

# What to do if you experience a critical incident

Dr Linda Wagener gives a concise overview on critical incidents.



## What is a critical incident?

Critical incidents are events that threaten our fundamental well-being. They are very often sudden and unanticipated. Accidents, life-threatening illnesses, physical and sexual assaults, robberies, suicide, murder or other death of a loved one and natural disasters are examples of critical incidents that can happen to almost anyone, anywhere.

However, in some parts of the world, the risk of encountering a critical incident increases due to war, famine, civil unrest, or other geopolitical factor. The list of common critical incidents in these contexts is very long and can include shootings, bombings, hostage taking, mob riots, rapes, car-jackings, disappearances of loved ones. One needs only to turn on the nightly news to see multiple examples.

## What happens during a critical incident?

If we are suddenly faced with an acute threat, our instinctual brain takes over and activates a flood of physical changes that help us to defend ourselves in the moment. Just a few examples include the flush of adrenaline and glucose to our muscles to give us energy to run or fight, changes in our blood cells to increase clotting in case we are wounded, release of endorphins to protect us from pain and fear, dilation of our pupils to let in more light so we can see more clearly. We often will experience an intense urgency that results in a flight, fight or freeze response. However, our instinctual brain is not very good at observing and analyzing the situation. For that reason, we often need to slow our instincts down in order to make a

good decision about how to best survive the incident.

### What you can do in the moment:

- Breathe slowly and deeply
- Calm yourself
- Connect with others
- Observe your surroundings
- Get to safety

### The aftermath

There are many normal reactions that people have after experiencing a critical incident. We need to be prepared for the fact that people may react very differently than we expect. It is common to be jumpy, irritable, have sleep and appetite disturbances, nightmares, inability to concentrate, memory problems, and even "blackouts." Some people may want to avoid thinking or talking about the event, while others may want to talk about it over and over. It is important to have patience and compassion with ourselves and others. These reactions can continue for weeks and even months after the event.

### What you can do:

- Be with people, even if your tendency is to isolate. It's ok to just sit together or go for a walk.
- Process what happened to you through talking, writing, or just thinking through the event. Allow yourself time to deal with the memories.
- Get exercise if you can to help burn off the stress hormones that are lingering in your system.
- Make self-care a priority.
- Restrict caffeine. Sleep and rest are critical.
- Avoid over use of substances.
- Surround yourself with reminders that you are safe.

- Don't be afraid of your emotions. Be kind and patient with yourself and others.

- Seek help if you are feeling compulsions to harm yourself or others, if you feel profoundly depressed or you experience a sense of being cut off from reality.

- How to build your resilience?

- Resilience is our ability to bounce back from critical incidents. There are ways to engage in a healthy life style that helps us to build our resilience so we are better prepared to survive and even grow if we encounter difficulties.

### What you can do:

- Build your relationships so that you have a solid network of social connections.
- Live a healthy life style that includes good diet, exercise, and sleep.
- Make sure that you have many positive experiences in your life to counteract the negative things that you have experienced. Look for moments of goodness, beauty, and awe every day. Find spiritual resources that deepen your connection to life. Practice gratitude.
- Make sure you have activities and hobbies that you enjoy.
- Use stress management tools for coping such as meditation or yoga.

Dr Linda Wagener, Head of Psychology, Longboat Rödnd, has decades of experience in clinical psychology, with a particular focus on trauma management. Her expertise includes: mental functioning in hostile and extreme environments, gender security, critical incident staff care, and creating a positive work climate for all types of organisations.

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