

4.4. Managing stress

Dealing with people who are upset, particularly those whose conduct is unreasonable, can be extremely stressful – and at times distressing or frightening. It is perfectly normal to get upset or experience stress when dealing with difficult situations, particularly after a critical incident. The approach advocated in this manual, when systematically applied, goes a long way towards reducing this stress and fear.

However, critical incidents can occur. In complaint handling, your staff are more likely to experience minor difficult incidents – such as abusive phone calls – although more extreme situations can sometimes occur.

A critical incident is an event that disrupts your office's normal functions and that you, your colleagues or staff perceive as being a significant personal or professional danger or risk. Some examples of critical incidents are:

- threats of harm to self or others
- serious injury
- actual or threatened death
- deprivation of liberty
- severe verbal aggression
- bomb or hostage threats.

Some common myths about critical incident stress are:

- If staff members are experiencing critical incident stress, they are not competent or not suited for the job.
- Experiencing critical incident stress is a sign of psychological weakness.
- Talking about the incident will only make the stress worse.

4.4.1. Recognising the signs of stress

Everyone reacts to stressful situations differently. Some are more susceptible to critical incident stress than others. This could be due to events in their personal lives, their personality type or their perception of an incident with a complainant. Some people also react immediately after a stressful incident, while others will react much later on. Also, for some people stress can be cumulative – often resulting in a strong reaction to a series of minor events. Others can be affected by a critical incident even if they did not experience it firsthand because of how they perceive the incident.

Because the possible responses to stress vary so considerably, it can be difficult to identify whether a colleague or a member of your staff is suffering from stress or will experience stress after a critical incident. The following list of common signs of stress will help you recognise stress within yourself, your colleagues or your staff so that appropriate action can be taken to manage that stress.

Physical signs

- shock
- nausea
- fainting immediately after the event
- chest pains
- headaches
- muscle soreness
- fatigue
- gastrointestinal problems
- elevated heart rate
- elevated blood pressure

Emotional responses

- anger
- fear
- depression
- feelings of isolation
- crying or feeling tearful
- feeling powerless

Intellectual signs

- difficulty thinking clearly
- difficulty making decisions
- difficulty concentrating on the job

Behavioural changes

- increased irritability
- withdrawing from people
- insomnia
- nightmares
- resorting to alcohol, cigarettes or prescription/non-prescription drugs more frequently or in greater quantities
- interpersonal problems
- social withdrawal
- anxiety
- depression

4.4.2. Effects of critical incident stress on the organisation

Critical incidents can significantly affect team dynamics and functioning as well as the wider work environment. Work effectiveness and productivity can become impaired and there may be a higher than usual rate of absenteeism or a sudden rise in staff turnover rates. Levels of morale may fall and group problem-solving abilities may become compromised. Mistrust towards complainants may also take hold.

Supervisors and senior managers should therefore check for signs of stress in their staff and ensure that appropriate support services – like debriefing and counselling – are available to them. This will also be important for meeting duty of care and work health and safety obligations.

4.4.3. Debriefing

Many of us ‘debrief’ after a difficult interaction with a person without realising that we are doing it. For example, after an abusive phone call many of us immediately turn to a colleague to tell them about the horrible things that the person said to us and seek reassurance that they – not us – were being unreasonable. Doing this helps us to off-load the stress (and sometimes the anger) that we were feeling during our interaction. It also gives us an opportunity to say things that we could not say to the person on the phone.

Debriefing is an important part of managing stress. As the example before suggests, it is usually a voluntary process – with the exception of operational debriefs. These can occur in a number of different ways:

- Professional debrief – an external professional service is used to provide the service on an as-needs basis (such as EAPs).
- Internal management debrief – provided by a supervisor or senior manager. Any supervisors or senior managers who provide debriefing to staff should be trained in debriefing techniques.
- Informal peer debrief – debriefing after a minor incident can be provided by peers. It is an immediate opportunity to express your thoughts and feelings and receive appropriate support from your peers, for example, over a drink or a walk. If this method is used, management needs to make it clear that it is a legitimate component of the work of each staff member to help a colleague to debrief if they are asked for this assistance.
- Informal group debrief – frontline staff meet together to discuss recent or particular difficult incidents of UCC.
- Operational debrief – this is to review operational issues after an incident. It is intended to deal with people’s personal issues and usually occurs after people have worked through those issues via alternative means. What happened and whether things could have happened differently, or better, should be considered.

Key components of debriefing

Some key components of debriefing include the following:

- It aims to assist recovery from critical incident stress and avoid future problems such as post-traumatic stress syndrome.
- It generally needs to occur 24 to 72 hours after an incident, depending on the readiness of the affected staff member(s).

- As some people can display a delayed reaction, debriefing may occur weeks or even months after the event.
- Formal and operational sessions are always private and discussions are confidential.
- Participation is voluntary, though staff should be encouraged to attend.
- Follow-up sessions may be necessary.
- An educational component about stress-related symptoms that may be experienced and how to manage them should be included.

The affected staff members may need support for a period beyond debriefing – such as a lighter workload for a while, changed duties, part-time work or leave.

A debriefing report should be prepared at the end of each session. This should be a confidential document that relates to the organisation's operations and should be kept separate from the affected staff member's personnel file.

4.4.4. Employee assistance programs and counselling services

Sometimes you may feel more comfortable talking to a person outside the office – to someone other than a colleague or senior manager. You may just want time to work through an incident, particularly if you are experiencing other stressful life events or may need ongoing or additional support through a confidential counselling service like the EAPs. EAPs are work-based intervention programs designed to improve the emotional, mental and general psychological wellbeing of all employees and their immediate family members. It aims to provide preventive and proactive interventions for the early detection, identification and/or resolution of both work and personal problems that may adversely affect performance and wellbeing. These problems and issues may include health, trauma, substance abuse, depression, anxiety and psychiatric disorders, communication problems and coping with change.

Most public sector organisations will have information about EAPs readily available. If not, you should consider asking your supervisor or senior manager about the availability of these services.