



Northern Illinois Critical Incident Stress Management Team
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Information Sheet for Spousal Support/Significant Others

Your loved one has been involved in an emotion-charged event, known as a critical incident. He or She may be experiencing normal stress responses to such an event. Critical incident stress (CIS) affects up to 87% of all emergency personnel exposed to a critical incident. No one in emergency services is immune to critical incident stress, regardless of past experiences or years of service. Your loved one may experience critical incident stress at any time during his or her career. As you may choose to remain in a supportive role, it may be helpful to review several things about critical incident stress.

The signs of CIS are physical, cognitive (thinking), emotional (feeling), behavioral (actions) and spiritual. Your loved one has received a handout outlining these areas. Please consider asking him or her to share this information with you. Talking and sharing can be a valuable first step as part of an overall healing process. It is important for you, as a valuable support person, to know that CIS can occur immediately at “the scene”, within hours or days of an event, or even weeks after a traumatic incident. CIS will affect individuals at different times and for different reasons.

Your loved one may experience a variety of the signs/symptoms of a CIS response or he/she may not feel any of the signs. Transitional suffering from the effects of CIS is completely normal. Additionally, your loved one is not the only one suffering; other emergency personnel shared the event and are probably sharing similar reactions. The symptoms will normally subside and disappear in time if you and your loved one do not dwell upon them. It is also not that uncommon to resurface old issues (crisis issues) that you thought had previously been resolved.

All phases of our lives overlap and influence each other: personal, professional, family, or as a couple. The impact of CIS can be intensified, influenced or mitigated by our own personal, family, and current developmental issues. As you continue in a supportive role it is important to encourage but not pressure your loved one to talk about the incident and some of the reactions experienced. Understanding can be the best medicine. Your primary job is to listen and reassure. Remember that as an event is upsetting to you and your loved one, your children may also be affected; and may also need to share.

You may not understand what your loved one is going through at this time, but do offer your love and support. Don't be afraid to ask what you can do that he or she might consider helpful. Accept the fact that life will return to a more normal routine in a reasonable time.

If signs of CIS continue and do not begin to subside (within a few weeks), or, if they intensify, please consider seeking further assistance. Our NICISM team can confidentially help you and your loved one find a professional who understands CIS and how it can affect you and your loved ones. Please remember, you are not in this alone! We are here to support your family!

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