

You've had a critical incident at work..... What now?

Work can start out just like any other day and quickly transition into a setting where you might have to engage safety protocols, triage response, and manage staff. These types of situations are often unpredictable and sudden such as a major medical event at your workplace of a staff or public member, death of a coworker, workplace accidents, and potential aggression or terrorism activities from the public. While it may seem that the majority of your response would necessarily be reactive, there are things you can do to plan and prepare for situations like this at work.

1. First and foremost, ensure ongoing healthy behaviours in both the workplace and home. If you naturally do not have your 'house' in order, responding to these events will be much more challenging. Do 'self-checks' regularly and ensure you keep a balance in your life. If you find you are heading home at the end of the day and having a drink because you 'need' that drink – that might be a cue to sub in a healthier coping strategy (take dog for a walk, garden, make dinner together with a spouse,, family, or friend). If you find you are not taking the appropriate breaks at work to distress and connect with others, set up a time with a coworker to grab a coffee. You can and should be your first line of defense to mitigate the natural reactions to unnatural events.
2. Have a workplace strategy mapped out, either formally through policy, or informally through discussions at meetings. That could be implementing a response strategy that is pre-determined and the same to all workplace events. This could be something as simple as writing policy that after all adverse events in the workplace, a meeting will be held on the Friday at lunch for everyone to check in with each other. This could be having a common response strategy in the way of 2-4 emails that go out to staff in the days that follow reminding them to engage in self-care and healthy behaviours. This could be agreeing to connect with a smaller team of other safety professionals post event within 72 hours in a structured pre-planned format to ensure that you are looking out for each other.
3. Don't fight a normal reaction. Remember: You have been through a potentially traumatic event. Even though the event is over, you may now be experiencing or may experience later some strong emotional or physical reactions. It is very common, in fact quite normal, for people to experience emotional aftershocks when they have experienced an adverse event.

Sometimes the emotional aftershocks appear immediately after the traumatic event. Sometimes they may appear a few hours or a few days later. And, in some cases, weeks or months may pass before the emotional impact becomes obvious.

If you are having symptoms from this event, they may last a few days, a few weeks or a few months and occasionally longer depending on the severity of the traumatic event.

Through your own self-care and with the understanding and the support of loved ones, stress reactions usually pass more quickly.

Here are some strategies you can employ to ensure you are engaging in healthy behaviours:

- Keep a regular sleep schedule and utilize best –practice habits for sleep (no caffeine after 2pm, screens out of the bedroom, regular routine for sleep and wake times)
- Know ‘your’ normal and be aware if you start to deviate. If you are typically not someone who consumes alcohol or cannabis and all of a sudden you are engaging in frequent use, this should be a sign you may need to seek professional help. The same goes for increase in use, which should indicate to you that you are leaning on the substance as a coping mechanism.
- Keep engaged. After stressful work events, it is common to want to ‘check out’ and blow off get togethers with friends or long standing routines (leagues, weekly get togethers). Don’t give into the temptation to isolate.
- Increase your exercise in the days after an event. Your body will have a lot of extra stress hormones circulating and adrenaline so help your body process those by adding some extra physical activity. This could be as simple as adding a lunch time walk or an extra exercise class.
- Engage in other Stress-relieving activities as well. They are not as difficult or time consuming as we may think. A 15 minute coffee break; talking to a co-worker, supervisor, or mental health worker; going out to dinner or a movie; or just learning and using deep breathing exercises can significantly reduce stress.

Also be aware that occasionally, the adverse event is so painful that professional assistance from a counselor may be necessary. This **does not** mean you are weak. It simply indicates that the particular event may have been personally relevant to you, or was just too powerful to manage without help. Know your resource access to both Employee Family Assistance Program (EFAP) and benefits for coverage.