Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) Information Sheet

Stress is a normal part of every significant job. At different times during your career with the Department, your level of stress may reach a significant or critical point. An **acute stress** reaction is frequently related to a specific unusual event; Death of a co-worker, a multi-casualty incident, severe dismemberment or disfigurement of a victim, death of a child and personally knowing or relating to a victim are a few examples. A **delayed** reaction may happen days, weeks, and/or years after an event. This typically occurs after you are re-exposed or “triggered” by a similar sight including sound, smell, taste, touch, situation, etc. **Cumulative** stress is the buildup of stress over time and/or when you are experiencing significant amounts of stress simultaneously in your life. This buildup may eventually reach a critical mass, resulting in a stress reaction.

A stress reaction is an important signal. It is your body’s way of coping with the temporary state of being overwhelmed by a situation. The duration of the symptoms (hours, days, weeks or months) depends on your personal circumstances. However, once properly addressed, most acute stress reactions will significantly lessen within 24 – 72 hours. More importantly, a thoughtful combination of stress management strategies will lessen the impact of most situations.

**Healing Our Own:**
We need to recognize those at risk. Providing our fellow First Responders with support is now more important than ever.

Risk factors include:
- Sleep deprivation
- Heavy alcohol or drug use
- Witnessing a traumatic event
- Major physical illness or injury
- Loss of a close relationship.
- Isolation or lack of social support (e.g. retirement)
- Knowing others who have died by suicide

Additional warning signs include:
- Sudden Withdrawal from social contact
- Persistent feelings of hopelessness
- Increasingly reckless behavior
- Mood swings/Change in behavior
- Having a suicide plan (time, place, method)
Potential Ways to Reduce a Stress Reaction:

- Remember, you are a **NORMAL** person, having a **NORMAL** reaction to an extremely difficult situation.
- Four natural physiological stress relievers are: Laughing, Crying, Exercise and Touch. (The more you can include these in your life, the greater the potential for reduced stress levels.)
- Make an attempt to include periods of strenuous physical exercise (alternated with relaxation) to alleviate some of the physical reactions. Specifically within the first 24 – 48 hours (if at all possible!)
- Drink lots and lots and lots of **water**. (Avoid dehydration.)
- Eat well-balanced and regular meals! (Even if you do not feel like it).
- Get plenty of rest.
- Be aware of wanting to alter yourself with caffeine, nicotine, drugs, or alcohol. These chemicals tend to intensify the physiological stress reactions you are already experiencing. Additionally, you do not want to complicate the situation by adding substance abuse to the list of problems.
- Do things that feel good to you: Read, write, pray/meditate, listen to music, walk, sit quietly, cook, watch a movie, take a hot shower or bath, get a massage, do progressive relaxation & deep breathing exercises, etc.
- Talk and spend time with others. (Many find that talking is the most healing medicine.)
- Realize those around you may also be under stress.
- Help your co-workers as much as possible by checking out how they are doing and sharing your thoughts and feelings with them.
- Allow yourself some down time to just relax and temporarily do nothing.
- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible. Structure your time and make an attempt to keep busy.
- Make as many daily decisions as possible. This should give you a sense of control over your life. (With something as simple as someone asking “what you want to eat” – give an answer even if you are not sure.)
- Postpone major life decisions (moving, leaving the job, ending a relationship, making major financial investments, etc.) for a minimum of 30 days.
- Recurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks are normal. Typically they are just signals that your body needs to further process the details of the event(s). Find constructive ways to understand and integrate these details (talk, write, draw, pray, meditate, etc.).
- If you get “stuck,” consider consulting trained CISM peers, clergy, mental health professionals and/or your physician. Let your support system do its job in serving you. It can make a significant difference.

How Can I Help My Loved One:

- There is no “right” thing to say. **Listening** is often the best thing to do.
- Remember, the healing process is very dynamic and there is a wide range of normal reactions. Some individuals will want to share specific details. Others will prefer a quiet and compassionate presence. Most will want a combination of support. Remain flexible to his or her needs and never “expect” certain reactions.
- Spend time with the affected individual. Offer your assistance and a listening ear even if he/she has not asked for help.
- Assist with practical things like cooking, cleaning, caring for the children, grocery shopping, etc.
- Give him/her some private time.
- Don’t take anger or other feelings directed at you personally.
- Don’t tell him/her that they are “lucky it was not worse!” Impacted individuals are not consoled by these statements. Instead, tell them that you are sorry that such an event has occurred and you want to understand and assist them.
- **Take care of yourself.** You will not be able to help anyone if you do not first care for yourself.