

## COPING WITH AND RETURNING TO ROUTINES AFTER CRITICAL INCIDENTS

After a critical incident, focusing on learning and work can be difficult. But returning to productive functioning is necessary for us and our community, and if done with care can actually assist in our recovery.

The following information and action suggestions can help us recover from distressing events. Note though, that some people may not feel the effects of a critical incident immediately, but rather months or even years later.

### SIGNS OF EMOTIONAL IMPACT

The emotional impact of a critical incident may appear in peoples' performance and productivity as:

- Absenteeism
- Working slower
- Missing deadlines
- Social withdrawal
- Irritability or anger
- Calling in sick more frequently
- Appearing numb or emotionless
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- Forgetting processes, procedures, or requests
- Difficulty with work transitions or changes in routines
- Overworking

### ACTIONS TO CONSIDER

To help everyone in our community work through the effects of a critical incident and to reduce the impact on productivity:

1. **Connect as soon as possible:** For example, leaders can meet with their community members to communicate the facts, express shared emotions, and to promote available resources, such as BCIT's Counselling and Student Development for our students and Shepell·fgi for our faculty and staff.
2. **Educate:** Inform community members about the signs of emotional distress, actions being taken in response to the incident, and available resources so that accurate and helpful information is circulated.
3. **Provide resources:** Have educational materials and information on resources readily available for people to access.
4. **Facilitate communication:** Support among community members can help us to work through difficulties.
5. **Consider bringing in counselors:** Professional counsellors can conduct group meetings and provide individual counselling, which can also help identify and get additional help to those who need it.
6. **Allow community members to help:** Allow people time away from learning or work to give their help, such as donating blood, community actions, or for personal needs.
7. **Organize community actions:** As examples, a blood drive, a volunteer group for relief efforts, a donation fund, or a memorial.
8. **Reconsider travel:** People may be hesitant to make trips for some time and prefer to stay closer to home. Consider postponing or canceling travel plans.
9. **Plan for future emergencies:** Review emergency plans to address situations that arose during or because of the current critical event.

## KEY MESSAGES FOR OUR COMMUNITY

Some of these example key messages may help us to communicate with the members of our community and facilitate our recovery and return to productive work.

- **We grieve:** Find out which of our community members lost family, friends, or acquaintances. Share your grief and offer support.
- **Know what to expect of yourself:** You may experience emotions of denial, disbelief, confusion, shock, sadness, yearning, anger, humiliation, despair, guilt, or many others. You may be surprised by the intensity and duration of your emotions or how swiftly they change. These feelings are common, healthy, and will help you come to terms with this event. Be aware that your feelings may recur during stressful times. This too is normal.
- **Talk and listen patiently with each other:** Emotions are normal. Talk to your colleagues and students who are experiencing similar feelings. Some may have experienced comparable events previously. When listening, don't try to "fix it" or offer false comfort, especially if somebody has lost a loved one. Instead, offer a straightforward expression of sorrow and take the time to listen. Where appropriate and possible, offer to help with the tasks of daily life, such as errands or shopping. Discourage unhealthy ways of coping, like excessive alcohol. Don't hesitate to recommend professional help when you feel someone is experiencing more than they can cope with alone.
- **Be aware that people will respond differently and recover at different paces:** Some will want to get back to learning or work to regain a sense of control, while others will have difficulty focusing for some time. Many may need some kind of assistance, but still others go on without developing significant problems. These are all normal responses to a critical event.
- **Things will go on:** Acknowledge that learning and working may be very different in some ways, depending on the particular setting and how severely it was impacted. Still, there will be some continuity, and returning to productive work will help our community and its members with recovery.
- **Many people who are required to travel may be afraid to do so:** This is a normal reaction, and they may benefit from being reassured of this and that you foremost have their safety in mind. Tell them about any travel policy changes and that they will be informed if any other changes are made.
- **Take care of yourself and family:** Eat nutritiously, get the necessary rest and exercise, spend time with those close to you, postpone major life decisions and other significant stressors when you can, and seek additional help when necessary.
- **Take care of your children:** Several things can help children handle the effects of the critical event:
  - Let them express their feelings and ask questions
  - Share your own coping strategies with them
  - Get back to your family routine as soon as possible
  - Reassure them that they are safe
  - Turn off the radio, TV, Internet, and other news sources when they are in the room
- **Seek help if you need it:** Seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness. Emotional difficulties—in general and in response to critical incidents—are real and fixable.
- **Contact the available services with any concerns or suggestions:** Counselling and Employee Family Assistance Programs can be very effective, and people need not be embarrassed to seek the help that they need.