

## **Critical Incidents: Coping with Trauma and Loss in the Workplace**

### Introduction:

When workplaces are in crisis, it can be hard to know how to react. Employee assistance is here to help in critical incidents. In this month's supervisor newsletter, we define critical incidents, talk about common reactions to stress, and ways that supervisors can use employee assistance benefits to support their team.

### What is a critical incident?

A critical incident is a traumatic event that causes unusually strong reactions in the body and can impact normal functioning. Critical incidents are events outside the usual range of experience for most people and would be considered distressing to almost anyone. A critical incident usually results in employees feeling strong stress reactions after the event, which may or may not be obvious from the outside.

Examples of a critical incident might include:

- Serious injury or death of an employee, student, or member of the public while performing job duties
- A rescue attempt on the job
- Any incident which can be considered a serious physical or psychological threat to an employee, like natural disasters, motor vehicle accidents, or acts of violence
- Being part of an event that has extensive media coverage

It is normal to experience emotional "aftershocks" following a critical incident, and there are things you can do to support yourself and your team in the aftermath. You and the employees you work with may experience emotional, physical, mental, and behavioral reactions. These are not signs of instability or weakness. Instead, they are ways that your minds and bodies can process this event.

Stress reactions can appear immediately after the traumatic event or may appear a few hours or even days later. With understanding and the support of co-workers, friends, and family, stress reactions usually pass more quickly. Remember: everyone has their own unique reaction to trauma. Don't assume that everyone will react the same way that you do, or that people without an obvious response aren't feeling some of these symptoms.

### What symptoms of stress responses should I look out for?

While everyone is unique, the following lists some common symptoms and signs of a stress response that you or the people you work with might experience after a critical incident. Symptoms can impact all parts of our bodies, minds, emotions, and behaviors, including:

- Physical signs and symptoms – ex: shakiness or loss of appetite
- Cognitive signs and symptoms – ex: confusion or heightened/decreased awareness of your surroundings
- Emotional signs and symptoms – ex: deep sadness, guilt, or anger
- Behavioral signs and symptoms – ex: pacing, struggling to return to normal work or personal routines

## How can I manage and cope with my stress response?

When you experience stress responses due to a trauma, it can be hard to know how to react. Here are some coping strategies for the hours and days following a critical incident.

- Take steps to take care of your body, even if you don't feel like it. Drink plenty of water, eat well-balanced and regular meals, and engage in moderate exercise if you're able to do so. Keep to your usual schedule without making big life changes. This will help you feel more in control.
- Spend time with others and talk to people. Even if you're not sure what to say, talking about the experience out loud or on paper can help you process what you're thinking, feeling, and experiencing. At the same time, some people may feel more nonverbal, and saying "I'm not ready to talk about it" is completely acceptable.
- Don't stigmatize your reactions as "crazy" or "irrational". You're having a normal response to a very abnormal event.
- Realize those around may also be under stress and consider finding support outside of the immediate group of people impacted by the critical incident. Everyone has their own reaction to trauma, and not everyone will be able to provide emotional support. You can seek extra help through the EAO and LifeMatters.

## Strategies for Managers

As managers and leaders, you may be wondering how to support the employees you work with through stress responses and trauma, while at the same time trying to manage your own impact. After learning of the event and collecting the important details, there are several helpful steps that you can take to provide work-appropriate support.

- **Address immediate needs.**
  - **Inform relevant parties and get support.** This may include HR representatives, supervisors or managers, employee assistance, or emergency personnel, depending on the situation.
  - **Determine whether you can send staff home.** If this option is appropriate, offer it to employees. Also, respect that people have different needs. Some employees may want to return home, and some may want to remain at work and may or may not be productive. Let people know their options, and that they can change their mind. Refer to [UW-Madison's leave policy](#) for time off following a critical incident.
- **Consult with employee assistance.** Employee assistance professionals are trained to respond to critical incidents and can support managers in many ways. Some of the most common ways we support teams in crisis are:
  - **Crafting communication around the incident.** Employee assistance can provide guidance on emails that inform staff of a critical incident. They can help you share information in a work-appropriate and compassionate way and provide information on resources that may be immediately helpful to employees. There may be other departments who support this communication as well, depending on the critical

incident. Employee assistance can help you connect with other campus services and resources if needed.

- **Setting up a defusing meeting.** A defusing happens the same day as a critical incident before staff leave the office. An employee assistance counselor can provide immediate mental health support, sometimes called psychological first aid, and it aims to provide stabilization, support, and plan next steps following an incident (ex: getting a ride home, securing pet or childcare, reminders to drink water and use breathing techniques). A defusing should take place in a private space with a closed door to protect the privacy of those involved.
- **Setting up a debriefing meeting.** Debriefing meetings take place after a critical incident, usually within 3-5 days, but sometimes later. Only staff who were directly involved in the critical incident should be a part of this meeting. A debriefing should take place in a private space with a closed door to protect the privacy of those involved. If processing spaces for impacted staff not directly involved need to take place, we can organize that as well.

Every team is unique and may request any of these three methods of support, a combination of the three, or something not listed here. Even if staff state that they are fine, you can consult with employee assistance to learn more about your options for employee assistance support. **Always check in with employee assistance before scheduling a defusing or debriefing meeting.** These meetings should be led by trained employee assistance professionals, not managers or peers.

- **Plan to follow up with your employees.** Work-appropriate support from managers can help employees process their stress in a healthier way.
  - Let employees know that you are aware that stress responses show up in many ways, and that you can help them connect with resources if they need assistance.
  - Make sure employees know the resources and options available to them, including free employee assistance counseling, options to take time off work, and next steps related to the incident, such as changes to office practices, funeral arrangements, GoFundMes, and more. Having these options available can help employees feel more in control of the situation.
  - Be on the lookout for stress response symptoms and refer employees to employee assistance if needed. See our [September 2021 newsletter](#) for tips on how to appropriately refer employees to our services.
  - Consult with employee assistance for ongoing support. We are here to help!

### Conclusion

Critical incidents are deeply upsetting events that are often challenging and traumatic to process. Managers who understand the common responses to critical incidents and use their resources to connect with trained professionals can help their team recover from these incidents and process their stress responses in a healthier way.

Employee assistance is here to support you. Contact the Employee Assistance Office at [eao@mailplus.wisc.edu](mailto:eao@mailplus.wisc.edu) or 608-263-2987. LifeMatters, our external employee assistance partner, also

provides 24/7 support for critical incidents, including email consultation, defusings, and debriefings. Contact LifeMatters by calling 1-800-634-6433.

### **"Conquering Time" Webinar**

LifeMatters and the Employee Assistance Office are offering a virtual webinar called "Conquering Time" on **Thursday, April 27, 11:00 a.m. - noon via Zoom**. Topics covered during this training include:

- Accessing our personal energy cycle
- Prioritizing our to-do lists
- Managing common time wasters
- Creating new habits

This webinar will be held over Zoom with closed captioning available, and is offered at no cost to all UW–Madison employees. [Register online](#) to receive the Zoom link.

### **Upcoming LifeMatters Webinar Opportunities**

The CALS Wellness Committee has partnered with LifeMatters to bring you self-care seminars in the first months of the year. Please register for one, some, or all sessions. We look forward to seeing you there – and feel free to invite your peers across campus to sign up.

Once you register, you will receive a Zoom link for the session. Later, closer to the date of the session, the link will be sent again, and the CALS Wellness Committee may share some LifeMatters handouts. Registration links for all three sessions can be found [here](#).

### **LifeMatters Monthly Promotions and Resources**

Our affiliate partner, LifeMatters, offers promotions, newsletters, webinars and more! Go to [mylifematters.com](http://mylifematters.com) and sign in with Bucky2. Webinars are located under "Quick Links." This month's promotional content includes:

This month's promotional content includes:

Flyers:

- Adding More Steps into Your Day
- Alcohol or Drugs: Getting Help
- Workplace Alcohol or Drug Use: A Guide for Managers and Supervisors

Posters:

- Getting Help
- Lace Up!

- Stress Eating

### **New Podcast Resource**

Our partners at LifeMatters are excited to bring you “OnTopic” a podcast dedicated to overcoming challenges in times of uncertainty. Employee assistance counselors will be talking to industry experts from a wide variety of fields to explore the issues of the day and steps individuals and organizations can take to become more resilient. OnTopic will be released every other Wednesday. The first episode of OnTopic is available now and focuses on talking to children about violence.

You can access OnTopic on [iTunes](#), [Spotify](#), or anywhere else you get your podcasts.