Action can be taken!

CRITICAL INCIDENTS
IN THE RAILWAY INDUSTRY

Preventing Negative Psychological Effects in Locomotive Engineers and Train Conductors

DS-1070

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Comments
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This document summarizes the main findings of a study that assessed various critical incident (CI) management and employee support protocols in the railway industry in order to:

- raise managers' awareness of the potentially negative effects of critical incidents on locomotive engineers and train conductors in the rail industry and other transportation industries;
- share recommendations with them regarding the best critical incident management and employee support practices;
- inform them of the benefits of strictly applying a critical incident management and support protocol (CIMSP).

FOR WHOM?

This tool is intended for:

- managers in railway companies;
- professionals responsible for managing critical incidents and providing employee support, and teams responsible for employee assistance programs for railway companies;
- personnel in charge of training in railway companies;
- locomotive engineers and train conductors;
- agents working in railway operations centres;
- unions;
- managers and personnel involved in peer helper programs;
- occupational health and safety committees in railway companies.

This document may also be of interest to other industries, including:

- public transit operators in urban and rural areas (metros, trains, buses);
- road freight transportation companies;
- industries in which transportation plays a significant role (e.g.: mining, processing industries, marine transportation).

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Context

Good news: Action *can* be taken to reduce the potential impacts of critical incidents (CIs) and support the affected employees. This can, in turn, improve their chances of a quick recovery under appropriate conditions. However, prevention measures should also be put in place well before a train crew has to apply the emergency brakes and report a critical incident by radio.

A **critical incident** is an event whose impact may be sufficiently stressful as to undermine the usual coping skills of the people involved.

A CI generally involves a situation in which the person's life or safety or that of someone else is under threat.

Traumatic reactions may occur in people who experience a CI.

In the context of the **railway industry**, CIs mainly involve derailments, collisions or near-collisions with people, vehicles, or animals, but are not limited to these alone. These events may cause injuries, fatalities, or intense fear for someone's safety or even life.

CRITICAL INCIDENTS IN THE RAILWAY INDUSTRY

Every year, approximately 20 people die in Québec — and around 100 in Canada — as the result of a collision with a train.[1]

The Canadian rail industry faces CIs associated with collisions or near-collisions with people or vehicles, on a regular basis. In addition to fatal incidents, there are a number of incidents (difficult to estimate) resulting in injuries or major property damage. Most locomotive engineers and train conductors are exposed to this type of event at least once during their career. They are witnesses, victims, participants, and often, first responders, when such incidents occur. These incidents can cause serious injuries or even fatalities among the victims, but also major psychological after-effects for the engineers and conductors[1].

1. Mishara, B. L. and Bardon, C. (2017). Characteristics of railway suicides in Canada and comparison with accidental railway fatalities: Implications for prevention. *Safety Science*, 91, 251-259.

THE IMPACT OF CRITICAL INCIDENTS ON LOCOMOTIVE ENGINEERS AND TRAIN CONDUCTORS

Locomotive engineers and train conductors will face an average of four critical incidents resulting in fatalities or serious injuries during the span of their careers.

A significant proportion of them quickly regain their ability to function at a satisfactory level in their personal lives and their jobs, and they experience very few psychological, social, functional and occupational after-effects. For some, however, the recovery time after a CI can be long and they may require support during this period. More than 15% of these employees will, in fact, experience more severe problems, including depression, acute stress or posttraumatic stress disorder, or anxiety disorders.

At least 40 employees in Québec and over 200 in Canada are involved in such incidents every year.[1]

THE STUDY BEHIND THIS GUIDE

Researchers assessed the use and effects of intervention protocols in the railway industry during CIs causing injuries or fatalities. Using this information, they described the aspects of protocols that can have positive effects on locomotive engineers' and train conductors' recovery and on the prevention of more severe disorders, such as PTSD and anxiety disorders.

The study showed that strict, empathetic management of CIs combined with social and occupational support from employers is a key factor in promoting employee recovery. Management and support practices should be based on processes, skills and attitudes that can be easily modified by employers within their protocols and without generating prohibitive costs for companies. Employers have less control over other factors associated with major negative effects, such as the characteristics of the CI itself (for example, multiple fatalities, serious injuries, isolated locations). Generally speaking, railway companies have critical incident management and support protocols (CIMSPs) that include most of the actions deemed to be effective. The strict implementation of these protocols is the first step toward improving current practices and mitigating the negative effects of CIs.

To learn more:
Assessment of Various Critical Incident Management and Support Protocols for Railway Employees After a Serious Incident

Effects of Critical Incidents

While it may be difficult for companies to prevent some critical incidents from occurring (for example, a collision with a pedestrian on a train track), developing and strictly implementing a critical incident management and support protocol (CIMSP) can help reduce their effects and the risk of traumatic reactions in the affected personnel.

Above all, it is important to understand that the negative effects of CIs are:

Personal

Each person reacts differently, depending on his or her history and the circumstances of the CI. The same person may also react differently to a new CI.

Dynamic

The effects change over time. A person may seem to be doing well right after the CI, but then experience difficulties in the following days or weeks. Likewise, a person who experiences major negative effects also has a good chance of recovering over time.

Varied

The effects experienced may range from slight, temporary discomfort to serious symptoms, and may even evolve into mental health disorders that affect the person's ability to function. All these reactions are normal and reflect the variety of human experiences.

Serious

Regardless of whether a CI seems more or less serious and whether its effects seem more or less intense, the effects must be regarded as work-related injuries. They must be assessed and appropriate support provided. Taking them seriously does not mean either panicking or minimizing, but rather, clearly acknowledging the experience and adapting the work organization's response accordingly.

Manageable

Again, regardless of the nature and magnitude of the CI and its effects on employees, employers, support organizations and health professionals can all take action to promote recovery.

Reactions to Critical Incidents

The researchers in the study collected answers from 74 locomotive engineers and train conductors to questions about their well-being. The questions were asked at different stages following their involvement in a critical railway incident. Nine supervisors also participated in the study.

The researchers were thus able to describe the engineers' and conductors' various reactions following the CI, as detailed in the figure below. There is no such thing as a "normal" or "desirable" reaction. The researchers identified several possible reaction profiles, but it may well be that some employees' experiences do not fit any of these profiles and that they have different reactions. What is important is that each individual understand how his or her own reactions are tending to develop in order to anticipate and manage them as effectively as possible whenever they surface.

POSSIBLE REACTIONS FOLLOWING A CRITICAL INCIDENT

In the hours following the CI

IMMEDIATE REACTIONS

- Minor stress and irritation
- Horror and fatigue
- Shock
- Fear

One week after the CI

REACTIONS AFTER ONE WEEK

- Things are going pretty well
- Intense exhaustion
- Pervasive emotional disturbance
- Pervasive cognitive disturbance

3 to 6 months following the CI

LONG-TERM REACTIONS

- An intense short-term reaction
- An intense long-term reaction
- A lower-intensity long-term stress reaction

IMMEDIATE REACTIONS

Employees who are present in a locomotive during a critical incident may react in a wide variety of ways in the following minutes and hours.

Few symptoms

"Minor stress and irritation" profile

These individuals may not seem to be very affected by the CI. They stay calm, and may appear a little angry, annoyed or sad, but it does not affect their ability to think or act.

Some people can give the impression of being insensitive or abnormal because they do not experience emotions following a CI. However, this is not true. As long as they are able to observe themselves, express their feelings and act appropriately according to their needs, they are fine, and so much the better.

Horror, faster heart rate, perspiration, intense fatigue

"Horror and fatigue" profile

Some individuals feel a combination of horror and fatigue. They are overwhelmed by what they have just been through; they have major physiological reactions and can feel completely drained by the experience.

It is important to detect any employees reacting in this way, and to give them the chance to move away from and out of earshot of the related chaos so they can regain control over their experience.

Major trembling, state of shock

"Shock" profile

A shock reaction is also common. People in shock may experience trembling and loss of control of certain movements.

Here too it is important to help these employees regain a sense of calm by taking them to a quiet location as quickly as possible.

Fear for their safety, fear for their life

"Fear" profile

In these situations, people feel intense fear for their safety or even for their life.

This last type of reaction can be the most problematic because it is often associated with the development of a traumatic reaction within the weeks following a CI.

When employees are afraid for their lives or safety during a CI, they are at greater risk of developing a feeling of unreality (known as "derealization"). This means they have the impression of observing themselves from the outside, a feeling of detachment from self and of experiencing things as unreal.

Regardless of the context in which they appear, feelings of unreality should be taken very seriously, and the individuals who experience them should be followed closely.

7

REACTIONS ONE WEEK AFTER

Several profiles can be observed in the days following the critical incident. The effects may disappear very quickly or not.

Moderate and temporary symptoms

"Things are going pretty well" profile

These individuals may feel temporary fatigue and very moderately intense emotions about what has happened. They may think about it, but this does not trigger any unpleasant physiological or emotional reactions. Overall, these employees need a little rest in order to unwind, but they feel pretty good.

A large number of employees fit this reaction profile in the days immediately after a critical incident. They may have had had a major reaction on the site of the CI, but this fades quickly and they feel themselves returning to normal within the next two or three days.

This may reflect very strong coping skills or may happen when the employee presents fewer risk factors or was exposed to fewer stressful stimuli.

Problems sleeping, persistent fatigue

"Intense exhaustion" profile

Some employees may feel intense exhaustion in the days following a CI. This is often the case when they experience problems sleeping or difficulties recovering.

In these cases, it is important for them to identify this sensation and find ways (alone or with help) to relax and regain their mental and physical energy. It is also important that they rest and take the time needed to recover. Living in denial of this fatigue is not a good strategy.

Guilt, grief

"Pervasive emotional disturbance" profile

Some employees may feel overwhelmed by guilt or grief, which affects their mood in the days following the CI. These individuals are at greater risk of falling into a depression after a CI.

Ruminations, irritability, loss of concentration, flashbacks

"Pervasive cognitive disturbance"

This occurs when people ruminate over what has happened, about what they did, or about what others did or did not do. They cannot stop themselves. They may have flashbacks and problems concentrating. All this can make them more irritable in other areas of their life.

LONG-TERM REACTIONS

Three types of effects may become apparent within three to six months of the critical incident.

a **An intense short-term reaction** (such as acute stress), which diminishes in the month following the CI. Even though this reaction is rare among railway employees, most exposed workers show some signs of acute stress in the days and weeks following a CI.

b **An intense long-term reaction** (such as posttraumatic stress disorder, known as PTSD, depression or anxiety disorders). The proportion of railway workers suffering from PTSD ranges from 4% to 16%, depending on the studies conducted in various countries.

c **A lower-intensity long-term stress reaction**
These effects are not significant enough to be diagnosed, but nonetheless have major consequences for the individuals who experience them. Up to 40% of employees still feel the effects of a CI three months after the event. This manifests itself in problems sleeping, fatigue, hypervigilance, irritability or flashbacks.

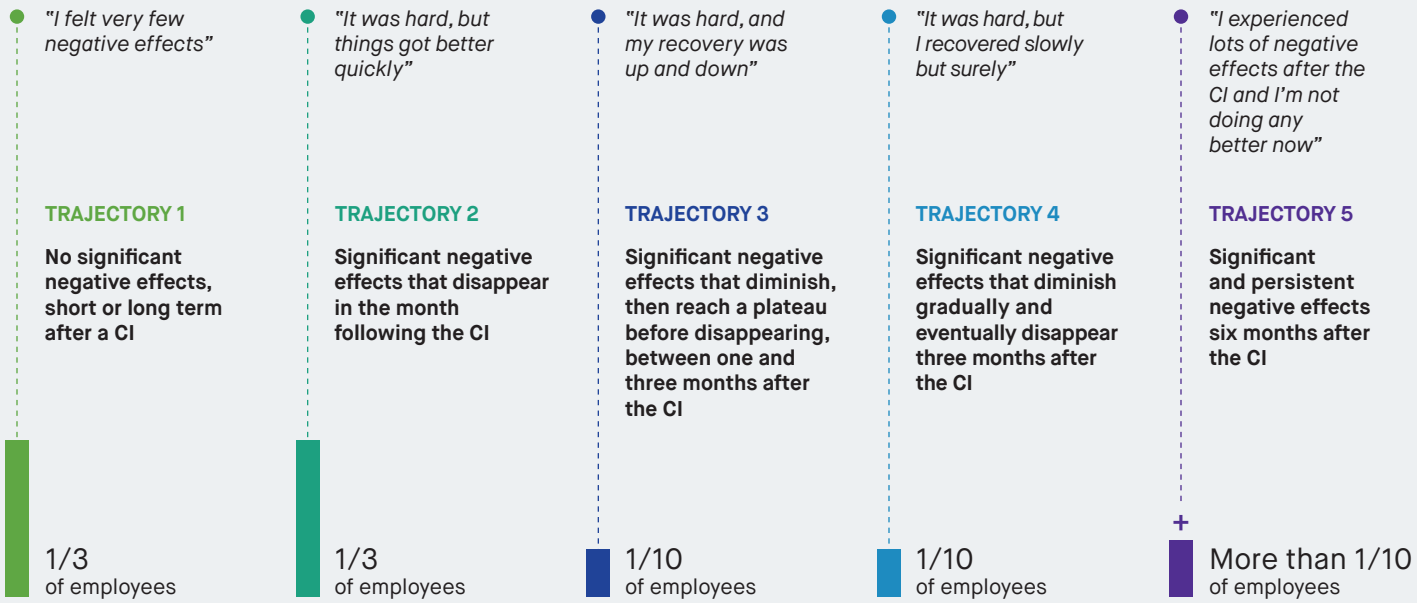
IMPORTANT

Each individual is unique and may react differently from one critical incident to another. These reactions and the various profiles should be regarded as guides for observing oneself and one's co-workers, and not as diagnostic tools.

Recovery

After a critical incident, each affected person recovers at his or her own pace. Based on the experience of the study participants and the different effects documented during the research project, the researchers established the five recovery trajectories detailed below.

FIVE DIFFERENT RECOVERY TRAJECTORIES



These effects are major and affect the cognition (concentration, rumination, distraction), energy (fatigue, insomnia) and emotions (guilt, grief) of the personnel involved in a CI. They may also interfere with their ability to perform their work optimally.

IMPORTANT

Overall, most employees recover from their experience, but at different paces. It is important to identify the factors fostering or hindering this recovery and then to propose appropriate support solutions.

Risk and Protection Factors

FACTORS RELATED TO THE WORKER

The negative effects and the intensity with which a worker feels the impact of a critical incident may be related to a number of risk and protection factors.

Personal	History of several CIs, coping skills, attitude and behaviour on the site of the CI, role in the management of the CI, perception regarding responsibility and the victim, feeling of control, etc.
Environmental	Site and circumstances of the CI, distance from the terminal, start of a fire, presence of chemical products, presence of witnesses, intervention of co-workers, etc.
Related to the complexity of the critical incident	Number and type of victims, having feared for one's life, seeing or touching the victims, presence of serious injuries or fatalities, etc.
Related to the workplace	Labour relations, organizational support, training of the managers, support for managers, access to a peer helper program, etc.
Related to the availability and use of resources (occupational and personal)	Social support, Employee Assistance Program (EAP), family physician, specialized therapist, etc.

FACTORS RELATED TO MANAGEMENT OF THE CRITICAL INCIDENT

Certain risk factors are associated with the way in which the critical incident is managed by the employer and the first responders:

- Presence of a supervisor on site
- Scene of the CI taken in charge by a supervisor
- Supervisor assures the employee that he or she is not responsible for what has happened
- Respectful and empathetic attitude of the various professionals and personnel on site and in the following days
- No pressure placed on the employee to continue working or to come back to work prematurely
- Demobilization, that is, withdrawn from the scene of the CI and sent home on mandatory leave
- Support provided proactively through the Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
- Clear procedure for the return to work and for assessing the employee's fitness to return to work
- Offer of deferred support if needed; follow-up performed after the return to work and a positive work environment provided

IMPORTANT

Having a thorough understanding of these factors can help reduce the negative effects of critical incidents and promote employee recovery.

Management of Critical Incidents

The sound management of critical incidents makes it possible to regain control of the situation quickly and mobilize the resources needed to support the affected workers. This process of taking of control has two key components:

- communicating clear and specific information about needs, management processes and resources available;
- recognizing the role of each individual in preventing the potentially negative effects of CIs on workers, until they have recovered and returned to work.

The implementation of a critical incident management and support protocol (CIMSP) equips a company to handle CIs and to organize its actions and resources so as to prevent negative psychological effects in employees (see *Critical Incident Management and Support Protocols as a Prevention Tool* section).

BEST PRACTICES

Employers are essential partners in their employees' recovery following a CI. They can help prevent or reduce negative effects in their workers through simple systematic actions.

Crucial initial contact

Example

"The first responders and police officers on site were very friendly. One of the officers was very kind, you know. He said, 'the person, the victim... is dead. You are my priority, not the victim, or anything else... You are my number one priority, if you need anything whatsoever, just tell me.' Really, it was so comforting to hear that."

The agents in the operations control centre are the first people to come in contact with the employees aboard a train when a CI occurs. Having to confront human remains and feeling obliged to get off the train to check a victim's vital signs (even when they know that nothing can be done) are major risk factors for employees developing negative effects. We recommend that the control centre have a checklist on hand to help assess the complexity of the CI (see page 18) together with the train crew, decide with them whether they need to get off the train, and communicate this information to the supervisors, who go to see the employees on site and plan the support services they will need when they return to the terminal.

When the CI occurs in an isolated area and emergency measures have been applied, the control centre may make an initial assessment of the employees' condition while they are waiting for the first responders and supervisor to arrive. The control centre personnel will then be able to inform the supervisor of the situation and speed up the arrival of specialized professionals qualified to provide the appropriate services. It is essential to promote communication between the control centre and the supervisor so that the individuals concerned are properly informed of the situation and the crew's condition.

Systematic clinical intervention

It is important to remember that intensive clinical intervention is not necessary for everyone who has experienced a potentially traumatizing event. The aim is rather to identify those people at risk of developing longer-term traumatic reactions and provide them with appropriate support.

Psychological first aid

Psychological first aid is part of early intervention and mental health prevention best practices at the time of a traumatizing event. Administering psychological first aid helps:

- identify which people are experiencing difficulties;
- provide appropriate support while waiting for professional help;
- steer individuals in difficulty toward the appropriate mental health support resources.

Psychological first aid at the time of a CI can be given by everyone. Managers, agents in operations control centres, the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) team, locomotive engineers and train conductors, as well as their family members all have a role to play in reducing the risk that those involved will suffer severe after-effects from the CI. The critical incident management and support protocol (CIMSP) must indicate the recommended psychological first aid to administer.

Social support

Access to and use of the resources available in the individual's personal support network are important components in recovery following a potentially traumatic event. Using peer helpers is one such strategy.

Support for supervisors

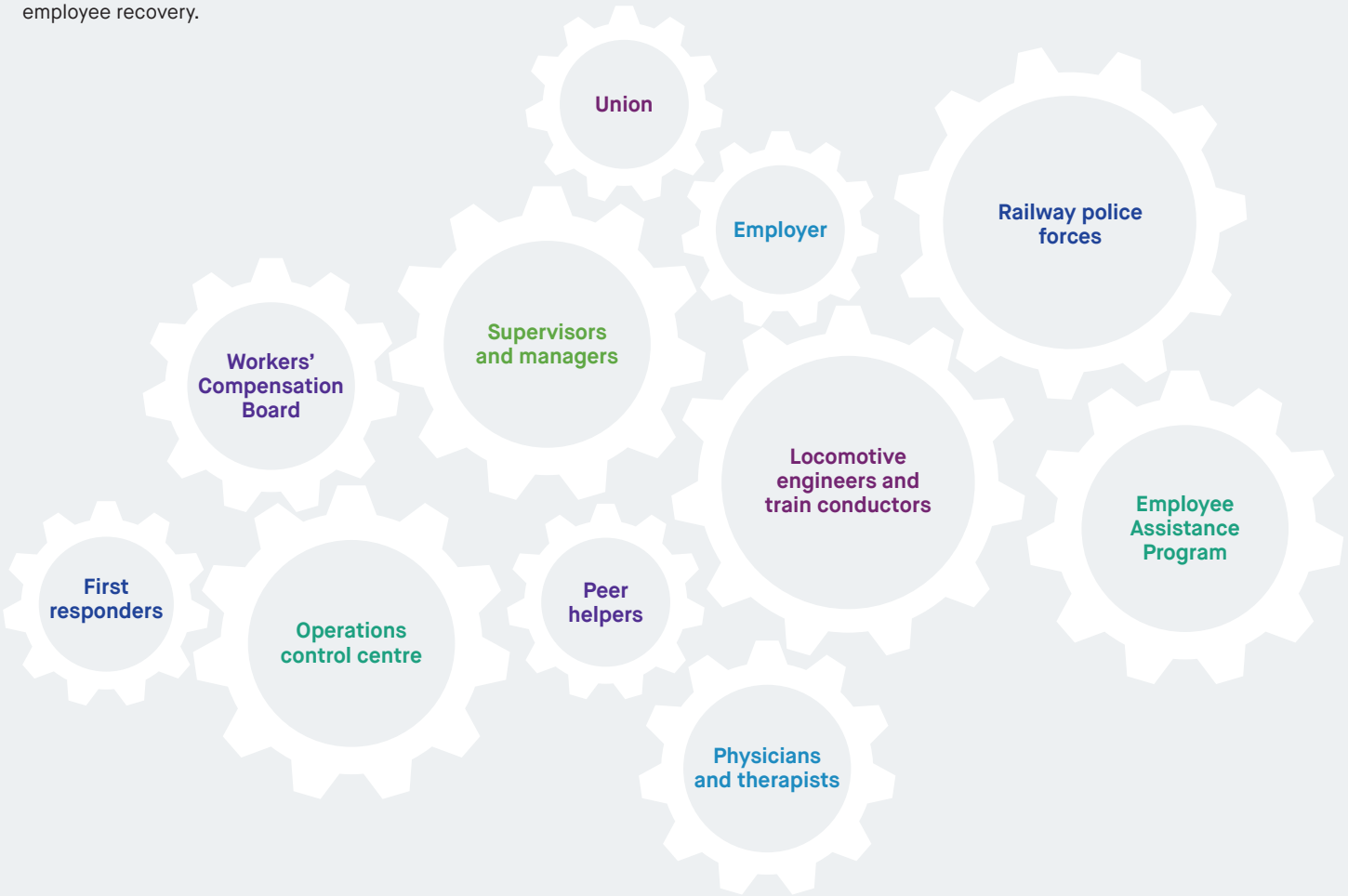
It is also essential for supervisors to receive assistance and support from their managers. As many of the participating locomotive engineers and train conductors mentioned, if a supervisor is pressured to go back to work too soon, he or she will pass this pressure on to employees. This can have negative repercussions on both their level of satisfaction with the management of the critical incident and their recovery.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITIES

Amidst the chaos, technical procedures, and administrative and legal obligations, a number of simple things can be done to help ensure that engineers and conductors develop fewer negative effects and recover faster. Many people are involved in managing operations and CIs, and they all have a role to play in supporting engineers and conductors.

MANAGEMENT OF CRITICAL INCIDENTS

The following individuals or teams should be made aware of the issues involved and properly trained and equipped to promote employee recovery.



UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEXITY OF CRITICAL INCIDENTS

Critical incidents are unforeseen events often accompanied by complex situations. The study showed that the more complex a CI, the more difficult it is to manage and the greater the risk of long-term negative effects on employees. Apart from the complexity of the situation, it appears that the way in which the other people involved in managing the CI react to this complexity is even more important for the affected employees.

Assessing a CI with the help of a checklist (see page 18) serves to document the various complexity factors. This can, in turn, shape the management of the CI and the support provided to employees.

Example

A collision with a vehicle that occurs two hours away from the nearest city and four hours away from the employees' terminal of origin can be problematic. It means that the employees will be on their own for a long time at the site of the critical incident, with the victim's body, until first responders arrive on the scene. They will arrive well before the supervisor, who will therefore not be able to assist his or her employees in person. Evacuating the train can be a complicated process and take a considerable amount of time. Employees may have to wait more than four hours before leaving the scene.

IMPORTANT

Research shows that regardless of the nature of the critical incident, the way in which it is managed has a major impact on employee recovery. Well-planned and properly implemented critical incident management and support protocols (CIMSPs) are an effective way to improve the health and well-being of employees who are present during a critical incident.

Assessing the complexity of a critical incident helps to adapt how it is managed and the support procedures used with employees, ultimately to limit the negative effects of the incident. The various professionals and personnel involved can use a checklist to collect information on the complexity factors and thus facilitate smoother coordination of the management and support activities.

CHECKLIST FOR ASSESSING THE COMPLEXITY OF A CRITICAL INCIDENT

EMPLOYEES' SITUATION

- ☐ The employee saw the person get hit
- ☐ The employee saw human remains during the CI
- ☐ The employee was contaminated by blood or human remains
- ☐ The employee administered first aid to the victim
- ☐ The employee witnessed the person's death
- ☐ The employee felt powerless to help the victim
- ☐ The employee did not want to participate in managing the scene of the accident
- ☐ The employee spent a lot of time alone with the victim

NATURE OF THE CI

- ☐ The employees were afraid for their lives
- ☐ Some employees were injured
- ☐ Some passengers were in danger or injured
- ☐ Accident or suicide
- ☐ Collision with a pedestrian
- ☐ Train evacuation procedures complicated by environmental conditions or the severity of the CI

ENVIRONMENT

- ☐ The CI occurred at the station
- ☐ Densely populated, high-traffic area
- ☐ Isolated, hard-to-access location
- ☐ An atmosphere of chaos prevailed at the scene of the CI
- ☐ Unfavorable weather (black ice, cold, rain)

VICTIM(S)

- ☐ Number of victims
- ☐ Perception of the victim's powerlessness (age, handicap, victim of murder, etc.)
- ☐ Multiple injuries
- ☐ Serious injuries
- ☐ Presence of human remains and blood

EMPLOYEE'S CI HISTORY

- ☐ The employee has already experienced a CI in the past five years
- ☐ The employee experienced major traumatic effects at the time of a previous CI

Critical Incident Management and Support Protocols as a Prevention Tool

Proper management of the critical incident and providing support to the affected personnel are the best ways for a company to prevent traumatic reactions and to promote their employees' recovery.

WHY ADOPT A PROTOCOL

Critical incident management and support protocols (CIMSPs) help to:

1. Reduce the risk of negative effects and traumatic reactions after a CI by acting in a systematic and appropriate way in chaotic situations.
2. Standardize the procedures to be followed during and after a CI to ensure that all employees receive appropriate support and ensure that the company has proper procedures in place to handle such incidents.
3. Ensure that all employees and managers understand what to do, how to do it, and when to do it, in order to provide all personnel affected by the CI with the best possible support.

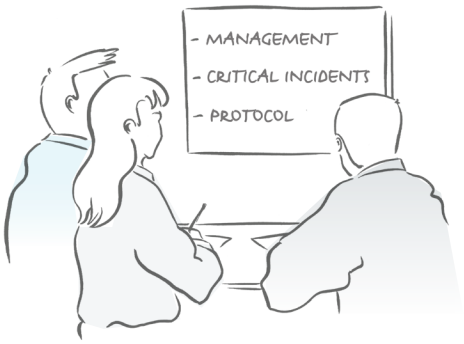
COMPONENTS TO INCLUDE

Generally speaking, relations with the employer, a perception of support from the organization and the supervisor, and the quality of implementation of the CIMSP all have a significant impact on the various effects felt following a CI.

More specifically, and according to studies conducted in the railway industry and on the best practices for managing CIs, here are the actions that should be included in all CIMSPs.

IMPORTANT

It is important to clearly spell out the components of the critical incident management and support protocol to the company employees. All stakeholders in the workplace should be familiar with the protocol and it should be implemented systematically.



Drafting the protocol

- Clearly define what constitutes a critical incident in the company's work context.
- Define the roles of each key actor in the task of taking charge of CIs within the company (operations control centre, peer helpers, locomotive engineers and train conductors, supervisors, union, health professionals, etc.) and find out about the roles of other parties involved (police forces, ambulance services, fire and public safety departments, etc.).
- Clearly define needs, as well as expectations of the Employee Assistance Program team in terms of their debriefing practices and support for employees exposed to a CI; require them to apply the best clinical practices.
- Provide supervisors with training to ensure proper management of CIs.
- Give all employees training on the company's critical incident management and support protocols.
- Equip all locomotives with an information kit containing the protocol, a list of the actions to be taken and contacts to be made, and management documents.
- Provide conductors with emergency kits to help them manage the situation (gloves for moving a victim or object, survival blanket, etc.).

Taking charge at the time of the incident

- Assess the complexity of the CI and adapt management and support strategies accordingly.
- Take charge of the scene of the CI and oversee the physical, emotional and social needs of the employees present during the CI.
- Demobilize the employees affected (stop their work shift and release them so they can go home).
- Ensure their physical safety and well-being (cold, heat, hydration, food, change of clothes), except for cases involving medical emergencies, which require treatment by the first responders at the CI site.

Support

In the hours and days following the critical incident

- Comfort the employees and take care of their needs.
- Explain to them that their reactions are normal: there is no "right way" to react to such an abnormal event as a CI.
- Ensure the employees' safe removal from the site.
- Give them three days of mandatory leave, paid by the employer, following a CI.
- Take into account the complexity factors involved in the CI, such as the employee's nature or history.
- Remind employees that support is available through the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

Hey, guys, I am so sorry about what you have just been through. We're going to take care of you. I'd like to remind you of the procedure, okay? The relieving crew are on their way. When they arrive, you will head back to the terminal. Someone from the Employee Assistance Program will be there to meet you.

I'm okay. I don't need to.

I advise you to speak to the person anyway. He may give you some useful tips. Then if you need anything down the road, you'll already have had a first contact.

During the employee's absence

- Have a mental health professional do a debriefing in order to assess the employee's reactions and needs.
- Provide the employee with information about what constitutes a critical incident, its consequences and the available support resources.
- Establish a plan of action with the employee for the period of leave in order to support his or her return to normal.
- Have each employee's fitness to return to work assessed by an independent professional before any return to work.

The day when the employee returns to work

→ Meet with the employee to check his or her overall state.

Hello, John. So today you've come back to make a trip and see how you feel?

Yes, sir. I feel ready... But we'll see.

Fred will make the trip with you. You know each other well. He'll be there with you throughout. If there's anything at all, feel free to tell him.

After the first day of work and during the following weeks

→ Meet with the employee to check whether his or her overall state is good.

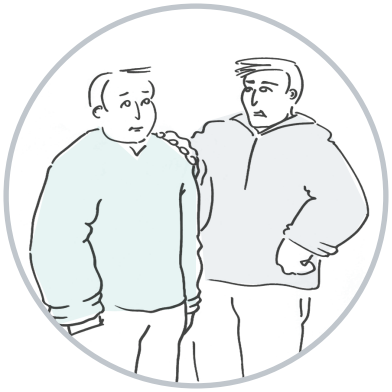
I'm happy that it went pretty well. How do you feel now that it's done?

Pretty good. It was reassuring to have Fred there to help me. We're pretty pleased with how our day went.

Complementary Resources on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

For more information on posttraumatic stress or to find the resources available in your community, visit

- the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) Web site: https://cmha.ca/documents/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd
- the Gouvernement du Québec Web site: https://www.quebec.ca/en/health/health-issues/mental-health-mental-illness/post-traumatic-stress-disorder/
- the Government of Canada Web site: https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/topics/mental-health-wellness/post-traumatic-stress-disorder.html



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