

# Common reactions after a critical incident



Critical incidents are unexpected, unusual events perceived by an individual as threatening or traumatic. They are often sudden, outside our normal frame of reference and a challenge to our ability to cope. If you experience a critical incident, you can have a wide range of reactions. It is important to remember:

- **Your reaction is your reaction**
- **You might react differently to different situations at different times**
- **There is no right way to react**

## Common reactions

### Emotional

- Disbelief
- Anger or irritability
- Grief/sadness
- Fear
- Numbness
- Feelings of helplessness
- Guilt and/or feelings of shame
- Anxiety
- Yearning
- Loneliness

### Cognitive

- Difficulty concentrating or loss of focus
- Intrusive flashbacks, memories of event
- Decreased trust
- Memory challenges
- Searching for blame or responsibility
- Ruminating on choices made
- Taking responsibility for things that weren't known or within one's control
- Searching for meaning

### Physical

- Fatigue
- Physical Exhaustion
- Lack of energy
- Changes to appetite or weight
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Digestive upset
- Feeling dizzy or lightheaded
- Headache
- Heart palpitations
- Aches and pains

### Behavioral

- Social withdrawal or isolation
- Dreams or nightmares
- Seeking closeness with loved ones
- Returning to old coping patterns
- Pacing/body agitation or restlessness
- Seeking people to talk to about the experience

### Spiritual

- Seeking meaning of life and purpose
- Spiritual confusion and possibly estrangement
- Strengthened or renewed spirituality
- Feeling abandoned by spiritual connection



### Additional supports are needed when:

- Your reactions are feeling particularly strong and persisting over time
- Your reactions are increasing in intensity, rather than decreasing over time
- You feel out of control, or your activities of daily living are being negatively affected
- Your own coping and support resources aren't helping you to find a resolution

### What you can do to help others:

- Listen with an open mind, acknowledge their thoughts and feelings
- Accept that they may need time and space
- Offer to lend a hand with everyday tasks
- Point out there are resources and supports available to help
- Respect their privacy, and only reach out on their behalf with their consent, or if you are concerned about imminent safety

## On-campus resources

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### Staff Wellness

Staff Wellness leads a number of programs, resources and services, to help promote, support, and sustain the health and wellness of faculty, staff and post-doctoral scholars.

403.220.2918 | [staffwellness@ucalgary.ca](mailto:staffwellness@ucalgary.ca) | [ucalgary.ca/staffwellness](http://ucalgary.ca/staffwellness)

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### Campus Security

For all imminent life-threatening situations, call 911. For all other safety and security concerns, call Campus Security.

403.220.5333 | [ucalgary.ca/security](http://ucalgary.ca/security)

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### Sexual Violence Support Advocate

The Sexual Violence Support Advocate offers confidential support and information regarding sexual violence to all members of the university community.

403.220.2208 | [ucalgary.ca/sexualviolencesupport](http://ucalgary.ca/sexualviolencesupport)

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### Office of Diversity, Equity and Protected Disclosure

The Protected Disclosure serves as a confidential resource for individuals seeking information and advice on sensitive and diverse matters.

403.220.4086 | [ucalgary.ca/odepd](http://ucalgary.ca/odepd)

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### Student Wellness Services

Faculty and staff can contact Student Wellness Services for information about assisting students or visit for walk-in medical appointments, chiropractic treatments, massage therapy and nutrition services.

403.210.9355 | [ucalgary.ca/wellnesscentre](http://ucalgary.ca/wellnesscentre)

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## Off-campus resources

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### Employee and Family Assistance Plan (LifeWorks)

LifeWorks provides in-person, online, telephone, and email support at no cost to faculty and staff.

1.800.663.1142 | [ucalgary.ca/hr/efap](http://ucalgary.ca/hr/efap)

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### 211 Alberta

211 Alberta connects users to the right community and social services.

Dial 211 | [ab.211.ca](http://ab.211.ca)

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### Access Mental Health

Access Mental Health provides information, telephone consultation and referral over the phone to help you understand and connect with helpful supports.

403.943.1500 | 1.844.943.1500

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### Distress Centre Calgary

Connect to professional counsellors at the Distress Centre Calgary through their 24-hour crisis line, email, or online chat. Face-to-face counselling is also available.

403.266.HELP (4357) | [distresscentre.com](http://distresscentre.com)

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#### Reference:

Crisis & Trauma Resource Institute. (2016). *Critical Incident Group Debriefing: Common Reactions after a Critical Incident*. [ctrinstitute.com](http://ctrinstitute.com)

Student Wellness Services. *Understanding Grief*. SU Wellness Centre. University of Calgary