

G.R.I.E.F.®

GUIDED RESPONSE - INTERVENTION & EVALUATION FOR FATALITIES

Pocket Response Guide



A fatality or other major traumatic event in the workplace setting is likely to be devastating emotionally and physically for all employees concerned. These Critical Incidents may be defined as a workplace event that is out of the ordinary and which has the potential to produce significant reactions on the part of employees and family members. For purposes of discussion, this guide will focus its attention to the various issues and symptoms associated with a workplace fatality.

The reactions that employees can go through after a loss of a colleague can manifest themselves as physical, cognitive and emotional responses that may be experienced almost immediately or may even be delayed days, weeks or even months after the actual event. The personal reactions that one experiences after a workplace fatality can be both distressing and threatening, and may be so intense as to temporarily disrupt a person's ability to cope and to come to terms with the actual event. It is not uncommon for employees to "second guess" what they could have done to prevent such a tragedy. Comments such as "if I had only" or "I should've done more" are often expressed as a means of the employee rationalizing a personal solution to the events that occurred. Unfortunately, all of the second guessing on the part of the employee will not change the final outcome.

The reactions of those employees who are effected by the death of a fellow worker can often result in ways that seem unusual, "out of the ordinary" or can even be observed as behaviors that "are out of characteristic" for that person. The feelings caused by the death of a fellow worker

may be so intense that unlike normal stress and pressure, which often alleviate after a short period, can be episodic and can linger for long periods of time. Employees affected by these critical incidents may feel fear of a similar workplace situation in which the death occurred, even when there is no sound justification to be alarmed. Their emotional status may be such that they are unable to relax and may exhibit periods of distress, self guilt and even a state of "numbness". Other reactions that employees can experience are those of anger and frustration directed towards the victim for being careless and lax with safety measures.

Affected employees can respond in ways that may seem "bizarre" and may demonstrate uneasy behaviors around their friends or family members. The person may appear to be constantly "on edge" and he/she may not respond to normal assurances. This behavior often causes those close to them to be confused and unsure of what supportive measures to provide or how to assist. The person may also have periods of appearing numb or "shell-shocked" which may cause the person to disengage from others. This detachment may cause close acquaintances to withdraw and to appear to be "unsupportive" of the affected person. Close peer relationships and family members are often the most supportive means by which the person can get back on track with their life. Unfortunately, it is often difficult for them to supportively engage with meaningful activities. This withdrawal leads them to shy away from providing any real supportive resources.

In most cases, the most important step that an employer can take after a workplace fatality is to

engage an outside professional in conducting a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing with employees. The primary objectives of a critical incident debriefing include the following: De-escalate the situation, provide support and reassurance to employees, ascertain and assess any emotional effect with employees, refer employees warranting further professional counseling with additional mental health support and to offer follow-up support if necessary. The primary purpose of debriefing is to desensitize the situation and the various emotions that are associated with the accident – ultimately-the goal is to prevent these symptoms from adversely affecting the emotional state of coworkers.

As a general rule of thumb, any employee who feels he/she has been directly or indirectly involved in a critical incident should be extended the opportunity to participate in the debriefing. All employees should be offered this participation, irregardless of whether or not company employees were directly involved or on site at the time of the incident. In some way or another, all employees may have been touched by the incident including those that may be assigned to work in other departments. Through their participation in the debriefing sessions, ongoing stress from this incident may be prevented which may often lead to poor work performance. In some rare cases, this inability to cope with the situation may cause an employee to quit their job.

Phase 1 - Event Analysis

There are several phases that will evolve over time that will facilitate the debriefing process. The first phase will primarily focus on a fact-finding review. This process allows employees to identify what actually happened during the critical incident. It is not uncommon for those involved in critical incidents to share comments about the event that are not totally factual or are very subjective in nature.

It is very important that those directly involved talk about the events in as much detail as possible. Participants should be encouraged to describe what he/she was doing during this incident and assess their perceived involvement. It is not uncommon for employees to feel that they somehow failed or did something wrong at the time of the incident.

Often, they are able to remember bits and pieces of the incident as well as to draw a blank on other key events. They may feel even more uneasy or uncertain as to their perceived involvement in the actual event. Recovery from a traumatic incident can be facilitated by recalling the events that occurred in order to allow their feelings to fade and to allow the person to come to terms with the event. "Time heals all wounds" is a phrase that best describes this process.

Phase 2 - Emotional Sharing



The second phase of debriefing will often highlight or expose similar feelings and thoughts that are shared by co-workers. It is not uncommon for employees to withdraw from their peers due to the fact that they are experiencing symptoms that they perceive to be unique to them. This "cathartic" experience of sharing deep emotional feelings has a tendency to "get things out on the table".

Sometimes the person can function fairly normally for a period of time until another event triggers a relapse where the employee's personal problems reoccur. Efforts

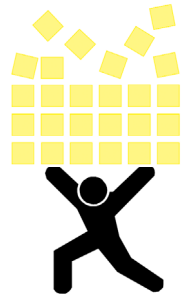


should be made to focus the person's attention on what they are feeling emotionally and how the events of the incident affect their functioning ability. By clearly understanding what aspects of the incident triggers their emotional feelings, one is able to "work through" these thought processes and direct their energies to the road to recovery.

Phase 3 - Reactive Feelings

The next phase that evolves during the debriefing process is one where employees are typically more forthcoming and emotional with their personal feelings. Employees may openly verbalize feelings that range from fear, anger, and guilt to total helplessness.

These inner feelings are often reflected by outward emotions of crying and trembling to one another during this time. One primary area that many employees will attempt to share with each other is their description of the worst part of the incident personally experienced. This may entail a more gruesome account of what actually took place and the specific physical damage that the victim encountered during the incident. It is quite common that employees may have vivid nightmares involving these framed "pictures" of the actual event.



Phase 4 - Clinical Symptoms

Employees share their personal feelings during the next phase of debriefing. This phase often reveals the participants emotional, cognitive, behavioral and physical symptoms.

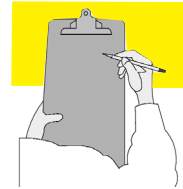
These symptoms can range from disturbances with sleep, nightmares, hand tremors, inattentiveness, nausea, nervousness, a pre-occupation with the event, being short tempered, as well as possible

flashbacks to the actual event itself.

Each employee may handle stress differently. Some may exhibit outward symptoms that are noticed by other employees, while other employees may "bottle up" their



emotions internally. Eating habits are another area that may be adversely effected, exhibiting a loss of appetite or by over eating as a nervous reaction to the stress. These varying degrees of reactions are part of a "flight or fight" phenomenon that occurs during stress. Flight symptoms are associated with symptoms of withdrawal and avoidance while fight symptoms include outward bursts of anger that are often directed towards peers or family members. Coping mechanisms that are also utilized during this phase include the possible use of drugs and alcohol as well as the tendency to sleep long periods of time. In fact, some may have great difficulty "getting started" each day getting dressed and may even neglect their personal hygiene.



Phase 5 - Psychoeducational Lessons Learned

Therapeutically, the next phase that should evolve is the individual moving from an emotional level of dealing with the trauma to that of a cognitive level.

During this phase, employees begin to learn that the feelings they have are normal and will usually subside in a short period of time.

One of the primary objectives of this phase is to provide as much educational detail as possible to emotional reactions and behaviors. This allows the person to better understand why they are feeling the way they are and to identify potential triggering events that may cause them to react adversely. It's not only beneficial to understand the "why" of these behaviors, but also to be guided to the "what can I do now" coping mechanisms.

Various strategies are utilized by the professional counselor including coping and relaxation techniques for those who are still experiencing severe emotional symptoms. For those still be exhibiting severe symptoms, short term therapy may be warranted.

Phase 6 - Readjustment-Recovery

As the individual begins to more effectively cope with the incident, he/she begins to bring closure to the debriefing process. At this stage, persons should be able to summarize the critical incident and be able to determine a specific action plan for moving on with their lives.

Follow up plans are an important aspect of closure for debriefing sessions and offered to employees for ongoing support and assistance if necessary.

In closing, the following measures should occur after a critical incident has occurred:

- Conduct a Critical Incident Review with employees and engage in professional assistance to carry out this activity.
- Spend time with those affected and try to be non-judgmental. Allow them sufficient time to vent their feelings remembering that recovery will occur in different time frames for each individual.
- Lend a listening ear and remember that the person will rehash or share his/her inner thoughts on the critical incident many times to move past the traumatic experiences.
- Assist the person with hands-on examples of what they can do to get beyond the initial trauma of the incident. Extreme stress can often result in the person's inability to "see the forest for the trees". Attempt to focus the person's energy towards constructive behavior. Adverse use of one's resources and energy can increase stress and lower the person's defense mechanism.
- Healing from traumatic experiences takes time. Realize that everyone reacts to trauma in different ways and on different time tables. Remember the old adage - "How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time." Healing may take many small steps to finally reach the recovery stage.
- Trying to convince or rationalize with a person in distress is usually fruitless. Try not to "talk the person out of his/her feelings" or to minimize the actual event. What they are experiencing is real and warrants the need to focus on the present. They will appreciate your sincere support in due time.

A company should not underestimate or down play the impact of a critical incident on their workforce. Having a well-designed game plan and process in place can provide employees with reassurance, decrease fear and anxiety. Providing emotional support has proven to help a company and their employees survive, cope and overcome workplace fatalities.

