



A guide for navigating critical incidents

A critical incident is an unexpected or traumatic event that can overwhelm your staff's coping mechanisms. This can lead to psychological distress and a decrease in normal functioning.

These incidents can happen in a variety of workplace settings, including:

- Unexpected death of a co-worker
- Workplace injury
- Organizational restructuring or reduction in workforce
- Industrial, safety or natural disasters
- Public health emergencies
- Acts of violence such as a robbery, shooting, stabbing or terrorism
- Emergencies that overload healthcare facilities

After a critical incident, your staff may experience changes in behavior and productivity may be negatively impacted. It is important to respond appropriately, especially when social media is so easily accessible. As a manager or human resource professional, you play a crucial role in supporting staff and returning your workplace to normal as quickly as possible. To do so, you must demonstrate empathetic listening, establish trust and show genuine concern for your staff. Trauma affects the entire organization, and you must provide guidance, emotional resources and stability work performance.

Although some critical incidents, such as organizational restructuring or reductions in workforce, offer time for planning, most occur suddenly and without warning. This guide will help you anticipate and prepare for common responses to trauma and severe stress both in your staff and yourself. Your program includes resources such as the Critical Incident Response Team and Manager Support Services, which can benefit both you and your staff.



Scan the QR code to visit your Air Force EAP member website, www.resilience.af.mil/Workforce-Resource, or call 1-866-580-9078 (TTY 711) for helpful resources.

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or visit www.resilience.af.mil/Workforce-Resource



Communicating during a crisis

As a manager or human resources professional you may worry that you will say the wrong thing when dealing with a critical incident. In reality, your presence and compassion are the most important things you can provide during this time.

Tips for communicating with staff:

- The best thing to say during a tough time is, *"I am so sorry. What can I do?"* Follow their lead and, if needed, list ways you think can be helpful.
- Use accurate and avoid euphemisms when referring to a death. For example, use "died" instead of "passed away"
- Avoid phrases like these:
 - *"It could have been worse."*
 - *"I don't understand why this is still bothering you."*
 - *"I'm sure she's in a better place now."*
 - *"I know how you feel. I had the same thing happen to me."*
- Acknowledge that it will not be business as usual in the coming days. People may need extra flexibility and/or mini-breaks to keep focused on work.
- Encourage your staff to discuss the event and their reactions and feelings.
- Observe changes in behavior, listen to individual staff concerns and determine when to refer an individual for professional help.
- Respect confidentiality regardless of whether the details of a critical incident are widely known or the media have gotten involved.
- Respect cultural and social diversity among your staff, particularly in times of crisis when staff are more likely to talk about their values and beliefs.

Tips for announcing the incident to staff:

- Share public details of the incident, including what the family or investigators are allowing to be public information. Repeat the details of what is known even if you feel that staff is aware of the situation.
- Acknowledge that staff are trying to cope with the incident, and staying focused on regular routines will be difficult. Emphasize the importance of helping each other feel safe and supported.
- Announce the funeral arrangements or when to expect more information. List any flexibility that the company will provide so that staff can attend. Include details such as visitation, burial date, time and location.
- Explain how the organization is helping the family and share other conversations with staff as appropriate.
- Promote the program's onsite including the date, time, location and counselor's name.
- Educate staff about the program's services, tools and resources. Remind them that it is free, confidential, and available to staff and their household members.
- Post program information on websites, in break rooms and other gathering places.

When to bring in the Critical Incident Response team

Critical incidents are sudden, powerful and fall outside the range of ordinary human experiences. Some events such as floods, hurricanes, tornadoes or fires are easy to identify as critical incidents with anticipated emotional concerns. However, some other incidents like a sudden suicide or staff member's death, a shooting at a nearby public place or a corporate restructuring, may have unexpected consequences on staff members, making it difficult for managers to decide how to react.

Following are some signs when a situation needs to be addressed:

- Declining productivity
- Increased absenteeism
- Increased concerns about personal safety
- Irritability, anger or tearfulness
- Expressed feelings of being overwhelmed or uncomfortable

As a manager, if you notice any of these signs, it's important to acknowledge and address them in a non-threatening, non-judgmental way by leveraging support from your program's Critical Incident Response team.

What to expect from the Critical Incident Response team

The Critical Incident Response (CIR) team provides support to organizations that have undergone traumatic events, assisting in minimizing the long-term effects on staff and managers. If you need help, contact your program and request to be connected to a CIR counselor. The specialist will assess the situation, determine what is required immediately and provide guidance on responding over the days that follow.

The Magellan team of CIR counselors are clinical professionals with an average of 17 years of experience. They are available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. CIR counselors help individuals process and cope with the emotional and physical impacts of a traumatic event by fostering their natural resilience and coping skills.

Types of CIR Services

There are a variety of CIR services available that can be tailored to the needs of your organization.

Management consultations are held in a group setting or individual meetings with the most impacted leaders.

Clinical role: answer concerns prior to meeting with staff and advise managers, leaders and human resources.

Telephonic crisis support is conducted through a conference call system to normalize grief and loss reactions.

Clinical role: provide a facilitated, confidential discussion group to remote workers in place of onsite services.

Group support is effective for work teams closest to the loss and/or for the group of individuals who were the first responders to the incident.

Clinical role: facilitate a discussion about the traumatic event and how it's affecting staff.

- Counselor encourages the staff's natural resiliency, coaches them on techniques and behaviors that work for them and teaches them about healthy coping skills.
- Staff can participate in the group based on their comfort level and learn that their reactions and feelings are normal.
- The group setting increases cohesion among staff following a critical event and staff who may need additional support can be identified.

Individual support is a confidential service tailored to the needs of an individual staff member and effective for individuals not comfortable in a group setting. Prior to providing the support, it is helpful to let the CIR counselor know about staff who have history of mental health challenges or other losses that relate to the incident (i.e., it's common for people with heart issues to have increased anxiety if someone just died of a heart attack at work).

Clinical role: reinforce the individual's natural resiliency and provide coaching to aid recovery.

Follow-up services provide feedback for managers' continued response after the CIR counselor leaves the worksite.

Clinical role: assess continued coping skills two to three days after the onsite service. Assess the helpfulness of the initial response and the impacted staff's ability to access and utilize coping skills. Then, determine if additional services are needed, i.e., telephonic or onsite support.

All services are confidential and provide support and resources to help staff manage through an event and return to their regular lives successfully.

Preparing for a Critical Incident Response

A critical incident can impact each staff member differently. Critical incident counselors use a bullseye analogy to describe the impact of trauma, with the staff most impacted near the center and those not closely related to the incident near the edge.

How to communicate with staff:

- First responders may experience a trauma response in addition to their grief and may benefit from processing the graphic details of the incident.
- Immediate staff may need to be shielded from the traumatic details.
- Those who are indirectly impacted may not need education regarding trauma, and more focus should be put on similar, outside situations that impact them more directly.

How to prepare for the onsite:

- **Secure an appropriate meeting area**—Find a room a private and quiet room and arrange chairs for an interactive meeting (if possible in a U-shape). Group sizes may vary, so be flexible. Note that groups are the most efficient way to deliver CIR services. However, if a group setting isn't possible due to space or productivity issues, CIR counselors will work with you to find another solution.
- **Encourage participation**—Encourage staff to attend through written and verbal communication.* Staff are often concerned about whether sessions are confidential and how they might impact their work. Assure staff that participation is voluntary and let them know when you have set aside time from their regular duties to attend.

**Email templates are available at the end of this guide.*

Recovering after a critical incident

Critical incidents can bring up a range of personal issues for staff and they take time to process. Consider these tips to help you and your staff manage and recover from the trauma.

High levels of emotion

In the first few days following a traumatic event, staff may experience crying spells, be highly distractible, unusually irritable, or show other symptoms of distress. This is normal and improves quickly for most people. If a high level of emotion persists after the first weeks, it is usually isolated to one or two individuals. The key is to remain calm and supportive. Managers can consult with the critical incident response team or refer staff to the program if they are not showing signs of resilience.

Work performance

A critical incident may directly or indirectly affect work performance. After a crisis, it is not business as usual. Taking a more tolerant approach for a time may be helpful when dealing with schedules and time off requests. Help staff set small, achievable goals and recognize and praise accomplishments and encourage them to return to productivity. If you see someone continuing to struggle, remind them that the program is a free and confidential resource to help them. If you are concerned about a specific individual's performance, consult with the Manager Support Services team. Management consultations are part of the program.

Limitations

Recognize your limits as a manager or supervisor. You are not expected to be a counselor for staff, yet they will look to leadership for support and direction. For most staff, there is nothing more powerful than simple human kindness. Showing an interest in how staff are doing, listening to them and encouraging them go a long way toward making them feel comfortable. If you are starting to feel like a counselor for a staff member, this is a good sign a program referral is in order.

Find time for yourself

During a crisis, leaders and managers are tasked with taking care of others and it can be easy to put your own needs aside. Check in with your own reaction and set aside small amounts of time daily to engage in soothing behaviors. If you are having a hard time balancing your reaction with your leadership duties, it may be time for a call to your program to get help.

Efforts to memorialize the loss

One positive grief coping skill is to create a special area or activity that honors those who have been lost. Staff may make some of the following suggestions:

- Create a memorial wall in a break room
- Create a memory book for the family
- Fundraise for events related to cause of death
- Distribute ribbons for staff to wear

Critical Incident Response communication templates

The following email templates are for your use to encourage your staff to reach out for help. You may also use them to invite staff to participate in critical incident response services. Please use the email template that is most appropriate to your organization's situation. You may customize the email templates as needed.

Critical incident topic: Death of an employee

Subject line: Support for the passing of [employee name]

Email copy: As you may already know, our team has experienced the loss of a colleague. We are saddened with you. We understand that the pain of losing someone can be difficult for everyone involved, and we offer our deepest condolences. Please know that our thoughts are with you as you go through this difficult time.

It is important to remember that grief is a natural response to loss. It is the process of emotional and life adjustment one goes through after a loss. There is no standard and expected period for grieving.

We encourage you to take some time to focus on your own reactions and feelings. We have arranged for voluntary and confidential group counseling sessions that are approximately one hour long. These sessions are here for your support, and you can attend them if you feel comfortable. The meetings will take place as follows:

DATE:

TIME:

PLACE:

If you prefer to meet with a counselor individually, please let us know and we can make the arrangements.

As a reminder, our [Magellan program name] is available 24/7/365 to you and your household members. All services are free and confidential.

Please call [XXX-XXX-XXXX] or visit [member website or internal web portal].

Please let us know if you have any questions or concerns. Our thoughts are with you.

Critical incident topic: Act of community violence

Subject line: Support for [event name]

Email copy: We would like to extend our deepest sympathies and condolences to you and those in your community during this difficult time. We understand that tragic events affect everyone, and after an incident of community violence, it is common for individuals and communities to experience a range of emotions such as shock, sorrow, fear, anger and confusion.

Grief is a normal response, and we are here to support you during this challenging time. We encourage you to take some time to focus on your reactions and feelings. You may experience disruptions in your daily habits, feel distracted or show other symptoms of stress. We encourage you to seek the support of loved ones and friends.

We have arranged for voluntary and confidential group counseling sessions that are approximately one hour long. These sessions are here for your support, and you can attend them if you feel comfortable. The meetings will take place as follows:

DATE:

TIME:

PLACE:

If you prefer to meet with a counselor individually, please let us know and we can make the arrangements.

As a reminder, our [Magellan program name] is available 24/7/365 to you and your household members. All services are free and confidential.

Please call [XXX-XXX-XXXX] or visit [member website or internal web portal].

Please let us know if you have any questions or concerns. Our thoughts are with you.

Critical incident topic: Robbery

Subject line: Support for [event name]

Email copy: As you may already know, a robbery occurred at [location of the incident] on [date]. We understand this has been a traumatic experience for everyone, and we want to do all that we can to support you during this difficult time.

It is normal to feel a range of emotions such as shock, anger, fear, helplessness and anxiety after a traumatic event, even if you were not directly involved. Please be assured that these are natural responses. We encourage you to seek the support of loved ones and friends.

We have arranged for voluntary and confidential group counseling sessions that are approximately one hour long. These sessions are here for your support, and you can attend them if you feel comfortable. The meetings will take place as follows:

DATE:

TIME:

PLACE:

If you prefer to meet with a counselor individually, please let us know and we can make the arrangements.

As a reminder, our [Magellan program name] is available 24/7/365 to you and your household members. All services are free and confidential.

Please call [XXX-XXX-XXXX] or visit [member website or internal web portal].

Please let us know if you have any questions or concerns. Our thoughts are with you.

Critical incident topic: Natural disaster

Subject line: Support for [event name]

Email copy: We are deeply saddened by the recent natural disaster that affected our staff in [location of incident]. We understand this has been a traumatic experience for everyone, and we want to do all that we can to support you during this difficult time.

It is normal to feel a range of emotions such as shock, anger, fear, helplessness and anxiety after a traumatic event, even if you were not directly involved. Please be assured that it is normal to experience these feelings. We encourage you to take of yourself and your family and to seek the support of loved ones and friends.

We have arranged for voluntary and confidential group counseling sessions that are approximately one hour long. These sessions are here for your support, and you can attend them if you feel comfortable. The meetings will take place as follows:

DATE:

TIME:

PLACE:

If you prefer to meet with a counselor individually, please let us know and we can make the arrangements.

As a reminder, our [Magellan program name] is available 24/7/365 to you and your household members. All services are free and confidential.

Please call [XXX-XXX-XXXX] or visit [member website or internal web portal].

Please let us know if you have any questions or concerns. Our thoughts are with you.