

# Ten Top Tips



## When helping someone cope with a critical or traumatic incident

Critical incidents are typically sudden, powerful events which are outside the range of everyday experiences. Being physically assaulted or threatened, the sudden death of a close friend, relative or work colleague or any sudden event that impacts upon someone's ability to function, is a critical incident.

### THE DO'S

1. **Provide the person with a place** for 'time out' after the incident. Take them somewhere safe and away from prying eyes so they can unwind and not have to keep working or responding to the demands of colleagues or customers. People like to regain control of their emotions and it is important to allow them the space and time to do this. Let them know that what they are experiencing is quite normal and ask them what would be helpful. Encourage them to ask for what they really need.
2. **Spend time listening** to people's experiences as to what has happened. People who have experienced a traumatic event welcome assistance, but not imposed help. Be available to listen if the person wishes to talk. Offer refreshments and the chance to talk about what happened. Remember you are not a counsellor, you are a colleague and friend and that is who they know you as.
3. **Provide the person with information** about the event which may help them to understand what happened. Information helps people put an event into perspective. Sometimes people blame themselves for the incident or say they did not act quick enough. Offer other explanations and be careful only to provide the facts as you know them. If you are giving an opinion ensure the person understands it is only your opinion.
4. **Organise relief staff, if necessary.** Don't assume people are able to continue working. Allow them time to defuse the strong emotions that accompany a critical incident and consider if they can return to work. Even if they say they are okay, give them time to sit for a while to gather themselves. People like to be given choices and not told what to do. Check on them at regular intervals to assess if they are coping. If not, get some help.
5. **Provide them with the opportunity** to make necessary telephone calls. They may need to contact friends and family members to cover practical everyday errands, such as collecting children from school, picking up a car being serviced and cancelling any appointments. People regain control more effectively when they don't have to worry about things they should be doing.

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- 6. Have a trusted or experienced colleague** available to sit with the person. The person may request someone in particular or may wish to be alone. Check on them at regular intervals. Do not leave them alone if they are showing physical signs of distress. Some danger signs are chest pains, difficulty in breathing, panic attacks, general confusion, uncontrolled crying or outbursts of anger. Consider seeking immediate professional help in these instances.
- 7. Know your role.** You are providing an understanding listening ear and practical support to the person. You are not providing counselling. If the situation is difficult, telephone a counsellor (e.g., ACCESS Programs) to talk through some ideas and to develop a management plan to deal with the incident.

### THE DON'TS

- 8. Don't provide or encourage alcohol consumption** or other substances, including medication. The person needs a clear mind and healthy body to recover. Excessive smoking can also interfere with a person's recovery. Encourage the person to have some refreshments and to engage in some light exercise, such as walking and talking about their reactions. Allow them the necessary time to recover.
- 9. Don't minimise the impact of the incident**, such as 'it could have been worse', even if it appears something manageable to you. People react in very different ways and each needs time to recover at their own pace and in their own way. Respect each person as an individual.
- 10. Don't forget to check in** with the person over the next few days to see how they are getting on. Reinforce their sense of control and how they now have more knowledge about themselves to cope with a difficult situation.