



Critical Incident Response Guide

INTRODUCTION

A critical incident can be defined as an event that has a stressful impact sufficient enough to overwhelm the coping skills of an individual. When a critical incident occurs, the Washington State Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can provide guidance to employees, supervisors, managers, human resources personnel and executive leaders on how to support the affected workplace. The EAP can assist with:

- Helping to identify critical issues, next steps and potential risks to individuals and the organization.
- Equipping supervisors and managers with the tools and resources to support individuals and groups before, during and after an event.

This guide and the accompanying information and handouts found on our website - eap.wa.gov - are intended to offer guidance and resources. The information in this guide is based on the knowledge, training and expertise of the EAP, as well as other professional organizations.

In all cases, regardless of your decision to request EAP critical incident services, please consider consulting with the EAP about the incident. Knowing that there has been an event at your workplace helps the EAP be prepared for outreach from employees accessing services as a result of the event.

What is a Critical Incident?

A critical incident is defined as any event that has the power to overwhelm typically-effective coping skills. Some examples of critical incidents include the following:

- A bomb threat
- An act of or threat of violence either by an employee, customer or stranger. This might include gunfire outside of a field service office; or angry and abusive client making threatening comments to an employee or others.
- A medical emergency in which employees are first responders.
- An onsite accident where someone is severely injured or killed.
- A natural disaster where state agencies are significantly involved or impacted.
- Major layoffs or re-organization.
- An employee death with significant impact. This may include an onsite or offsite death that has news coverage, a major figure in the agency, multiple employee deaths within a short period of time or a long-term employee that was well known and respected within the agency.
- Suicide of an employee or family member
- Scandal or public investigation that involves news coverage

EAP Critical Incident Response

The EAP is available, following a workplace incident or trauma, to provide practical grief, loss, and trauma information as well as guidance to employees on accessing EAP services. This type of support can be most helpful 3 to 10 business days following an event for homogeneous groups of employees (employees from the same unit, word group, or who know each other well in departments). The EAP typically does not provide daylong or multi-day virtual or on-site response. Contact EAP at (877) 313 4455 for a Critical Incident Response consult.

What Can I Expect from Employees Who May Be Impacted?

While each employee is unique, there are some common reactions to critical incidents, including:

- Numbness
- Disbelief
- Shock
- Helplessness
- Confusion
- Disorientation
- Horror
- Fear
- Anger

Making the Initial Announcement

- Consider how and to whom you make an announcement. Consult with HR, executive management and communications.
- In most situations, you might want to call or speak to the direct supervisor to determine who should make the announcement to the immediate work group. Take into consideration those in the group who might be traveling for work or located in another office.
- Typically, a general announcement follows the work group announcement. However there might be situations where the event is already in the public domain, indicating the need to make a general announcement sooner or without first doing a work group announcement.

Communications

- Employees will have a strong need for information about the incident. Supervisors and managers should make an effort to get as much information as appropriate or available and share it in a timely manner. Express the commitment to keep staff up to date as much as possible.
- Be aware of the impact of social media and set appropriate guidelines if necessary. Stress the importance of information coming from one or two reliable and informed sources. Consult with

executive management or your communications department for guidance.

Provide Space and Time

- Provide a physical or virtual space where staff can meet, and if possible, keep the space available throughout the day for co-workers and friends to gather and talk.
- It is important for staff to be able to share memories, discuss the situation and spend time talking. Doing so is not wasted time and helps affected staff cope with the shock and grief of the situation. Allow people to express their feelings.

Model and Normalize

It is important that supervisors and managers model and normalize responses to grief. Take the time to allow for acknowledgment of loss and associated difficult feelings. Some employees will be impacted more significantly than others and may want to take a break from work, end their workday, contact the EAP or just need some additional private time. It is important to honor these needs as much as possible.

Practice Self Care

Practice self-care, while also supporting those who might be in crisis. Access and use the available resources, including the EAP.

Checking In

- Meet with staff regularly. Build on the strengths of the group and encourage them to support each other.
- Check in with employees 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.

Assessing Needs

- The best way to determine if EAP's Critical Incident Response is needed is to ask staff directly about their needs. Grief is a natural response to loss, and group interventions are not always needed or desired.
- It is the EAP protocol to have the supervisor that is in charge of the workgroup explain what a debriefing is to staff and find out if they would like to have one. If there are only a couple staff that would like it another alternative is to have them contact EAP individually.
- **If the assessment indicates the need for Critical Incident Response, contact EAP at (877) 313 4455 for a Critical Incident Response consult.**