

After a Critical Incident

What acute stress can look like in the hours and days after a high-impact event.

Common early reactions

Sleep disruption, intrusive images, startle responses, irritability, emotional numbing, guilt, shakiness, difficulty concentrating, changes in appetite, and wanting either to talk constantly or not at all can occur after critical incidents.

Helpful early supports

- Prioritize safety, hydration, food, sleep opportunity, and practical support.
- Use trusted peers without forcing a detailed retelling before you are ready.
- Avoid using alcohol as the primary way to sleep or shut down.
- Expect concentration and patience to be temporarily reduced.
- Monitor symptoms over time rather than judging yourself by the first 24-72 hours.

When to seek more support

Persistent or worsening intrusive symptoms, inability to function, severe guilt, panic, unsafe substance use, suicidal thoughts, or symptoms that remain highly disruptive deserve professional assessment.

Try this reflection

What support would be easiest to accept in the first 48 hours after a difficult incident: practical help, peer contact, quiet time, family communication, or professional support?

Using this resource: For education and skill-building only; not diagnosis, medical advice, or crisis care. If you feel overwhelmed, pause and seek appropriate professional support. In the U.S., call or text 988 for crisis support; call 911 for an immediate emergency.