



# Chapter 8

## Behavioral Resiliency



# Chapter 8: Behavioral Resiliency

---

## Objectives

After completing this chapter, participants should be able to:

1. Define *critical incident*.
2. Explain the purpose of a Critical Incident Debriefing.
3. List the four principles of trauma-related stress.
4. List the symptoms of a stress reaction.
5. Explain how to manage stress during and after a critical incident.
6. Describe considerations for families of victims of a critical incident.
7. Explain the importance of following protocols for media and social media contact during and after a critical incident.

## Chapter 8: Behavioral Resiliency

### Introduction

The best way to deal with emergencies is to prevent them. On a well-run site, emergencies should be few and far between. But it is not possible to totally eliminate the chance of an emergency. Basic planning and worker training are very important. An infectious disease site may involve conditions that make accidents and rescues more complicated, and communication can be more difficult than usual. The possibility of dangerous conditions makes mistakes more costly. Hazards may not be obvious. Advance training is the best way to limit the damage done by any accident or emergency.

Most of the cleanups that you will be involved in are known as remedial actions and are nonemergency situations. Emergency situations are handled in an earlier phase of the process known as a removal action. Removal actions are typically performed by specially trained emergency response teams like the fire department personnel.

Remedial actions have the following characteristics:

- They begin after the more immediate (emergency) problems have been controlled.
- The work involves removing the hazardous materials and restoring the site to a normal condition.

Remedial actions involve a variety of activities. Therefore, workers with different skills and crafts, as well as support facilities, crews, and equipment, are needed.

Some cleanup operations, however, may require more hazardous work in the presence of Category A infected waste, and an emergency response plan may be put into effect as part of worksite planning. If an accident, emergency, or a critical incident occurs on your worksite, you have certain responsibilities and jobs to perform, and these can expose you to situations, circumstances, and sights that can have a strong and lasting emotional impact. A critical incident can be defined as an event that happens abruptly, and that has an impact that can overwhelm a person's normally effective ability to deal with physical or emotional stress.

We are beginning to understand how stressors encountered in these types of situations may affect you and your fellow workers. Workers in these situations may face the danger of death or physical injury, to themselves or to their coworkers, and they may see mass disaster or

## Chapter 8: Behavioral Resiliency

---

mass casualties. In general, you may see and experience things that are beyond your body and mind's ability to cope with, without assistance.

In addition to physical danger, you are at risk of being impacted behaviorally and emotionally. Sometimes the emotional aftershocks (or stress reactions) appear immediately after the traumatic event. Sometimes they may appear a few hours or a few days later. And, in some cases, weeks or months may pass before the stress reactions appear.

### Behavioral Resiliency

#### WHAT IS A CRITICAL INCIDENT?



*Critical incident = Traumatic event*

In 2015, there were 4,836 workplace fatalities ranging from transportation incidents, contact with objects and equipment, slips, trips, and falls, to violence and exposure to harmful substances or environments. In 2015, construction had the highest number of fatalities at 937, and the fourth-highest fatality rate of all industries.

A workplace critical incident is a sudden and unexpected workplace situation or event that can be traumatic for everyone but none more so than for the workers involved. Critical incidents in the construction industry typically involve a workplace fatality(ies) and/or serious injury(ies). The incident generally causes someone who witnesses it or was involved in it to experience a stress reaction with strong emotions at any time during and/or after the incident.

Many contractors respond to critical incidents by following a structured emergency response plan. The plan generally consists of organizing, coordinating, and the directing of available resources in order to respond to the event and bring the emergency under control. The goal of this coordinated response is to contain the incident and minimize the physical and structural impact on people, structures, and the community.

Rarely does a workplace emergency response plan address the emotional and mental impact of a critical incident on affected workers. However, in recent years there has been more focus and attention on the effects of traumatic events on individuals. People often have reactions to these extraordinary events that may leave them feeling overwhelmed and upset. We now know that besides the physical damage caused by these workplace events, the surviving victims, their co-workers, and the workers' families may also suffer psychological and emotional effects that can be significant and last longer than some physical scars.

A crisis management plan, strategies designed to help an organization deal with a sudden and significant negative event with an established protocol for critical incident response, can help contractors and impacted workers deal with the emotional aspects of experiencing a workplace critical incident. It is important to take certain steps to try and address the various feelings and reactions that workers may have to a traumatic event. This will also be important to help get people back to work sooner and to try to lessen the long-term emotional impact that a critical incident can have on someone.

# Chapter 8: Behavioral Resiliency

---

In order for work to resume following a critical incident, workers need to be fully assured of their safety so as to not feel afraid to return to work and to have their trust in the leadership established so that they want to return to work.

## Impact of Critical Incidents

Workers who witness and/or are involved in critical incidents may have known the victim(s), or simply worked on the same jobsite where the event occurred, and can be severely affected. There is no set range of emotions workers may experience after such an incident, or any specific timetable when these feelings might come up. Shock, anger, guilt, and a host of other emotions can occur.

For example, some workers may experience flashbacks, anxiety about work activities, physical reactions (sweating, shaking, dizziness, or nightmares) and depression. The type or the intensity of an individual's physical and emotional responses may vary. The details of the incident – if it was natural or man-made, the degree of violence and horror experienced by eyewitnesses, the possibility for a similar event to occur, or previous involvement with other critical incidents – can all impact workers and the extent of their emotional reactions.



*Involvement with a critical incident can have a severe emotional impact.*

## Critical Incident Debriefing Helps Members Cope

When these worksite critical incidents occur, having a trained specialist visit the worksite and provide needed assistance and support to witnesses or to those who may be otherwise affected by the incident is important. This type of support helps workers and others to be better able to recognize and cope with the emotions such traumatic events can produce.



## Chapter 8: Behavioral Resiliency

The Laborers' Health and Safety Fund of North America (LHSFA) has created *Crisis Management: A Guide for Effective Critical Incident Response*, which provides guidelines and best practices for employers to help create effective crisis management planning, and methods for supporting the emotional needs of their workers after a crisis occurs.

The guide includes topics such as:

- developing a communication plan;
- critical incident debriefing plans for workers on the day of the incident, and the days following the incident;
- guidance for addressing the needs of families of impacted workers;
- managing media and social media contact; and
- notifying next of kin in the case of death or injury to an employee.

### TRAUMA-RELATED STRESS

A critical incident is traumatic for the workers involved. The incident can cause you to experience a stress reaction with strong emotional reactions at any time during or after the incident. Following are four basic principles of trauma-related stress:

1. Trauma is in the eye of the beholder. Each individual may perceive different things to be traumatic. What is traumatic for one person may not be for another, it is completely subjective.
2. The traumatic response is a normal response to an abnormal event. Responding to trauma is an appropriate way for the body and mind to handle what it has just seen and/or experienced. It is the physiological way we protect ourselves.
3. Traumatic stress is a psychobiological event – it impacts the body and the mind.
4. What you resist persists. By not addressing symptoms of a traumatic event and/or not allowing yourself to have a response or ignoring feelings will prolong being able to move forward and recover. If a traumatic response is not addressed it will likely surface at a future time one doesn't expect.

### Symptoms of Stress Reaction

The signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last a few days, a few weeks, or a few

# Chapter 8: Behavioral Resiliency

---

months and occasionally longer depending on the severity of the traumatic event or a person's previous experiences. With understanding and the support of loved ones, the stress reactions usually pass more quickly. Occasionally you may experience a traumatic event so painful that professional assistance from a specialist or counselor may be necessary.

You work in an industry where people are reluctant to acknowledge they need help and/or to seek it out. Getting help does not imply craziness or weakness. It simply indicates that the particular event was just too powerful for you to manage by yourself. After the incidents at the World Trade Center and Pentagon on 9/11/01, we saw that a lot of people carried the experience and what they had seen or felt for a long time. With assistance, many of these people were able to begin to heal and move forward.

Below are symptoms of a stress reaction broken down into categories: physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. You may experience one or more of these symptoms after responding to a disaster, it is unusual not to experience any changes. Later in the chapter suggestions will be discussed as to how to address these side effects of stress.

## Physical

Physical signs and symptoms that someone may experience include the following:

- nausea
- tremors (lips, hands)
- profuse sweating
- diarrhea
- rapid heart beat
- increased blood pressure
- muscle aches
- upset stomach
- feeling uncoordinated
- chills
- chest pain (should be checked at hospital)
- rapid breathing

## Chapter 8: Behavioral Resiliency

---

- headaches
- sleep disturbances
- weight loss/gain

### Cognitive

Cognitive signs and symptoms that someone may experience include the following:

- slowed thinking
- difficulty in problem-solving
- disorientation (especially to time and place)
- difficulty concentrating
- difficulty naming common objects
- distressing dreams
- difficulty making decisions
- confusion
- difficulty calculating
- memory problems
- seeing the event over and over (flashbacks)
- poor attention span

### Emotional

Emotional signs and symptoms that someone may experience include the following:

- anxiety
- guilt
- depression
- feeling lost
- feeling numb
- shock

# Chapter 8: Behavioral Resiliency

---

- fear
- grief
- sadness
- anger
- startled
- apathy



*A stress reaction may bring feelings of sadness or isolation.*

## Behavioral

Behavioral signs and symptoms that someone may experience include the following:

- feeling abandoned
- worrying about others
- wanting to limit contact with others
- unusual anger
- change in eating habits
- paranoia
- isolation
- wanting to hide / withdrawal
- irritability
- prolonged silence
- decreased personal hygiene

## Who is at Greatest Risk for Severe Stress Symptoms?

Workers who directly experience or witness any of the following, either during or after a disaster, are at greatest risk for severe and possibly long-term stress symptoms.

- Life threatening danger or physical harm.
- Exposure to gruesome death, bodily injury, or dead or maimed bodies.
- Extreme environmental/human violence or destruction.
- Loss of home, valued possessions, neighborhood, or community.

## Chapter 8: Behavioral Resiliency

- Loss of communication with or support from close relations.
- Extreme fatigue, weather exposure, hunger, or sleep deprivation.
- Extended exposure to danger, loss, emotional/physical strain.
- Exposure to contamination (such as biological agents or toxic chemicals).

### MANAGING STRESS

#### Managing Stress During a Disaster Operation



*Managing your stress during a traumatic incident allows you to stay focused on your job and any potential jobsite hazards.*

You will need to take care of yourself to help stay focused on hazards at the site and to maintain the constant vigilance needed for you and your fellow workers' safety. You may not recognize the need to take care of yourself and to monitor your own emotional and physical health, especially when your assignment stretches into several weeks. In addition to attending any critical incident debriefing meetings that your employer may hold, here are some additional ways that you can manage your stress during a disaster operation:

- Develop a “buddy” system with a co-worker.
- Watch out for each other. Co-workers may be intently focused on a particular task and may not notice a hazard nearby or behind.
- Take care of yourself physically by exercising regularly and eating small quantities of food frequently.
- Take frequent rest breaks. The work you will be doing may take place in an extremely dangerous environment. Mental fatigue over long shifts can put you at increased risk for injury.
- Make sure that you drink plenty of fluids such as water and juices.
- Try to eat a variety of foods and increase your intake of complex carbohydrates (breads, whole grain muffins, granola bars, etc.).



*Regular exercise is one way to manage both physical and emotional health.*

# Chapter 8: Behavioral Resiliency

---

- Whenever possible, take breaks away from the work area. Eat and drink in the cleanest area available.
- Recognize and accept what you cannot change – the chain of command, organizational structure, waiting, equipment failures, etc.
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten – you are in a difficult situation.

## Managing Stress After a Disaster

Over time, your impressions and understanding of your experiences will change. This process is different for everyone. No matter what the event or your reaction to it, you can follow some basic steps to help adjust to the experience.

Your employer may hold a number of group meetings, including those with a certified mental health professional, to help support workers' emotional health. In addition to these meetings, it will be important for you to try to do the following things after returning home from a critical incident:

- Reach out – people really do care.
- Reconnect with family, spiritual, and community supports.
- Do not make any big life decisions.
- Catch up on rest (this may take several days).
- Eat well balanced, regular meals.
- Slow down – get back to a normal pace in your daily life.
- Understand that it's perfectly normal to want to talk about the disaster and equally normal not to want to talk about it.
- Expect disappointment, frustration, and conflict – sometimes coming home doesn't live up to what you imagined it would be. Keep recalling what's really important in your life and relationships so that small stressors don't lead to major conflicts.
- Don't be surprised if you experience mood swings; they will diminish with time.
- Appreciate a sense of humor in yourself and others. It is OK to laugh again.
- Don't overwhelm children with your experiences; be sure to talk about what happened in their lives while you were gone.



*Managing your stress level after a traumatic incident in the workplace helps you to stay focused on the rest of your life.*

## Chapter 8: Behavioral Resiliency

---

- If talking doesn't feel natural, other forms of expression or stress relief such as journal writing, hobbies, and exercise are recommended.
- Avoid use of drugs or alcohol. These are not healthy coping mechanisms and could lead to additional stressors or problems.

### Helping Families and Friends of Impacted Workers

Whether impacted workers live close to the site of a critical incident with their families or are away from their families and on the road or “traveling” for work will likely affect the amount of support required from the employer for a particular victim’s family members.

When a critical incident results in fatalities and/or serious injuries an employer will need to consider the following steps:

- Do families of those injured or killed need to be notified? By whom? How?
- Convey to employees what to say and not to say to families and others.
- Determine where or to whom calls from family members of injured or deceased workers should be forwarded.

Employers should be prepared for family interactions including:

- Making special arrangements to greet and address families of those who have died or who are hospitalized.
- Anticipating the needs of family members arriving on site and assign personnel to immediately meet and direct family members who may arrive onsite.
- Protecting families from the media.
- Arranging to reunite family members with their loved ones as soon as possible, this could include coordinating and making travel arrangements for impacted family.
- Considering techniques for meeting families at home, at the hospital or other public places or over the phone.

## Chapter 8: Behavioral Resiliency

---

### Media and Social Media Considerations

Employers in the face of a critical incident should be prepared to manage contact with the media both for themselves and their employees. Workers should be assured that their employer has a plan in place to deal with media questions about the incident and then educated on that plan. Workers should be instructed not to talk to the media, not to answer questions, and instructed on where and to whom to direct reporters if they arrive to cover the incident.

In addition, workers should be advised not to take any pictures or video of a critical incident. However, recognizing that some people likely still will, workers should be told not to post any critical incident-related pictures or videos to social media – especially not before families of impacted workers have been notified that their loved one has been killed or severely injured.



## Chapter 8: Behavioral Resiliency

### Summary

A *critical incident* is an event that happens abruptly and has an impact that can overwhelm a person's normally effective ability to deal with physical or emotional stress. Workers in these types of situations may face the danger of death or physical injury, to themselves, or to their coworkers, and they may see mass disaster or mass casualties. You may see and experience things that are beyond your body and mind's ability to cope with, without assistance. In addition to physical danger, you are at risk of being impacted behaviorally and emotionally, and the emotional aftershocks can be long-lasting.

Workplace emergency response plans rarely address the emotional and mental impact of a critical incident on affected workers. However, in recent years there has been more focus and attention on the effects of traumatic events on individuals. We now know that besides the physical damage caused by these workplace events, the surviving victims, their co-workers, and the workers' families may also suffer psychological and emotional effects that can be significant and last longer than some physical scars.

A crisis management plan with an established protocol for critical incident response can help contractors and impacted workers deal with the emotional aspects of experiencing a workplace critical incident. It is important to take certain steps to try and address the various feelings and reactions that workers may have to a traumatic event. This will also be important to help get people back to work sooner, and to try and lessen the long-term emotional impact that a critical incident can have on someone. When these worksite critical incidents occur, it is important to have a trained specialist visit the worksite, and provide needed assistance and support to those who witnessed or may otherwise be affected by the incident.

A critical incident can cause you to experience a stress reaction with strong emotional reactions at any time during or after the incident. The four basic principles of trauma-related stress include the following:

- Trauma is subjective and can have different effects on people.
- A traumatic response is a normal response to an abnormal event.
- Traumatic stress is a psychobiological event that impacts the body and the mind.
- Symptoms of stress from a traumatic event should be addressed and not ignored.

## Chapter 8: Behavioral Resiliency

---

Symptoms of stress reaction can be grouped into categories: physical, cognitive, emotional and behavioral. You may experience symptoms after responding to a disaster, and it's unusual to not experience any changes. You will need to take care of yourself to help stay focused on hazards at the site, and to maintain the constant vigilance needed for you and your fellow workers' safety. You may not recognize the need to take care of yourself and to monitor your own emotional and physical health, especially when your assignment stretches into several weeks. Whether impacted workers live close to the site of a critical incident with their families, or are away from their families and on the road or "traveling" for work, will likely affect the amount of support required from the employer for a particular victim's family members.

Employers in the face of a critical incident should also be prepared to manage contact with the media, both for themselves and their employees. Workers should be assured that their employer has a plan in place to deal with media questions about the incident, and then informed about that plan. Workers should also be instructed not to talk to the media, not to answer questions, and to whom they should direct reporters if they arrive to cover the incident. In addition, workers should be advised not to take any pictures or video of a critical incident. However, recognizing that some people likely still will, workers should be told not to post any critical incident-related pictures or videos to social media.

### Appendices: Critical Incident Resources from LIUNA Health and Safety Fund

#### UNDERSTANDING AND COPING WITH CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS

Sudden critical incidents occur without warning and have the potential to severely impact you and your community. We have provided the following information to help you deal with this critical event. **We encourage you to share this information with your family and friends.**

- For the next several weeks you and the people you care about may experience feelings of pain and hurt. No one is prepared to deal with such a catastrophic occurrence. The feelings you may experience are very different from any you have likely felt before.
- Find people to talk with you about the incident. Talking helps to release the tension and put the incident into perspective. Refusing to talk can increase the feelings of isolation and the feeling that “no one cares.” The world cannot read your mind. Your family, fellow employees, and friends do not know what you are feeling unless you tell them.
- Try not to be alone. Being alone can increase thoughts of isolation and the idea that you are the only one feeling this way.
- You may find that you are over-protective of your family, and specifically, your children. This is to be expected and is OK. Your sense of control has been severely threatened, and you may feel very vulnerable. As you get further away from the incident, the feeling will be more controlled. Talk with your family members about your need to be over-protective. Allow them the opportunity to understand and accept your actions.
- Avoid violent television programs, movies, and books for the next month. This type of activity may produce some of the same feelings that occurred after the critical incident.
- It is important to control the amount of alcohol and other substances that may alter your state of mind. Using substances of this nature can provide temporary relief from your anxiety; but it only delays the natural and healthy process of coping with the incident.

## Chapter 8: Behavioral Resiliency

---

- You may experience a change in your sleep pattern. Sleeping is sometimes difficult because of the fear that dreams may contain scary thoughts related to the incident. Expect it will take you twice as long to fall asleep. If you are still having difficulty failing asleep in a reasonable period of time, try moving to a different room to watch television or listen to the radio. It is important to avoid associating your bedroom with disturbing thoughts.
- Make sure you are getting enough exercise. A regular exercise routine helps reduce stress.
- It is extremely important to realize you will not feel like this forever. You have experienced a traumatic situation. Your body is slowly adjusting to the results of the incident.



“The essence of psychological trauma is the loss of faith that there is order and continuity in life. Trauma occurs when one loses the sense of having a safe place to retreat within, or outside of oneself to deal with frightening emotions or experiences. This results in a state of helplessness, a feeling that one’s actions have no bearing on the outcome of one’s life.”

– Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk

**REMEMBER, CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS IS THE BODY AND MIND’S COPING RESPONSE OF A NORMAL PERSON TO AN ABNORMAL SITUATION. IF FEELINGS ARE SHARED, UNDERSTOOD, AND ACCEPTED, RECOVERY WILL BE MORE RAPID.**

### REACTIONS TO TRAUMA STRESS

#### It's OK to Feel the Way You Do...

You've just had a very difficult experience. It is very common for people to experience emotional and physical aftershocks when they have experienced a traumatic event. **Don't be worried, you are not going crazy. These are NORMAL reactions of NORMAL people going through a NORMAL recovery from a very ABNORMAL situation. It's not only OK, but it's appropriate for you to feel the way you do.**

Sometimes these emotional and physical aftershocks (or stress reactions) appear immediately after the traumatic situation. Sometimes they may appear a few hours or a few days later. And, in some cases, weeks or months may pass before the stress reactions appear. Everyone is different.

The signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last a few days, a few weeks, or a few months, and occasionally even longer depending on the severity of the traumatic event. With the understanding and support of loved ones, the stress reactions usually pass more quickly. Occasionally the traumatic event is so painful that professional assistance from a counselor may be necessary. This does not imply craziness or weakness. It simply indicates that the particular event was just too powerful for you to manage entirely on your own. It is important to remember that if these symptoms persist or worsen over time that professional help be obtained to prevent significant damage to your ability to cope with the stress.

The next page contains very common signs and symptoms of a stress reaction that someone may experience.

No one can deny that this was a difficult experience for you, but it's important to know that, like the flu, your reactions will run their course and you will feel better in time if you continue to "talk out" your feelings and reactions. Withdrawal and "sealing over" can prolong your recovery and make it more difficult. This is especially true if you have been involved in other unresolved traumatic events or if your personal life is currently not stable. When it's especially tough, remember, it's OK to feel the way you do, express any fears or feelings and get professional help if it doesn't get better.

# Chapter 8: Behavioral Resiliency

PHYSICAL	MENTAL	EMOTIONAL	BEHAVIORAL
nausea	slowed thinking	anxiety	feeling abandoned
upset stomach	difficulty making decisions	fear	isolation
tremors (lips, hands)	difficulty in problem-solving	guilt	worrying about others
feeling uncoordinated	confusion	grief	wanting to hide / withdrawal
profuse sweating	disorientation (especially to time and place)	depression	wanting to limit contact with others
chills	difficulty calculating	sadness	irritability
diarrhea	difficulty concentrating	feeling lost	unusual anger
chest pain (should be checked at hospital)	difficulty concentrating	anger	prolonged silence
rapid heart beat	memory problems	feeling numb	change in eating habits
rapid breathing	difficulty naming common objects	startled	decreased personal hygiene
increased blood pressure	seeing the event over and over (flashbacks)	shock	paranoia
headaches	distressing dreams	apathy	
muscle aches	poor attention span		
sleep disturbances			

## Chapter 8: Behavioral Resiliency

### MANAGING TRAUMA STRESS

#### “How Can I Deal With My Reactions to This Incident?”

The incident you have just experienced was a shock to your system and your reactions are quite NORMAL. These reactions may last for a few days, a few weeks, or even a few months. Try some of the following to reduce the emotional pain of the incident you have experienced.

- Exercise vigorously within a day or two of the incident; alternate with relaxation.
- Structure your time and keep busy; maintain normal routines.
- Don't label yourself as “crazy” – remember that you are just having normal reactions to an abnormal event.
- Talk with people: your family, friends, co-workers.
- Don't numb yourself with alcohol or drugs.
- Spend some time with others.
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten and to tell others that you feel that way.
- Keep a journal; it can be especially helpful if writing in when having trouble sleeping.
- Do things that you especially enjoy.
- Don't make any major life changes or decisions for a while.
- Do make as many daily decisions as possible to reassert your sense of control.
- Get plenty of rest. (See below.)
- Eat well-balanced and regular meals, even if you don't feel like it.
- Don't fight recurring thoughts, images, flashbacks, or dreams – they will decrease with time.
- Help co-workers by asking how they are doing and sharing your feelings about the incident.
- Reach out to others – people do care.
- Remember, there is no set time frame for your reaction to the trauma to subside, each person's situation is different, be patient.

# Chapter 8: Behavioral Resiliency

---

If you have trouble sleeping, try some of these things:

For difficulty getting to sleep:

- Avoid caffeine in coffee, tea, colas, and chocolates before bed time.
- Do some gentle stretching exercises before going to bed.
- Have a glass of milk before going to bed.
- Avoid naps in the late afternoon or evening.
- Read a light book or magazine at bed time.
- Listen to relaxing music or a relaxation tape before bed time. (Do not watch TV while trying to sleep.)

For waking up at night:

- Get up and have a glass of milk.
- Don't toss and turn for more than fifteen minutes – get up and do a quiet activity such as reading or just enjoy the peace and quiet of the night.

For disturbing dreams:

- When you wake up with a thought-provoking dream, write down what it was about.
- Turn on a light, look around, and get up to “shake” the intense feeling of the dream.
- Imagine your own ending to the dream.

For waking too early:

- Get up early and enjoy the morning.
- Make sure the room is dark enough.
- Maintain a routine of going to bed and getting up at the same time.



## Chapter 8: Behavioral Resiliency

### **BY ALAN T. STURM, R.N., C., Clinician Geriatric Nurse**

Death is often considered an event, but it is more appropriately considered a process. Death is difficult to define because we cannot directly experience it. Loss – whether it is the loss of a loved one, home, employment, body limb, functional or emotional ability – like death may be experienced in the same manner.

The process of loss or death is usually broken up into three important parts: bereavement, grief, and mourning. Bereavement is defined as the state of having suffered the loss of a loved one, usually a family member. However, many people also suffer from the loss of animals.

Grief refers to the psychological and physical reactions directly related to the loss. Mourning, on the other hand, refers to how the bereaved person expresses grief within his or her cultural or religious background. It is important that previous lifelong experiences determine the way older individuals cope with losses, and this influences the grief process.

Symptoms of grief may be physical and/or mental (emotional). Not everyone experiences all of these symptoms or reactions which may vary in their frequency and intensity, coming and going for short periods of time.

Grief and mourning have been identified in three stages. The first is an initial response—shock, disbelief, feelings of emptiness, numbness, and confusion. Similar to Kuebler-Ross's Stages of Death (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance), this early stage of grief serves to protect the individual from overwhelming pain. It is followed by sorrow, which can last several weeks. The survivor may find himself weeping and crying easily, responding to physical symptoms, such as loss of appetite and sleep; and experiencing behavioral responses, by taking tranquilizers and/or keeping extremely active.

The second stage, known as the intermediate phase, may start around three weeks after death and lasts approximately one year.

This can be an extremely difficult stage since the survivor frequently finds himself dwelling on one aspect or situation related to the death, often trying to understand the meaning of death and feeling that the deceased person is present.

## Chapter 8: Behavioral Resiliency

---

The last phase, recovery, is often a time when the survivor moves on with living, becoming increasingly social and developing new skills. Many people find themselves making new friends and gaining a personal strength, realizing that grief can be good, not always bad.

There are, of course, grief reactions which are considered unusual, morbid, and are labeled pathological. Stages and symptoms last longer and are more severe. Depending upon their coping abilities, some people turn to substance abuse and/or have symptoms or major depression.

Bereavement groups can be very useful during times of grief.

**(Note:** Your Laborers' MAP or local community mental health organization can help you find an appropriate resource in your local community.)

## Chapter 8: Behavioral Resiliency

---

### THINGS THAT ARE HELPFUL DURING TIMES OF GRIEF

#### Time

Time alone; and time with others whom you trust and who will listen when you need to talk. Months and years of time to feel and understand the feelings that go along with the loss.

#### Rest - Relaxation - Exercise - Nourishment - Diversion

You may need extra amounts of things you needed before. Hot baths, afternoon naps, a trip, a “cause” to work for to help others – any of these may give you a lift. Grief is an exhausting process emotionally. You need to replenish yourself. Follow what feels healing to you and what connects you to the people and things you love.

#### Security

Try to reduce or find help for financial or other stress in your life. Allow yourself to be close to those you trust. Getting back into a routine helps. You may need to allow yourself to do things at your own pace.

#### Hope

You may find hope and comfort from those who have experienced a similar loss. Knowing some things that helped them, and realizing that they have recovered and time does help may give you hope that sometime in the future your grief will be less raw and painful.

#### Caring

Try to allow yourself to accept the expressions of caring from others even though they may be uneasy and awkward. Helping a friend or relative suffering the same loss may bring a feeling of closeness with that person.

# Chapter 8: Behavioral Resiliency

---

## Goals

For a while, it will seem that much of life is without meaning. At times like these, small goals are helpful. Something to look forward to, like playing tennis with a friend next week, a movie tomorrow night, or a trip next month, helps you get through the time in the immediate future. Living one day at a time is a rule of thumb. At first, don't be surprised if your enjoyment of these things isn't the same. This is normal. As time passes you may need to work on some longer range goals to give some structure and direction to your life. You may need guidance or counseling to help with this.

## Small Pleasures

Do not underestimate the healing effects of small pleasures as you are ready. Sunsets, a walk in the woods, a favorite food - all are small steps toward regaining your pleasure in life itself.

## Permission to Backslide

Sometimes after a period of feeling good, we find ourselves back in the old feelings of extreme sadness, despair, or anger. This is often the nature of grief, up and down, and it may happen over and over for a time. It happens because as humans, we cannot take in all of the pain and the meaning of death at once. So we let it in a little at a time.

## Alcohol and Drugs Are Not Helpful

Even short-term medication used to help people get through periods of shock under a physician's guidance, may prolong and delay the necessary process of grieving by masking its symptoms. We cannot prevent or cure grief. The only way to recover from the grieving process is to work through it and seek professional grief counseling help, if necessary.