISD Team members have received training in debriefing procedures and are members of the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation; a non-profit organization dedicated to stress prevention, education and support services for emergency personnel.