

# Helping Employees in the Immediate Aftermath of a Critical Incident: Common psychological reactions



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*A critical incident is any sudden or unexpected traumatic event that affects people's emotional lives, feelings of safety, and ability to cope. It might be a robbery in the workplace, the suicide of an employee, or a natural disaster or act of violence that occurred outside of work and significantly impacted employees. This article series offers strategies to help you support your employees during this difficult time.*

This is the second in a three-part series of articles on helping employees in the immediate aftermath of a critical incident. Read the previous article, "[What to do immediately after a critical incident.](#)"

## Common psychological reactions

The intensity of the feelings your employees may have after a critical incident will vary from individual to individual due to such factors as their personality, current life situation, past exposure to trauma, and their experiences during the incident. Reactions may be immediate, delayed, or ongoing. However, common emotional reactions include:

**A sense of unreality.** Often it will take hours—or longer—for staff to appreciate and process what actually happened. Employees may be in shock, disoriented, and emotionally numb during and after a traumatic incident, and it may take some time before they experience any emotions concerning the event.

**Intense emotions.** Often employees experience extreme feelings like fear, anger, or embarrassment either during or after a traumatic incident. These emotions can be overwhelming, and people may cry or display other strong emotions.

*It is important for you as a manager to realize that anyone on your staff might have strong reactions to a traumatic incident or event.*

**Guilt.** A member of your staff member may feel guilty or embarrassed by their behaviour during the incident, especially if he or she froze with fear.

**Worries.** Some employees may be concerned about how the organization will react to their behaviour, especially if they did not follow the organization's procedures for such incidents. People may also feel worried for their safety.

**Some employees may show no signs of any emotional reaction to the incident.** They may behave as if nothing has happened. These employees may only show reactions to the incident much later.

**Certain employees may be more vulnerable than others to the after-effects of a traumatic incident.** Those employees include:

- anyone who was physically injured in the incident
- those who have been involved in previous incidents involving potentially life-threatening situations
- those coping with major personal issues or losses, such as a death in the family or a separation or divorce
- those who have experienced mental health issues
- those who lack social support in their lives, such as individuals living alone or working away from home
- employees who are in managerial positions

It is important for you as a manager to be aware of these potentially vulnerable employees, and also to realize that anyone on your staff might have strong reactions to a traumatic incident or event.

**This is the second in a three-part series of articles on helping employees in the immediate aftermath of a critical incident. Read the next in the series, "[The importance of taking care of yourself.](#)"**

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