



CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS MANAGEMENT

FOR CIVIL SERVICE ORGANISATIONS

| CONTENTS



Introduction	Page 3
Critical Incident	Page 4
Critical Incident Stress	Page 4
Typical Response Flow Chart	Page 7
Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM)	Page 8
Role of Line Manager	Page 9
RITS (Rest, Information, Transition and Services)	Page 10
Activation of CSEAS CISM Response	Page 14
Engagement with CSEAS CISM Intervention	Page 15
Rules of CISM Group Interventions	Page 16
Feedback to Management / HR	Page 17
Confidentiality and GDPR	Page 17

INTRODUCTION

The Civil Service is committed to providing a safe and healthy work environment for all civil servants and to ensure that their health, welfare and wellbeing at work is, as far as possible, reasonably protected. This is in line with obligations as an employer under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005. This duty of care applies to both mental and physical wellbeing.

Critical incidents are specific, often unexpected, time limited events that often invoke unusually strong emotional reactions that have the potential to interfere with ability to function during the incident, immediately following the incident, or later, and can represent significant disruption to the individual, group and organisational wellbeing.

While the provision of Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) support is not counselling, it is a system of potential interventions that facilitates both the individual and organisational recovery process in the aftermath of a serious incident.

This document sets out the potential interventions and protocols to be followed with a view to managing the wellbeing of all civil servants in the event of a critical incident occurring.

Familiarity with what a critical incident is, the roles we all play and the protocol outlined in this document can go a long way to mitigate against the more harmful impacts of a critical incident.

| CRITICAL INCIDENT

The World Health Organisation (WHO) describes a critical incident as an event out of the range of normal experience – one which is sudden and unexpected, involves the perception of a threat to life and can include elements of physical and emotional loss.

Often such events are sufficiently disturbing to overwhelm, or threaten to overwhelm, a person's coping capacity, and also have the potential to cause sudden and / or significant disruption to the operation of an organisation.

| CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS

The stress which we experience when we are exposed to a critical incident is called "critical incident stress". Our stress reactions to critical incidents are essentially normal reactions to an abnormal situation, sudden, unexpected or frightening incident. Individual signs and symptoms of stress can vary greatly amongst and between individuals. These are influenced by a number of factors, including their personal circumstances, physical, psychological and social situation, together with their perspective of the incident that has occurred. For more information on reactions to trauma, please see this [CSEAS webpage](#)

Most people would be severely shaken by a critical incident but are likely to recover from its impact with appropriate support. However, such incidents may cause extreme stress, fear or injury to the person(s) experiencing or witnessing the event and may have the potential to have a lasting effect on individuals. For some people, the full impact of a critical incident only becomes apparent after several weeks, when serious symptoms emerge. Early and appropriate support to those affected by a traumatic / critical incident can help reduce the adverse effects of the event and minimise the possibility of further problems developing at a later date.

Critical incidents in the workplace may include:

- Personal threat
- Acts of violence or assault
- Terrorist incident
- Multi-casualty incident / disaster
- Death / serious injury
- Workplace robbery / fire / accident
- Prolonged incident with negative results
- Knowing the victim involved in an event
- The victim or observer of workplace violence
- Multiple significant incidents within a short time frame
- Witnessing / discovering a person involved in serious self-harm
- Event with excessive media attention
- Any other significant or overwhelming event

The range of critical incidents outlined above is not exhaustive. Reasonable judgment shall be exercised in determining whether or not an incident is a critical incident.



Characteristic symptoms of stress following a critical incident may include:

Feeling overwhelmed	Finding it hard to concentrate	Being irritable
Feelings of anxiety, worry or fear all the time	Being forgetful	Lacking self-confidence
Sleep problems	Avoiding certain places or people	Eating less or more than usual
Drinking alcohol or smoking more than usual	Increased heart rate	Increased breathing rate
High blood pressure	High metabolism	

Development of these symptoms following a critical incident is a fairly common and normal response, but if symptoms persist past a four week period, then it may be a sign of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Symptoms of PTSD may include:

Flashbacks

Nightmares

Anxiety

Depression

Irritability

Angry outbursts

Sleeping problems

Difficulty concentrating

Development of phobias

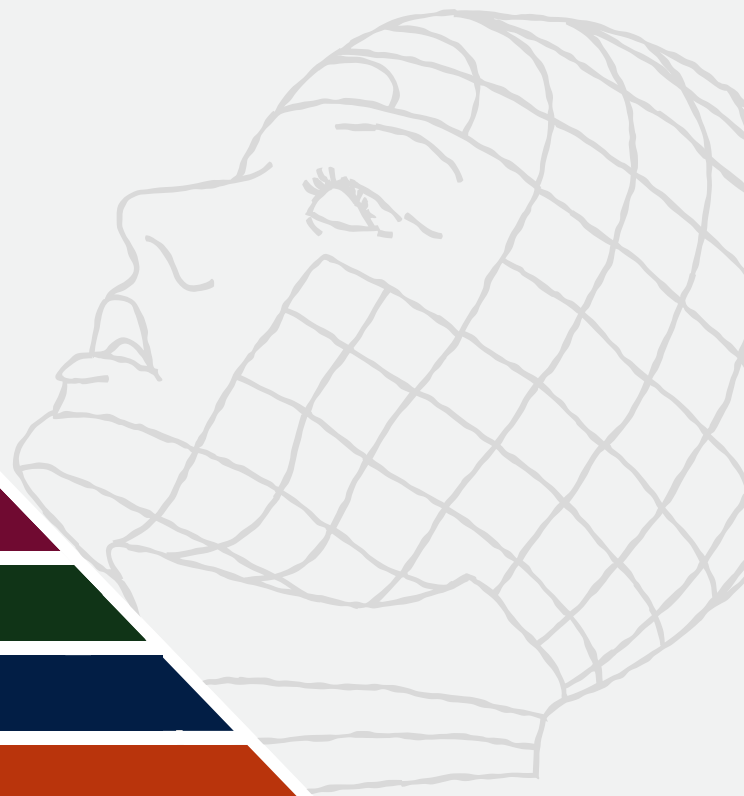
Repetitive & distressing images / sensations

Physical sensations, e.g. pain, sweating, nausea, trembling

Self-harming or destructive behaviour, e.g. drug / alcohol misuse

Avoidance of certain people / places to avoid re-experiencing the event

Other physical symptoms, e.g. headaches, dizziness, chest pains, stomach aches



TYPICAL RESPONSE FLOW CHART

AFTERMATH OF A CRITICAL INCIDENT

- Ensure that any physical or medical needs are dealt with first, and remember to acknowledge that staff have experienced an event that is not normal
- Contact HR
- Contact CSEAS

1

RITS (REST, INFORMATION, TRANSITION & SERVICES)

- Allow staff to stand down and / or congregate, if appropriate
- Provide factual information
- Arrange for teas / coffees / water to be available
- Provide CSEAS information and contact details
- Arrange transport home if appropriate

2

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

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- Take a few minutes break to look after self
- Speak with staff to acknowledge what has happened, acknowledge and normalise feelings expressed by those impacted
- Take care to identify any staff or bystanders who may have been affected by the incident and respond appropriately to their needs
- Monitor the reactions of those affected, and discuss any concerns you may have with the designated EAO

CISM INTERVENTION

4

- Not every incident will require every intervention. The CSEAS will advise on the intervention required.
- If appropriate, arrange space for intervention to take place e.g. meeting room
- Provide details to all staff impacted
- Take regular breaks during this time

FOLLOW UP

5

- Follow up with staff affected by the incident, starting with those who may seem particularly distressed.

CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS MANAGEMENT (CISM)

In line with best international practice, the CSEAS provide the Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) model of post incident care.

CISM provides a structured response to critical incidents and gives staff involved the best chance of recovery. CISM acts as psychological first aid in the wake of a critical incident. It is the *responses* of staff to a critical incident and, importantly, the *effect* the critical incident is having on staff involved that is targeted for intervention, rather than the event.

CISM “is a specialized package of crisis intervention techniques that are linked to each other and blended together to alleviate the reactions to traumatic experiences” (*Mitchell, 2017: 26*). It includes:

Assessment of the incident
Identifying type of response / support needed
How it will be provided
Follow-up support where required

CISM is short-term, acute intervention designed to stabilise and mitigate the crisis response. Its goals are to foster natural resiliency through ...

- Stabilization
- Symptom reduction
- Return to adaptive functioning, and / or
- Facilitation of access to continued care *(adapted from Caplan, 1961)*

CISM is not investigative | mandatory | psychotherapy / counselling

ROLE OF THE LINE MANAGER

Early and appropriate intervention can help reduce the effects of stress and minimise the possibility of further problems developing later. While there may be panic around you, try to remain calm and contact the emergency services, if needed.

Ensure that any physical or medical needs are dealt with first, and remember to acknowledge that staff have experienced an event that is not normal.

In carrying out your responsibilities, you can avail of further guidance and support from the CSEAS. The CSEAS can be contacted centrally at **0818 008 120** or by email at **cseas@per.gov.ie**.

Alternatively, you can contact the designated Employee Assistance officer (EAO) for your Department [here](#).



Interventions at the initial stage should be

- **SIMPLE**
- **PRAGMATIC**
- **LOCAL**
- **INFORMAL**

The primary focus should be on

- **PROVIDING CARE**
- **MINIMISING FURTHER STRESS**

RITS (REST, INFORMATION, TRANSITION & SERVICES)

Ensure that all employees affected by a critical incident have access to immediate practical and social support during and immediately after the event.

The **practical support** that staff members need will vary depending on the circumstances, but may include:

- Allowing staff affected to stand down and review whether alternative staffing resources are required and / or temporary office closure is necessary. This does not necessarily mean going off duty – it may be better to keep those affected together in the immediate aftermath of an incident so that they can compose themselves, talk about what has happened and support each other. However, be aware that this may also be a source of discomfort for others and will depend on the existing interpersonal dynamics and relationships.
- Providing tea, coffee, water (no alcohol)
- Helping with practical arrangements such as transport home or contacting a family member (when appropriate)
- Providing information on self-care in the aftermath of a critical incident or any information appropriate to the incident (see section below on Self-Care and Support Information)
- Providing information on the CSEAS and CSEAS contact information

Social and Emotional Well-being support means the everyday expression of care and listening to the concerns of those affected. It is not clinical in nature and should involve:

- Contact with colleagues
- Speak with staff to acknowledge what has happened
- Recognise the efforts of staff in the situation
- Acknowledge and normalise feelings expressed by those impacted
- Take care to identify any staff or bystanders who may have been affected by the incident and respond appropriately to their needs
- Monitor the reactions of those affected and discuss any concerns you may have with the designated EAO
- Provide information on the CSEAS

PROVIDE FACTUAL INFORMATION

People who are involved in any way in a critical incident have a strong need for information after the event:



- What happened?
- Who was involved?
- Who is affected (injured, dead)?
- What documentation needs to be completed?
- Who needs to be informed?
- Will there be an investigation?
- What will be required of them?

The nomination of an appropriate senior manager who can convey accurate information about the incident and outline plans to address the situation can:

reduce anxiety | quash rumours | re-establish a sense of order



Failure to offer this clarity and guidance can elevate already heightened stress levels among the staff involved.

PROVIDE SUPPORT INFORMATION

In general, you should encourage staff to use coping strategies they consider most effective in their work context. Do not impose specific strategies, but give general advice about taking care of themselves, such as not drinking too much alcohol, using social supports and other basic aspects of self-care.

Line managers should take all reasonable steps to ensure that staff who are exposed to a critical incident are aware of the supports available to them, and managers may activate CISM interventions on behalf of staff, if appropriate and / or requested (see information below).

Give CSEAS information leaflets on [Critical Incident in the Workplace Self-care Information](#) and contact details of the CSEAS to all those potentially affected by an event.

Remember, you are not expected to be a mental health expert and support is available to staff from the CSEAS, their GP and / or CMO where appropriate. Encourage self-referral to CSEAS.

When CISM interventions are required, participants for the intervention should be permitted to attend during working hours. This will require the reorganisation of resources by managers in order to ensure that any necessary and sufficient cover is provided whilst those staff affected can avail of appropriate CISM interventions.

Where the CSEAS is providing a CISM intervention, it is the responsibility of the receiving department or office to provide suitable accommodation / facilities for the CSEAS support team.

LINE MANAGER FOLLOW-UP

As well as meeting immediate support needs, you should follow up with staff affected by a critical incident, or other form of potentially traumatic situation. For people who are particularly distressed, this might be within 24 hours. For others, follow up within 4 – 14 days.

It may be the case that a small number of employees may need external specialist or immediate support. If you have concerns about any member of staff after a critical incident, you can seek guidance and support from CSEAS about how your Department or Office might arrange same.




In the aftermath of a response, do monitor those who appear particularly distressed and follow up with all staff and supervisors Follow up with CSEAS and HR if you have concerns in this instance.

LINE MANAGER SUPPORTS AND SELF-CARE

Remember, managers can also be affected by a critical incident. Individual CSEAS support is available to you. It is important during a critical incident response that you pay attention to your own wellbeing and allow time to focus on your own self-care.

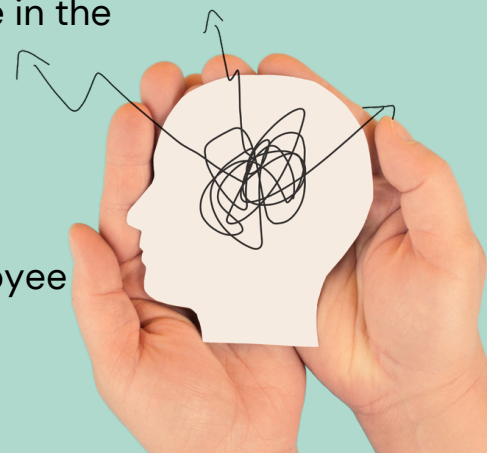
Self-care is any action or behaviour that helps you avoid triggering health and wellbeing problems. You may have a tendency to look after the needs of others before you look after your own needs.

Further details on self-care for managers is available in the **PEOPLE MANAGERS' GUIDE**



The CSEAS can be contacted centrally at **0818 008 120** or by email at **cseas@per.gov.ie**.

Alternatively, you can contact the designated Employee Assistance officer (EAO) for your department **[here](#)**



Report the critical incident to relevant personnel in your Department, i.e. your manager, HR Division, your Health & Safety Officer / Unit. Check if your Department / Office has protocols on managing critical incidents in the workplace.

HR Divisions have a vital role to play in supporting people managers and staff. They do so by implementing HR policies and providing advice and guidance on a range of workplace issues and procedures.

People Managers can contact their HR Divisions if they need support in the aftermath of a critical incident. You may also get support from your own line management and / or a trusted colleague.

ACTIVATION OF CSEAS CISM RESPONSE

Employee Assistance Officers (EAOs) in the CSEAS are trained in CISM and are available to provide a collaborative response with Government Departments / Offices when requested.

HR, Line / People Managers, or a relevant nominated person may request the assistance of the CSEAS in the provision of a CISM response. They should provide all necessary details as outlined below:

- Situation / event requiring CSEAS support
- Location
- Name and telephone number of the line manager in the area of the incident
- When CSEAS support is required
- Number of staff affected

The CSEAS will arrange for an EAO or team of EAOs to respond. The EAO / EAO team will liaise with HR, the Line / People manager or nominated officer to determine in collaboration with them the appropriate response to the critical incident.

Types of interventions include:

- **One-to-one meetings**
- **Small group setting**
- **Large group setting**
- **Follow-up support and referral**

Where it is deemed that individuals require additional external support, e.g. counselling, this is a matter for the individual Government Department / Office concerned



The type of intervention mobilised is dependent on the type of incident that has occurred, as well as the response of individuals and / or groups to the incident. It is the *emotional response* of individuals or groups of individuals to a critical incident that is targeted for intervention rather than the incident.

It should be noted that not every incident will require every intervention. It is the responsibility of the CSEAS to determine the intervention required.

As part of any intervention, the CSEAS support team will:

- Facilitate understanding of the incident and discussion
- Identify personal coping skills / stress management techniques to empower individuals
- Identify external support / coping resources
- Encourage utilisation of resources
- Provide short-term support to the individual or group

ENGAGEMENT WITH THE CSEAS CISM INTERVENTION

Participation in any CISM intervention is voluntary and non-mandatory. If you were involved in a critical incident you are strongly encouraged to access and / or engage with CISM interventions as quickly as possible, but support is available for you whenever you chose to avail of it. The service will be of greatest benefit to you the earlier you use it.

Rules of CISM group interventions

Confidentiality; what is said in the room remains in the room

Only those present at the incident, or impacted directly, may attend

Mobile phones switched off

No notes, cameras or recordings allowed

Participants shall be off duty or out of service during the intervention

No reports will be made to supervisors on what any individual said

No media is allowed

No breaks will be taken

No-one has to speak

Interventions occur away from the scene of the incident

If it's likely that a manager will have any part in the investigation of an incident, they should not attend a group intervention, even if they were directly involved in the event. Alternative support arrangements will be made available for that manager by the CSEAS

The CSEAS is not responsible for providing support to external, contracted staff working however, such staff may be invited by the CSEAS to avail of critical incident interventions, where it is considered reasonable to do so.

While the CSEAS does not provide support to family members of civil servants, EAOs can advise the individual about community supports available to their family members.

FEEDBACK TO MANAGEMENT / HR

Individual interventions: Where an individual attends one-to-one meetings, only confirmation of their attendance and engagement with the CSEAS will be given to the Line Manager / HR as appropriate. If requested by the individual, appropriate feedback may be given to their Line Manager / HR.

Group Interventions: The CSEAS can provide a list of the attendees and relevant feedback as agreed by the group to Line Manager / HR.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND GDPR

Confidentiality is between the client and the CSEAS. Information and personal data disclosed by employees to the CSEAS remains confidential (exceptions are listed below) and will not be disclosed to a third party outside of the CSEAS without the prior knowledge and consent of the individual. This is in keeping with normal professional standards in relation to confidentiality.

Exceptions to confidentiality are:

- **Life-threatening situations to the individual, other parties or the public**
- **Where there is a statutory responsibility to report**
- **Where required by a court or legal process to do so**
- **Where non-disclosure presents a significant safety or security risk**
- **Where the CSEAS becomes aware of a possible breach in criminal law, disclosure may be necessary**

All staff involved in a critical incident event and attending a group intervention, should sign an attendance sheet and also provide a contact number. This form will be used for follow-up purposes.

All records created and held will comply with the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 2014, Data Protection Acts 1998–2018 and the EU General Data Protection Regulation 2016/679 (GDPR). Please refer to the CSEAS GDPR statement on the CSEAS website.