



Critical incidents

Critical incidents are a normal part of policing however we know that in many cases people will have a psychological reaction to the jobs that they attend. This too is quite normal even if the job attended was quite 'routine'. Read more about the types of critical incidents, typical responses and how to take care of yourself or others.

Police are faced with a range of incidents at work. From an operational point of view, we tend to think of an incident as 'critical' when there is a certain level of risk or violence involved, or there are serious consequences for an officer, or a member of the public. In comparison with operational CIs – which focus on what happened – psychological CIs focus on how we responded to what happened, both physically and emotionally. Scenarios that trigger a strong emotional and physical response might hold some significance for the member (even if they attend these jobs frequently). There are some jobs that are inherently more triggering (for example cases involving children, and cases in which the victim has a likeness to themselves/ someone they know) or, members might be triggered by frequent attendance at one type of job (like a string of road fatalities or domestic violence incidents).

What might I experience after a Critical Incident?

After a CI, emotional aftershocks, or stress reactions, can be felt (even by the most experienced police members). Stress reactions vary from person to person, but may involve one or more of the following changes in emotions, thinking, physical sensations, and behaviour:

Emotions	Thoughts	Physical sensations	Behaviour
Frustration	Blaming	Exhaustion	Emotional outbursts
Anxiety	Confusion	Nausea/vomiting	Change in activity
Guilt	Reduced attention	Difficulty breathing	Disturbed sleep
Sense of loss	Flashbacks	Chest pains	Increased smoking
Anger	Poor concentration	Rapid heart rate	Easily startled
Denial	Loss of confidence	Headaches	Withdrawal
Fear of losing control	Negative self-talk	Dry mouth	Change in eating
Irritability	Decreased awareness	Raised blood pressure	Difficulty relaxing
Depression	Troubled thoughts	Fainting/dizziness	Fidgety
Feeling overwhelmed	Nightmares		Increased alcohol use
Feeling isolated	Easily distracted		Change in sex drive
	Poor short-term memory		

Reactions after an incident vary greatly – members may experience a range of symptoms, or they may experience no change at all. Also, the way you feel in the initial aftermath of a CI might not be the same as how you feel weeks or months down the track. The important thing to remember is that there is no ‘right’ way, or timeframe for CI responses.

How can I look after myself after attending a Critical Incident?

One of the most important things you can do is to recognise that you have been through a distressing experience; give yourself permission to experience some reaction to it, and process what has happened. The following strategies can also be helpful:

Focus on your health:

- Maintain a normal routine as much as possible.
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle including a balanced diet, regular exercise, recreation and quality sleep are key.
- Limit stimulants such as coffee, caffeinated drinks, cigarettes and chocolate.
- Avoid alcohol and drugs as a way of coping – these can affect sleep quality and can create longer term problems.
- Take care in relation to driving, cooking and using machinery and tools – post critical incident you may be experiencing fatigue and poor concentration.
- Avoid making major life decisions in the immediate aftermath of the incident.

Monitor your work:

- You may or may not need time off work.
- If you feel able to work, talk with local management about duties and rostering, to make sure you are not overwhelmed.
- Keep monitoring how you feel at work, and speak with your manager or your GP if you find that you are struggling.

Access your support networks:

- Keep up contact with supportive family, friends and colleagues.
- Some people find it useful to talk with others who have had similar experiences or who were there at the time.
- Your family and friends might not know how best to support you. If you don’t feel comfortable talking with them about how you’re feeling, perhaps they could help in other ways, like helping with childcare, or cooking you a meal.
- Sometimes members are overwhelmed by the volume of people contacting them after a critical incident. You might need to screen your calls, or take ‘time out’... that’s ok, just don’t allow yourself to become too isolated.

Control your exposure to the incident:

- It is natural to want to keep up to date with broader responses to the incident, but avoid overexposing yourself to media coverage of the event.
- You may be offered advice and opinions from a range of different sources. If possible, obtain reliable and accurate information about any formal processes (such as investigations, operational debriefs etc) following the event and make sure that you are clear on what your obligations are.

When should I seek help?

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People have natural resilience and coping mechanisms. Your personal strengths, sense of purpose, and the love and support of friends and family, will be key to your recovery. However, you are advised to speak to a counsellor if you experience any of the following:

- You are concerned or distressed by your reactions, or your reactions are getting worse.
- You are feeling on edge, jumpy, irritable or frightened most of the time.
- Your reactions are impacting on your daily life and functioning.
- You are unable to carry out your normal roles e.g. as a parent or at work.

You should seek help immediately if you are feeling hopeless, despairing or that you can't go on, or you are thinking about self-harm, suicide or harming others.



**Alcohol and Drug
Information Services VIC**
1800 888 236



Turning Point
www.turningpoint.org.au



Police Wellbeing Services
1300 090 995