



## COPING STRATEGIES

Everyone deals with stress after a Critical Incident in his or her own way. That is the way we physically, mentally, physiologically and spiritually are able to **COPE** with an event or events that cause stress which is a **NORMAL** reaction that a **NORMAL** person would have to an **ABNORMAL** event. The following techniques are some coping mechanisms that have proven to be helpful in post-incident stress situations.

**Express Feelings:** Share your thoughts and feelings with someone you trust, though it may be painful. Make sure the other person understands you're not asking for a solution, just an opportunity to express how you feel.

**Face the Pain:** Painful, fearful thoughts and memories come back without warning. This is normal, but our first reaction is to prevent this. Instead, let the memory or thought come back so that some release of tension can take place, and then decide when you want to stop it. You can even say to yourself, "Okay, that's enough!" Gradually, you will gain more control over these intrusive thoughts and feelings.

**Dreams and Nightmares:** Nightmares are very common reactions to traumatic stress. Although they can never be controlled completely, some people have learned to diminish them for themselves, "Okay, that's enough. Now I am going to dream about something else more pleasant." If you have trouble sleeping, try reading or watching TV. Insomnia should resolve in a few days, but if not, you may want to consult your physician.

**Recognize Self-Blame and Survivor's Guilt:** It's normal to feel some blame for just surviving a traumatic incident, especially if others were severely injured or killed. The "Why me?" and "I could have done something (or more) for that [person or situation]" can mentally take a toll on a survivor. Recognize this normal reaction for what it is—an irrational thought, one that cannot change what has occurred. It is **OKAY** to have survived.

**Change the Memory:** Remember, what's upsetting after a traumatic incident is not the incident itself, but your memory of it. You, and others you talk to, may keep discussing aspects of the event that are particularly distressing, stirring up those upsetting memories. Try to substitute other more affirmative aspects of the event, such as remembering someone who was saved, or someone who got to safety. Or remember how well the rescue team worked together to make the situation better. Substituting the positive thoughts for the negative is a healthy way to cope with the event and does not discount the significance of the event.

**Exercise:** Stress affects us physically as well as mentally. Strenuous exercise afterward is very useful, especially if you are already in good shape. Don't overdo it, however, and cause more harm than good! If you have chest pain or difficulty breathing while working out, stop the activity and consult your physician.

**Get Back to Work:** If you take time off work to cope, get back to work when it is appropriate. Expect the apprehension of your duties to remain with reminders of the incident. These responses are perfectly normal and should diminish with time. Getting back to the routine of your job aids in healing.

**Decrease Alcohol Consumption:** Drinking alcoholic beverages rarely helps in coping with stress and may compound thoughts and feelings surrounding the event. It hinders our ability to deal with stress, and blunts our responses. Try substituting with juices and healthier drinks.

**Accept Enjoyment and Diversion:** Although you may believe it will be a long time before you will laugh and feel better, it is OKAY to enjoy yourself and forget the incident. Getting involved in pleasant activities, such as going to the movies, playing sports, reading a good book, or exercising your mind, will be helpful in the days after a critical incident.

**Ask for Professional Help:** Sometimes professional help is needed to work through traumatic stress. Remember, the CISM teams are primarily peers helping peers, NOT professionals. Seeking the help of an employee assistance program is NOT a sign of weakness; it is a sign of strength. It takes courage to work with a professional and face your pains and fears. Be proud that you take this step.

**Don't Expect Too Much:** Working through post-traumatic stress is not something that happens overnight, and the process may take some time, and it may never return you to a pre-incident level of function. You will likely remember the event for a long time. Try to accept this element of yourself and put it in proper perspective.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** If traumatic stress can be faced squarely and dealt with in some positive fashion, you are winning half the challenge!