Supporting your team after a critical incident



When critical incidents happen, they can have a lasting impact on both individuals and teams. This guide outlines how managers can recognise the effects of traumatic events and provide appropriate support to help employees recover and re-engage with confidence.

When the unexpected happens

In any workplace, there is always the possibility that something unexpected and distressing may occur.

Whether it is a serious accident, an act of violence, a sudden death or exposure to traumatic material, these events, known as critical incidents (CIs), can have a significant impact on individuals, teams and organisations.

The same incident can affect people in very different ways. Some may experience immediate distress, while others may notice changes in their wellbeing over time.

The impact will depend on a range of factors, including the nature of the incident, individual circumstances and the support available.

While not every distressing workplace experience will require a formal critical incident response, recognising when an event may have a significant psychological impact is an important part of supporting employee wellbeing.

Understanding critical incidents

A critical incident is any event that is sudden, unexpected, and has the potential to overwhelm an individual's usual coping mechanisms.

Examples may include:

- Serious workplace accidents or fatalities
- Assaults or threats of violence
- Exposure to traumatic or distressing material
- The sudden or unexpected death of a colleague
- Major organisational crises or emergencies

Other experiences, such as bereavement, serious illness or organisational change, can also have a profound psychological impact, even where they would not typically be classified as critical incidents.

What defines a critical incident is not just the event itself, but how it is experienced.

How incidents can affect your workforce

The effects of a critical incident can be both immediate and longer-term.

Short-term responses may include:

- Shock, disbelief or emotional numbness
- Difficulty concentrating
- Sleep disturbance
- Irritability or heightened anxiety

If left unsupported, longer-term impacts can include:

- Ongoing stress reactions
- Reduced confidence and performance

- Increased sickness absence
- Risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other mental health conditions

Many people experience distress following a traumatic event and recover naturally over the following days or weeks. Others may experience more persistent difficulties or develop mental health conditions, including PTSD.

The impact may not always be immediately apparent. Some employees may initially appear to be coping well but notice changes in their mood, sleep, confidence or ability to manage everyday responsibilities later.

Managers should avoid making assumptions about how someone is feeling or how quickly they should recover. A supportive response recognises individual differences and remains attentive to changing needs over time.

What does effective support look like?

Critical incident support is a structured, evidence-informed approach to helping individuals and teams process and recover from traumatic events.

While the appropriate response will vary depending on the nature of the incident, good practice may include:

- Immediate support and stabilisation
- Psychoeducation to explain normal responses to trauma
- Group or individual support sessions
- Guidance for managers on supporting their teams

Line managers are not expected to be mental health specialists. Their role is to respond with compassion, follow organisational procedures and help employees access appropriate support.

Effective support recognises that people will respond differently to the same event. Managers should focus on creating an environment where employees feel safe, listened to and able to seek help if required.

Providing timely support is not only an important part of an employer's duty of care, but it can also help reduce the potential impact of a traumatic event on employee wellbeing, attendance and performance.

Why early support makes a difference

Providing timely and appropriate support delivers clear benefits.

For employees:

- Supports with ongoing stress reactions
- Helps them feel supported and listened to
- Ensures they know where to turn for further help
- Supports any reduced confidence or performance
- Helps to reduce risk of developing PTSD or other mental health conditions

For organisations:

- Maintains staff wellbeing and morale
- Support clear and consistent communication
- Reduces long-term absence and burnout
- Supports a psychologically safe workplace
- Demonstrates a clear duty of care

Tips for managing critical incidents in the workplace

While critical incidents cannot always be prevented, organisations can strengthen how they respond:

- Act early and offer support without forcing it
- Communicate clearly, sensitively and consistently
- Normalise reactions - distress is a human response, not a weakness
- Assess risk
- Support line managers - who are often impacted too

Accessing further support

The support available following a critical incident will vary between organisations and will depend on the circumstances involved.

Familiarise yourself with your organisation's relevant policies, escalation procedures and available support arrangements so that you know where to seek guidance if an incident occurs.

For example, services your organisation has in place may include access to an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), mental health assessments and trauma-focused therapies, which can further enhance recovery outcomes.

Managers should not feel that they need to manage complex situations alone. Seeking appropriate guidance and recognising when additional support may be needed are important parts of a responsible response.

Building resilience across your organisation

Ultimately, supporting people through critical incidents is about more than responding in the moment, it is about creating a workplace where individuals feel supported before, during and after difficult events.

By recognising the importance of early, compassionate and informed responses, organisations can:

- Support individuals more effectively
- Strengthen team resilience
- Build trust across the workforce

When people feel supported, they are better able to recover, re-engage and continue contributing with confidence.

With the right support in place, organisations can reduce the impact of critical incidents, helping their people recover while building stronger, more resilient teams.

This content is based on an article by Kenny Ralph, Deputy Trauma Manager at PAM Wellness (now part of Optima Health).

Further support

PTSD UK – Charity with support and information.

Mind – Useful supportive contacts for anyone experiencing PTSD.

HSE – Information about investigating accidents and incidents in the workplace.