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# A Manager's Guide to Dealing with a Critical Incident in the Workplace

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It is normal for a Critical Incident to cause an abnormal reaction. As a manager you will play a key role in supporting members of your team, not only directly after an incident but in the days, weeks and possibly months that follow.

This guide contains advice on how you can best support your staff after a Critical Incident.

## **For support following a Critical Incident:**

Freephone 0808 801 0808  
Outside UK +44 845 766 0113  
IE 180 091 1810

Text 88010 (Only for UK. Standard network rates apply)

Email [helpline@retailtrust.org.uk](mailto:helpline@retailtrust.org.uk)

# Key Points for Managers

1.

## ENSURE THAT EVERYONE IS SAFE

Straight after the event you should contact the appropriate service e.g. 999, your area manager or your HR team.

2.

## RECOGNISE YOUR OWN FEELINGS

To be able to support your staff appropriately, you first need to be aware of your own emotional needs and follow the same guidelines you would advise your staff to. It is important that you take care of yourself, and not just your staff members.

3.

## MAKE SURE THAT EVERYONE AFFECTED HAS SUPPORT

Reassure staff that it is normal for the police/investigation teams to be present on the premises. They may require an interview with you and your staff so it is important to reassure them that this is normal and nothing to feel anxious about.

It is wise to hold a briefing meeting with all of your staff before they go home to make sure that everyone has a chance to speak with each other.

During the meeting, ask the following:

- Has each staff member contacted a family member or close friend to let them know what happened?
- Has each staff member got the contact details of all support services available to them?
- Does each staff member have a safe method of travelling home?

Staff turn to their managers' for guidance in the hours following a Critical Incident, so you need to be prepared to support them. Whilst recognising that each employer will want to offer help in a number of different ways, there are some proven and practical steps that can be helpful.

# Supporting your Staff

## Practical Guidance



### POST INCIDENT

('IMMEDIACY')



After an incident, it is likely that individuals will feel confused about how they feel and what they should do. Remain calm and encourage staff to access support by modelling as many of the following behaviours as possible.

- Try to discourage staff from being on their own. It is usually better for people to stay at work with their colleagues for a time after an incident. This helps them to connect with other people who have also been involved.
  - Encourage staff to be supportive of each other, even those staff who 'appear to be okay'.
  - Show respect to individual staff members who prefer to be quiet by not trying to 'draw them out'.
  - Allow your staff to contact family and friends if they wish to.
  - Obtain as clear a picture as possible of the incident and communicate only what you know to be accurate. It is better to say that you don't have full details rather than try and quell the teams' anxiety by making assumptions.
  - Try not to be judgemental and remember that responses can be out of character.
- Removing them from the situation (e.g. to a quiet and private space) is not 'punishment' but a way of supporting them and their colleagues. This will help them to manage their reactions in peace and without fear of being judged.
- Whilst the nature of the traumatic event will influence how a staff member is feeling, a return to their normal routine is generally helpful. Encourage individuals to try to keep as much consistency in their life as possible and to return to work the next working day if appropriate in the circumstances.
  - Inform your staff about the support services available to them such as HR, Occupational Health and retailHUB; keep in mind that we also offer support to staff's family members.
  - Ensure contact details and procedures for internal and external support services are displayed and distributed to all colleagues affected in the immediate aftermath.

### DON'T X

- Don't criticise your staff in any way for their reactions, unless they are unacceptable and disruptive (e.g. bullying others as a result of their stress, not attending work without permission).
- Don't offer reassurance without the full picture (e.g. reassuring a colleague that another colleague is okay when you do not know this).
- Don't try and get people to talk about their feelings who don't want to; it is best to let all team members know that you are there if they need you and you can signpost them to internal or external support.



## THE WEEKS AND MONTHS THAT FOLLOW

**1.** Encourage your staff to talk about their experiences whether to colleagues, family, friends or retailHUB. It is their choice as to whom they speak, but it remains crucial that everyone has someone to turn to.

**2.** Remember that not everyone will know about the external and internal support services available to them. retailHUB offers free, confidential emotional and practical support for any issue the employee is facing. They can access us 24/7, 365 days a year. Wallet cards with our details are available free of charge and are useful to keep on hand.

**3.** Encourage your staff to keep as normal a schedule as possible; it is a good way to recover a sense of control over their emotional distress.

**4.** Encourage staff to take care of themselves physically. Whilst some will not want to be given advice, it can be useful to remind them that taking some exercise, eating healthily, and perhaps seeing their GP for any worrying symptoms can really help.

**5.** Be aware that for some individuals, concentration, problem-solving abilities and engagement at work may be hampered for a time.

**6.** Be aware of the impact of any media coverage concerning the event, particularly in relation to its nature (e.g. store robbery, accidents resulting in serious injury or death). Encourage selective reading as people can become distressed, especially when the media is reporting the event without all of the facts.

Once the initial reactions to an incident are over, normal business priorities will resume. Your staff, however, will continue to look to you to support them in the coming weeks. Your focus will be on guiding your staff to return to normal working whilst at the same time being aware of, and sensitive to, the strong feelings that may still be experienced by many. In order to support your staff, it is important that you are both visible and available to them. These tips have been proven to facilitate a return to normal working practices. Not all will be relevant to every incident and as a manager, you should select only those that apply to the situation you and your team are dealing with.

**7.** Where possible, avoid anything that will reawaken feelings of the incident and cause further distress (e.g. sending someone back to work on the same till at which the incident took place, or where they were in direct line of witnessing the incident). If this isn't possible, try and make sure that on their first few days back at work they stay close to a colleague who was not directly affected. This will give them reassurance and a sense of safety.

**8.** Encourage staff to remember that their colleagues will be experiencing similar feelings as they are, all of which are entirely normal.

**9.** Encourage staff not to make any major lifestyle changes or big decisions until they feel back to normal.

**10.** Avoid giving too much attention to the one or two members of staff who seem to be suffering the most – you may not be aware that others are suffering too.

# Things to Remember

**A Critical Incident can be any situation in which someone experiences a threat to their own life or physical safety, or has been affected by the death or injury of another as a result of a traumatic event (e.g. accident, suicide or crime).**

In the first 24 hours after an event, it is important that you give your staff (whether directly or indirectly affected) the contact details for retailHUB and encourage them to obtain emotional support from a telephone counsellor.

**24h**

Your staff are likely to be affected by your reactions to the incident and if they see you actively engaged with any source of help, it will make it easier for them to follow your lead.



When a person has been involved in a Critical Incident, they will experience a whole range of different emotions.

If you feel that immediate support is required, you can speak in confidence with a fully qualified counsellor who will be able to discuss your needs with you. This may include individual telephone support or, if more appropriate, the option for a retailHUB trauma specialist to visit your place of work to support you and any affected staff. The ideal time for a trauma specialist to visit an affected site is between 48 and 72 hours following an event.



# Understanding Common Responses

## FEELING AFRAID

This is one of the most frequently experienced emotions. The fear will often be driven by the type of incident. For example, in the case of an armed robbery at a till point where the attackers are still at large, employees may feel afraid for their personal safety and that of their family. They may feel frightened that the attackers know who they are and where they live. They may also be afraid that the perpetrators will return and launch another attack. Be aware that you may want to try to reduce staff members' fear by avoiding what they perceive to be risk areas at work. In this example, working on the tills, or returning to work immediately after the event may trigger strong emotions. Inevitably, they will also be affected outside of work, perhaps feeling anxious about using a cash point for fear of being robbed, or being around people they do not know.

## FEELING ANXIOUS

Anxiety is different to fear and it can have a long-term effect. Your staff may feel nervous, 'jumpy' or hypervigilant for some time. Unexpected anxiety can also be triggered by something that reminds them of the incident (e.g. similar clothing worn by the perpetrator, or a piece of music which was playing at the time of the Critical Incident.) Individuals also often have intrusive and recurring thoughts during the day and/or nightmares which not only have a psychological impact, but disrupted sleep patterns can also cause physical illness. Important note: individuals with experience of unrelated anxiety before the event are not necessarily likely to be more anxious than those considered to have a 'laid-back' or 'happy-go-lucky' nature.

## FEELING TEARFUL

It is very common for people to cry as a result of their involvement in a Critical Incident. For many, this is a coping mechanism and is best viewed as an entirely natural way of coping with the experience.

## FEELING ANGRY

It is likely that many of your staff will feel angry. Anger is often used to protect and conceal deeper emotions of distress such as hurt, sadness and fear. Thus, you may witness behaviour related to anger (e.g. a short-fuse or conflict between team members). You may also feel angry yourself. Although the anger is caused by the incident, many people are more susceptible to losing their temper in general following a traumatic event and this can often be viewed unsympathetically as "taking it out on others". Anger can also arise from seemingly minor incidents at work, including a hectic day or unkind words from a customer.

## OTHER PHYSICAL SIGNS

Individuals may also experience a variety of physical effects as a result of the event such as heart palpitations, neck and back pain, gastrointestinal problems and headaches. Individuals may also feel very tired and drained, which may continue for some time.

## APATHY AT WORK

Some people may feel apathetic and disengaged after the event and feelings can include a desire not to be at work if the event took place at their store or other usual location. A loss of energy, engagement, motivation and lowered concentration are common in these instances. Some may struggle to feel the same way about work as they used to in the weeks following the incident.

## FEELING NUMB AND/OR SHOCKED

For many people, these are their first reactions. There is often a sense of unreality, with typical comments being "It didn't seem real", "I can't believe what's happened", "It was like I was dreaming". Anyone can experience feeling emotionally numb for a few hours or even a few days, following a major incident.