

Recognizing Critical Incident Stress

The list below represents some of the temporary symptoms a person may have following a critical incident. These temporary symptoms may last from several days up to a couple of weeks, and weren't present before the incident. If the symptoms last longer than several months, it's important to seek professional help. The temporary symptoms may include:

Physical Symptoms*

- Fatigue
- Startles easily
- Headaches
- Rapid heart rate
- Difficulty sleeping or developing insomnia
- Chest Pain
- Elevated blood pressure
- Teeth grinding

**Any of these symptoms may indicate the need for medical evaluation. When in doubt, contact a physician.*

Behavioral Symptoms

- Hyper-arousal – increased arousal – the person continues to anticipate an overwhelming threat. It may cause difficulties with attention and concentration.
- Inability to rest
- Erratic movements
- Increased alcohol consumption – abusing alcohol or other drugs as a form of self-medication
- Completes only routine mechanical activities
- Avoidance – withdrawal – avoids close emotional ties with family, colleagues and friends. Isolated, distant, or other changes in social activity are also symptoms.
- Intensified pacing
- Loss of or increase in appetite
- Change in usual communications

Emotional Symptoms

- Fear
- Panic
- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Intense anger
- Guilt because they survived and others don't
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Emotional outbursts – Suddenly irritable or explosive, even when not provoked
- Emotional numbness (difficulty feeling love and intimacy, or in taking interest and pleasure in day-to-day activities)
- Grief
- Denial
- Agitation
- Depression
- Apprehension
- Loss of emotional control
- Inability to feel or express emotions
- Inappropriate emotional response

Cognitive Symptoms

- Confusion
- Uncertainty
- Self-blame
- Poor problem solving
- Poor attention/decisions – indecisiveness, shortened attention span
- Difficulty identifying objects or people, heightened or lowered alertness
- Intrusive images – the unwanted memories may be so strong that the individual almost feels like he/she is actually experiencing the critical incident again
- Nightmares
- Suspiciousness
- Blaming someone
- Poor abstract thinking
- Poor concentration/memory – disorientation of time, place, and person
- Increased or decreased awareness of surroundings
- Memory loss

For more information, contact:

Debbie Kuhn

Statewide CISM Coordinator / Metro EMS Specialist

301 Centennial Mall South

PO Box 95026

Lincoln, NE 68509-5026

Phone: (402) 471-0119

Email: debbie.kuhn@nebraska.gov

Website: http://dhhs.ne.gov/publichealth/Pages/ems_emsindex.aspx