

Critical Incidents in the Workplace: Management Guide

This information was prepared by the City of Toronto's (COT) Employee Assistance Program (EAP) as a guide to assist managers and supervisors to effectively respond to a critical incident in the workplace.

This guide will assist you in understanding:

- who to contact and when
- resources available
- how to create a supportive work environment
- how best to support employees immediately following a critical incident and beyond

Critical incidents are highly stressful events that have the potential to overwhelm an individual's usual coping abilities. These are extreme events which fall outside the range of normal experience. It is important to recognize that individuals involved in a critical incident may experience a broad range of reactions. These reactions are a normal human response to extremely abnormal events. For the majority of individuals, such reactions will ordinarily resolve in a relatively short period of time. Each individual's response to a critical incident is unique, but there are some common reactions that many people report.

In order to better understand the normal and natural responses individuals experience in the face of abnormal circumstances, we encourage you to refer to the following document:

[Critical Incidents in the Workplace: A Guide for Employees](#)

As a manager or supervisor, you have a key role to play when a critical incident occurs in the workplace. With appropriate and timely actions you can help to minimize the impact of highly stressful events on employees and facilitate their recovery and improved level of function.

Critical incidents may pose particular challenges for management. There is no standard single response. Effective workplace responses to critical incidents should be tailored to fit each incident.

Managers must be sensitive to, and take into consideration the:

- unique aspects of the event (e.g. the nature of the incident, the number of people affected, etc.)
- scope of the incident (e.g. large or small scale)
- needs of the individuals directly or indirectly involved
- workplace culture

How Can the COT Employee Assistance Program (EAP) help following a Critical Incident?

The EAP offers a comprehensive range of rapidly accessible services provided by professional counsellors, (24 hours/day, 7 days/week) including statutory and designated COT holidays who can:

- Provide management with consultation following a critical incident occurring in the workplace
- Provide management with consultation following other stressful situations. For example;
 - an accident involving an employee that occurs outside the workplace and that results in a serious injury of an employee
 - a sudden or unexpected death of an employee that occurs outside the workplace
 - the death of an employee who passes away following a long illness
- Offer immediate support and information to affected individual employees
- Provide voluntary, confidential short-term individual counselling
- When appropriate, arrange and facilitate group interventions based on Psychological First Aid (as described below).

When a critical incident occurs, contact the EAP as soon as reasonably possible for assistance in developing an effective plan to support staff and to discuss appropriate interventions and the optimal timing for these to be provided. The services provided by the EAP will vary according to the nature and circumstances of the incident and the unique needs of those affected.

Employees who feel they can benefit from individual counselling following a critical incident can self-refer to the EAP by calling **416-392-6633**.

What is Psychological First Aid?

Psychological First Aid (PFA) an evidence-based approach to assist people affected by an emergency, disaster or traumatic event. PFA focuses on enhancing support to promote the natural recovery processes of individuals, groups, and communities. This involves helping people feel safe, calm, hopeful, connected to others, able to help themselves, and comfortable accessing physical, emotional and social support. PFA aims to reduce initial distress, meet current needs, encourage flexible coping, and promote adaptive short-term and longer-term adjustment.

What Can I Expect from Employees Who May be Impacted by a Critical Incident?

Each employee's response to a critical incident is unique, but there are some common reactions that many people experience. These include:

- feeling intense fear
- helplessness
- horror
- shock
- disbelief
- numbness
- confusion
- disorientation

You can expect a wide range of individual reactions that vary from a minimal to an overwhelmed response, immediately and in the days and weeks to follow.

Most affected individuals have adequate strengths, skills and capabilities and, with the appropriate supports, will recover well over time. However, for some individuals, personal history or current life situations may make them more vulnerable to the effects of a critical incident. When managed effectively, the negative impact on individuals and the workplace can be greatly reduced.

During and Immediately Following a Critical Incident:

Management has two important roles to fulfill when responding to a critical incident:

- Ensuring that their management responsibilities are met
- Providing appropriate supports to staff

Management should be familiar with any applicable legislation such as: Occupational Health & Safety and WSI Acts, and relevant COT policies and guidelines such as: the [Corporate Occupational Health and Safety Policy](#), [Workplace Violence Policy](#), [Psychological Health & Safety Policy](#), Corporate Security's [Emergency Response Guide](#) and site specific Fire and Evacuation protocols, in order to be prepared for emergencies before they occur. Division specific guidelines and standard operating procedures may also provide additional guidance on how to respond to emergencies in your workplace. You will find the COT policies and guidelines on the HR Web.

The following information provides you with an overview of considerations and is not intended to be used in place of any legislated obligations or COT policies, procedures or collective agreement provisions.

Meeting your responsibilities - Overview:

Situations NOT involving acts of violence, or threats to personal safety:

	Contacts/Resources	Considerations
<i>Seek consultation to identify actions needed and determine next steps</i>	<p>Who is available to support you or provide you with back-up? *</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ┆ Senior Management ┆ Other divisional managers/supervisor <p>What help do you need?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ┆ Additional staff ┆ Occupational Health & Safety ** ┆ Disability Management Consultant ┆ Ministry of Labour ┆ EAP ┆ Strategic Communications <p>Investigation and Reporting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ┆ Critical Injury Investigation & reporting policy ┆ Investigation and Reporting of work-related injuries and Incidents policy ┆ Supervisor's Report of Injury/Incident 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ┆ Who needs to be involved (police, public, Strategic Communications, media) ┆ What information will be shared and with whom ┆ What information needs to be reported and to whom ┆ When and how to provide information ┆ Assign roles and responsibilities ┆ Complete relevant forms ┆ Document the event ┆ Manage workflow and modify deadlines ┆ Arrange for additional or alternate resources ┆ Be aware of your own response to the incident ┆ Manage your own stress

Situations involving acts of violence, or threats to personal safety:

In addition to the actions above, you may need to undertake the following actions to ensure you have taken all reasonable and practical measures to protect workers

	Contacts/Resources	Considerations
<i>Identify actions needed to ensure immediate and ongoing safety and security</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ┆ Corporate Security ┆ Toronto Police Services ┆ Occupational Health & Safety staff ┆ Joint Health & Safety Committee ┆ Employee and Labour Relations ┆ Human Rights Office ┆ Appropriate bargaining unit *** 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ┆ Emergency and Life Safety response required ┆ Engage a 911 response ┆ Safety Plan required ┆ Complete Workplace Violence and Threat Report *** ┆ Domestic Violence in the Workplace Policy

***Support:** Obtaining the assistance of other divisional supervisors and managers is particularly important in situations where you have been directly involved in the incident/event.

**** Occupational Health and Safety and Disability Management Consultants** can provide assistance in determining if contacting the Ministry of Labour is required (such as where there has been a critical injury). They can also assist you in:

- completing the Supervisor's Report of Injury and Illness if required
- completing and submitting the WSIB Employer's Report of Injury (Form 7) for affected staff within the prescribed timelines
- providing information to employees who may be making a claim under WSIB (preparing and submitting Form 6 and obtaining a Form 8 from their physician)

*** Refer to the City of Toronto **Workplace Violence Policy**

In order to document the event, you will likely need to interview staff to obtain information. While this is an important and necessary part of the process, understand that the timing of an interview should be weighed against the psychological stressors on employees related to the event. As a result, you may determine that a post-incident review (including whether the appropriate protocols were observed) should not be conducted until a later point in time. A post-incident review/interview is about collecting factual information.

Helpful information to collect at this time includes:

- Date and time of the incident
- Location of the incident
- Brief description of the incident
- Number of workers involved (approximate)
- Names of effected employees
- Names of the deceased or injured workers (if applicable)

Supervisors and managers should not schedule or facilitate psychological or critical incident debriefing sessions. Such interventions have been shown to have the potential to cause harm to vulnerable staff and are no longer used.

Meeting the Needs of Yourself and Your Staff:

How managers respond in the first hours after a critical incident provides a tremendous opportunity but also poses a significant risk for the subsequent outcomes. Employees will look to their managers for guidance and direction. Compassionate and concerned leadership will facilitate a resilient and cohesive group response that will weather the critical incident more effectively.

However, if you were directly involved in the incident, then you may wish to consider whether it would be better to seek the assistance of another supervisor or manager in providing support to your staff.

During the First Few Hours Following the Incident	Days and Weeks Following the Incident	Ongoing Support
<p>Ensure employees and the environment are safe and secure.</p> <p>Reach out to and meet with impacted employees in need of assistance.</p> <p>Consult with EAP for assistance in developing an effective response to the incident.</p> <p>Provide comfort for those affected including contacting family or friends.</p> <p>Do not ask employees to repeatedly recount what they witnessed or experienced or how they reacted</p> <p>Reassure employees that their responses to the incident are normal and provide hope and encouragement in their ability to recover.</p> <p>Obtain current contact information for employees and advise them that you will be following up with them as part of a “wellness check”.</p> <p>Offer impacted employees the option to leave.</p> <p>Provide practical assistance, including making arrangements for impacted employees to get home safely. This may involve paying for a taxi, or having a friend or family member pick them up.</p> <p>Provide employees with information about the EAP and other resources to assist them, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Critical Incidents in the Workplace: A Guide for City of Toronto Employees - The City of Toronto EAP brochure - contact information for the relevant Union Office 	<p>Be tactful and supportive when meeting with employees individually to discuss the incident, where an investigation or follow-up is required</p> <p>Provide updates using as much reliable information as possible even if only to say further investigation is underway.</p> <p>Any update must take into account the confidentiality obligations of any ongoing investigation and the privacy rights of all individuals.</p> <p>Identify temporary options that support staff to remain in the workplace. These could include: modifying work hours, duties, and work load, providing time off to attend counselling or related medical appointments.</p> <p>Employees may be less productive. Pending deadlines may need to be delayed and work reassigned.</p> <p>Do not have unrealistic expectations or pressure your staff to do more than they are able</p> <p>Do not tell employees how they should be feeling, reacting or coping with the incident.</p> <p>Discuss with your group how they may wish to support an employee who is off ill, or to honour an employee who has passed away as a result of the incident.</p> <p>Offer time off for employees to attend funeral services.</p> <p>Identify availability of the EAP services including the option of attending counselling during work hours where possible.</p>	<p>Understand that impacted employees may be less productive as they gradually return to their normal routines.</p> <p>Reassure employees about their safety at work and explain what measures are being taken to protect them.</p> <p>Meet with staff regularly. Build on the strengths of your group and encourage them to support each other.</p> <p>Check in with each person individually and privately. Ask how they are doing, discuss any concerns they may have and ask them for their input regarding their needs. Be accessible, supportive and caring.</p> <p>Continue to keep employees informed of any new information about the incident, when appropriate. Recognize that frequent updates may not always be necessary or helpful.</p> <p>Some employees benefit from maintaining their work routine and their connection with work colleagues.</p> <p>Continue to provide support and listen to employees’ concerns.</p> <p>Respect that employees will determine what their needs are in consultation with their health care provider</p> <p>Remember that when speaking to employees you are representing the organization.</p>

Additional Considerations

If the critical incident was due to a workplace accident or criminal incident, employees, including managers, may have to be interviewed by the police, management, or health and safety staff in the organization. Any one of these events may trigger a wide range of stress reactions as employees are asked to recall what happened. Inquests or court appearances may last several weeks. Additional emotional support could be required at this time.

Summary

Critical Incidents must be managed carefully.

The COT Employee Assistance Program is available to help.

Telephone advice and consultation with a professional counsellor is available 24 hours/day, 7 days/week including statutory and designated City of Toronto holidays.

For more information or to obtain a copy of the COT EAP brochure visit our website at:

[City of Toronto Employee Assistance Program](#)

Consultation and confidential counselling services are just a phone call away

416-392-6633