

Coping and managing your reactions following a critical incident

What is a Critical Incident?

“Any event that is out of the range of normal experience, one that is sudden and unexpected, makes one lose control, involves the perception of a threat to life and can include elements of physical or emotional loss” (World Health Organization).

Critical incidents can often be sufficiently disturbing to overwhelm, or threaten to overwhelm, a person’s coping capacity. Such events can involve loss of life, injuries, and/or damage to property/livelihoods.

Impact of a Critical Incident

Students affected by a critical incident may experience a range of early reactions (physical, psychological, emotional) as the sudden, disruptive nature of the critical incident means an exposure to uncertainty and stress. These reactions are usually normal and understandable given people’s experiences in a critical incident situation. However they may be beyond what one or others might expect or are prepared for. These reactions can happen (or not) regardless of the strength or other qualities of the person (s) involved. They are a combination of experiencing the shock to what has happened and the necessary processing of the event in order to adjust and return to a normal state.

Critical incident impact can interfere with the person’s usual ability to cope and this is where compassionate and caring well being first aid support along with the support of family and friends can be of help.

Common reactions following a traumatic event

During the critical incident

At the time of the incident you may:

- find yourself acting automatically
- feel nothing
- feel frozen and unable to act
- feel your heart pounding
- feel fear
- feel a sense of shock and disbelief
- experience time slowing down

Immediately after a critical incident

Soon after a critical incident you may experience:

- confusion
- agitated behavior
- tension, nausea, crying
- sense of collapse (weak knees, fatigue)
- chills
- dizziness
- numbness
- lack of concentration
- uncontrollable trembling / shaking
- anger
- feeling drained
- feeling high and full of nervous energy
- jumpiness, including sensitivity to loud noises or sudden movements, particularly if they remind you of the incident itself

Remember these are normal human reactions based on the body's fight or flight response and are not related to any personal strengths or weaknesses.

Later after a critical incident

With the initial shock fading, emotions/reactions may now include:

- sadness
- helplessness and shame at not being able to control the situation better
- irritability
- anxiety about ones safety and/or the safety of others.
- anxiety around the place or similar places where the incident happened or in similar scenarios
- hyper-vigilant for potential dangers
- sleep difficulties (difficulty in getting to sleep, early morning waking, vivid dreams)
- less interest in normal activities
- increase in alcohol use
- racing thoughts
- fatigue and / or taking longer to do everyday tasks
- anger at what has happened, and / or at whatever caused it or allowed it to happen
- guilt, questioning oneself
- self blame (e.g. "If only I'd been five minutes earlier." " If only I had reacted more quickly")
- headaches
- withdrawal (a desire to isolate yourself and avoid talking to other people)
- over eating or loss of appetite
- under or hyper activity
- loss of motivation
- mood changes
- flashbacks of the incident, which can be triggered by noise(s), smell(s) or visual image(s)
- sensitive to reminders of the incident / avoiding media coverage
- fear of returning to the area where the traumatic event took place
- Low mood and / or loss of interest in things you previously enjoyed doing
- depression

Longer term

The after effects of a critical incident usually begin to fade after a few weeks. However it is also normal for feelings to re-emerge afterwards.

In addition high stress, insecurity or previous traumas can exacerbate the effects of a critical incident.

A minor event may trigger emotions associated with a critical event or previous other trauma.

Self help guide

While it is very common, in fact quite normal for people to experience emotional aftershocks when they experience a critical incident, the following are some suggestions that may be useful to you to support yourself in such an incident.

- Immediately after a traumatic incident don't go home alone or spend the evening alone if possible
- Don't become alarmed at your reactions remember they are normal and they will pass with time
- Don't bottle up feelings about what happened. Talk to trusted others, family and friends about what is going on for you
- Talk about the incident to other people who were involved and who have shared similar experiences. Contact can help you avoid the loneliness many people experience after a trauma
- Don't let embarrassment prevent you from accepting support
- Don't label yourself as crazy or mad. You are normal and you are having normal reactions and feelings to a traumatic event
- Give yourself permission to feel awful
- Eat regularly and maintain good nutrition even if you don't feel like it
- Be careful of alcohol and other drugs use, as it can negatively interfere with the normal recovery process

- Do drive and/or cycle more carefully as one is more likely to have accidents at this time
- Continue and stick to your normal daily routine as much as is possible
- Do try to get some regular exercise (if physically possible). Brisk walking, cycling, swimming, running, are good forms of exercise and help your body deal with tension and strain
- Do look after yourself, take time to rest, do things that you find resourcing, engage in activities that you find relaxing
- If your sleep or thoughts are troubled, don't fight this. In most cases this will decrease over time
- Writing things down can be useful in clearing your head and may help to process through that which is brothing you
- Academically you may experience more difficulties than normal with concentration and focusing on programme tasks and deadlines. If this is troubling you talk to your programme chairperson/relevant lecturer(s)/ student advisory service
- If you continue to feel distressed do look for further support. Don't be afraid to ask for professional assistance if/when needed, for example talk to your college counsellor/family or college doctor

Recovering from the trauma of a critical incident

Our mind and bodies seek to heal and recover and the reactions we experience are often largely to assist with this recovery. The following descriptions of the stages of recovery may help in understanding this process. We may not of course always move through the stages below in sequence, rather we may go back and forth through these stages for a while (e.g. feeling numb to drawing realization to feeling numb again). Furthermore we may proceed through these stages in a few days or over a longer period of time. The length of time it may take us to recover and adapt can vary depending on a number of factors such as the nature of the critical incident, its personal significance for us, and the extent of our physical injuries.

States of Recovery

1. **Shock/Numbness:** In the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event we may feel shocked and numbed for a while, we may burst into tears or shake uncontrollably, we may be giddy or 'high', we may be agitated, we may feel drained.
2. **Realization/Acknowledgement:** During this stage the reality of what has happened and its significance begins to dawn on us and sink in. This can be disconcerting and an upsetting time and we often struggle against the fact that the traumatic event has occurred and the apparent consequences of it e.g. 'It's not right or fair' 'It shouldn't have happened.'
3. **Acceptance:** At this point we begin the process of accepting the event and its consequences, perhaps still bargaining at times or considering 'if only' scenarios, but ultimately striving to accepting the losses and changes that may result from the event.
4. **Adoption:** At this point we invest our energies in adapting and adjusting psychologically and practically if needs be, integrating the traumatic event into our life experience.

When to seek psychological assistance following a critical incident.

Taking care of oneself, allowing time to heal and recover with the support of trusted family members and friends are likely to be sufficient in helping one to recover.

However some traumatic events are extremely distressing, may go on for a longer period of time and/or one may have few family or social supports. Under such circumstances and/or if any or a number of the below factors apply, you may consider seeking professional psychological assistance.

- If your stress reactions do not lessen in the weeks following the critical event
- If you continue to have poor sleep and/or vivid dreams/nightmares
- If you have no one with whom to share your feelings when you want to do so
- If your relationships seem to be suffering badly
- If your college performance suffers
- If you continue having difficulties concentrating, studying, completing tasks

- If you feel things are getting on top of you and you feel like giving up
- If you experience repeated memories of the event
- If you find your mood has changed significantly
- If you become accident prone
- If you continue to avoid places and people that remind you of the incident
- If you find it harder and harder to be with people and want to stay in places that feel “safe”

Useful Contact Details

DCU Security

Glasnevin Campus	Telephone:	01 700 5999
St Patrick’s Campus	Telephone:	01 884 2299
Mater Dei Campus	Telephone:	01 808 6500

Emergency Services

Fire Brigade, Gardai and Ambulance Telephone: 999 or 112

Local Hospitals

Mater Hospital	Telephone:	01 803 2000
Beaumont Hospital	Telephone:	01 809 3000
St. Vincent’s Hospital, Fairview	Telephone:	01 884 2400

Counselling and Personal Development Service DCU Tel: 01-7005165 Email: counselling@dcu.ie

Health Service DCU Tel: 01-7005143 Email: healthservices@dcu.ie

Interfaith Centre DCU Tel: 01-7005491 Email: interfaithcentre@dcu.ie

Student Advisory Service DCU Tel: 01-7007165 Email: student.support@dcu.ie

Samaritans

www.samaritans.org/branches/samaritans-dublin-branch

Telephone: 116 123 (A national 24/7 hour helpline)

Drop in centre at: 112 Marlboro Street, Dublin 1. Open from 10am to 10pm

For 24 hour confidential email Listening Support e-mail: jo@samaritans.org

For 24 hour confidential text support text to 087-2609090

Aware

www.aware.ie

A national support helpline for issues relating to depression and anxiety. Telephone: 1890 303 302

This helpline is open seven days a week from 10am to 10pm.

Console

A national 24/7 suicide helpline. Telephone: 1800 247 247

www.console.ie

Pieta House

Preventing suicide and self-harm www.pieta.ie/contact-us

Dublin Rape Crisis Centre

This helpline is open seven days a week, 24 hours a day. Telephone: 1800 77 88 88

Out of Hours GP Service

www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/3/OutofHours/GPOOH.html

D Doc Local 1850 224477 Out of hours GP

External Support Links

For a full list of external supports go to www.dcu.ie/counselling/external_agencies.shtml

The Counselling and Personal Development Service, Dublin City University:

Website: www.dcu.ie/students/counselling

E-mail: counselling@dcu.ie

Phone: 01 – 7005165