



Coping with Critical Incident Stress

Tip Sheet

What is a Critical Incident?

A critical incident (CI) is stressful situation that has the potential to cause an individual to experience unusually strong reactions and overwhelm our usual coping mechanisms. Reactions vary from person to person and situation to situation. They may occur immediately, or some hours, days, or in some cases weeks or months later and can be cumulative. Generally, these reactions will subside with time.

Emotional changes	Thinking changes	Behavioural changes	Physical changes
Feeling:	Experiencing negative thoughts e.g.	• Increased use of alcohol or other drugs	• Fatigued
• Overwhelmed	• "I can't do this"	• Withdrawn from people	• Run down and becoming ill
• Guilty	• "I'm worried I'll freak out at the next job"	• Difficulty concentrating or completing tasks	• Headaches
• Irritable	• "Something is wrong with me"	• Avoiding reminders of the job	• Sleeping problems
• Frustrated	• "I should have..."		• Increased or decrease in appetite
• Indecisive	• "I shouldn't have..."		• Stomach complaints
• Sad	• "What if..."		• Sore muscles
• Less confident			
• Disappointed			
• Angry			

How to look after you

It is common for people to recover using their usual coping strategies, and usual supports cope and through accessing their support networks. You can aid recovery by:

Ambulance Victoria Wellbeing & Support Services is AV's internal mental health support service available 24/7 to all employees and their immediate family members, RANs, ACO's and CERTs.

When to seek support

It is important to seek support if you:

- Are experiencing reactions that worry you or feel that your reactions are not improving.
- have nightmares or broken sleep.
- Feel the need to talk and have no one you feel comfortable talking to.
- Notice you have to constantly keep busy to block everything out.
- Are struggling to function at work and/or at home.
- Are engaging in risk taking behaviours.
- Feel your health or motivation has deteriorated.
- Have attended multiple critical incidents in a short timeframe.

Support can be accessed via

1800 626 377 (1800 MANERS) to access:

- Peer Support
- Chaplain
- VACU

Email for VACU support

vacu@ambulance.vic.gov.au



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- Trying to maintain a normal routine and continuing to engage in activities you enjoy and find relaxing can be helpful.
- Engaging in activities you enjoy or find relaxing.

Other important self-care activities include

- Sufficient rest
- Nutritious food
- Physical Activity /Exercise (in moderation)
- Relaxation (e.g. muscle relaxation and breathing techniques, or listening to music, watching a favourite film, gardening, or any other activity you enjoy).
- Let family and friends know when you need company and when you need 'time out', so they know how to best support you.
- Some people find it useful to talk with others who have had similar experiences.
- Schedule time on your own if you need it, but don't allow yourself to become too isolated.

Things to consider

- Limit stimulants such as coffee, caffeinated drinks, cigarettes, and chocolate.
- Avoid alcohol and drugs as a way of coping – these can affect sleep quality and can create longer term problems.
- Pay attention to increased fatigue or concentration problems and as a result of increased stress
- Avoid making major decisions in the immediate aftermath of the incident. This is especially relevant if you are experiencing a strong reaction.
- Reach out to your usual social support and the additional support available through the Wellbeing and Support Services, including the Peer Support Program, Pastoral Care/Chaplaincy Program, VACU or our internal psychology team. These services are there to support you, are free and confidential. A list of the [types of supports and services available](#) is listed on the intranet.

Myth busting CI's

If I have a reaction does that mean I am weak?

No, certain cases can affect people in different ways, and it is no indication of strength or weakness.

I have been in this job a long time I don't have reactions...

Many feel that if they have been a paramedic for a long time, they have a certain 'armour' from these reactions. However, some people may experience a cumulative effect. This can be likened to a bucket in which you place all the jobs you

have attended. After a period of time the 'bucket' may become full or overflowing and you find that your usual coping strategies don't work as well. This would certainly be reason to seek support.

I haven't been in the job long. Does the fact I am having a reaction mean I am not cut out for Ambulance work?

Coping is not an "all or nothing" thing. At certain times in your career you will cope better than others. There will be times in your life when certain jobs really hit home

Review your current coping strategies. Assess which ones are helpful and which are not. This way you can develop a repertoire of effective strategies for future incidents.



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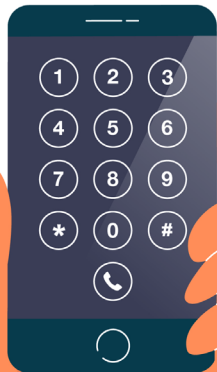
- If there is no improvement over a couple of weeks or your symptoms worsen, please make an appointment with your GP or a Psychologist.



AmbulanceVictoria

**1800
MANERS**

1800 626 377



Option

1

Peer Support

Talk to a caring, trained colleague who understands your experiences.
peer.support@ambulance.vic.gov.au

2

VACU Counselling Line

Confidential telephone support from a qualified counsellor (24/7).
Find your nearest VACU Network Clinician.
vacu@ambulance.vic.gov.au

3

AV Chaplain

AV's Chaplains provide compassionate support for your emotional, spiritual and pastoral care needs. This is a non-denominational service for everyone.
chaplain@ambulance.vic.gov.au

4

Bullying and Harassment

Confidential support and advice about bullying or harassment.
ProfessionalConductUnit@ambulance.vic.gov.au

5

Police Statements & Court Attendance

Get help with police statements or an upcoming court appearance.

6

Alcohol and Other Drugs Advice and Support

Talk with AV's AOD advisor about your options for support (8am-5pm).
AOD@ambulance.vic.gov.au