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**Normal Responses to Abnormal Events – GAA Critical Incident Response Information and Guidelines**

FOREWORD

Cumann Lúthcleas Gael and the Gaelic Players Association (GPA) are committed to the welfare of its players, clubs, individuals, families and communities. In recent times, there has been an increase in the number of contacts made to the GAA/GPA as a result of ‘exceptional circumstances’ or ‘critical incidents’ and to this end the following document has been provided to assist those players, clubs, individuals, families and communities.

No document can account for all ‘exceptional circumstances’, or for the reactions of individual which will be different depending on if they are adult(s) or children, whether they witnessed the event(s) or, have close or distance relationships with does involved, etc. Nevertheless we have tried to capture the normal responses that many people experience following exceptional circumstances.

INTRODUCTION

Do you or someone you know experience disturbing images, flashbacks, try actively to forget these memories and can’t, feel sad and numb, can’t think straight, are unable to concentrate, are irritable, shudder when you hear a sudden noise, and cannot sleep. If so, you may be experiencing an intense stress response following an exceptional circumstances often termed a “critical incident”. In fact this is a normal reaction to an abnormal event.

This advice sheet is presented to those who may have experienced such an incident that brought about these intense stress responses. It offers the opportunity to make some sense for you or your club member experience(s). You are invited give this advice sheet to a friend or club member who may be experiencing distress following an exceptional event(s). The events that may generate these reactions are known as a “critical incidents”.

**What is a Critical Incident?**

A traumatic or critical incident is any event that is outside the range of usual human experience. It is an event that causes an unusually intense stress reaction which has the emotional power to overwhelm an individual’s usual ability to cope. It may impede peoples coping mechanisms immediately or in the future following the event. It may impair their ability to adjust, and it may negatively impact on their work.

Examples of Critical Incidents include

* Death or serious injury on or off playing field
* Exposure to the aftermath of a road traffic accident e.g. the accident scene, the victim(s),
* Personal loss or injury, real or threatened to a child or adult
* Being violently threatened
* Close encounter with death
* Suicide of a club member
* A situation with excessive media interest
* Other incidents not covered above but which are associated with unusually strong emotional reactions.

**Normal Responses to Abnormal Events**

A critical incident is an emotional shock. It is not easy to take in what has happened and to come to terms with it. After a critical incident, it is **normal** to experience all kinds of unpleasant feelings, emotions and body sensations. During this time, memories and images of the critical incident, and thoughts about it, come into your mind even if you try to shut them out. These experiences may be confusing and even frightening. You may wonder if you will ever get over the critical incident, if you are losing control of yourself, or even if you are going mad. These worries are entirely understandable.

However, you will discover from this advice sheet that the thoughts, feelings and sensations you are experiencing are **a normal reaction** to stress, and show that your body and your mind are working to come to terms with the critical incident. Each person reacts to critical incidents in their own unique way. Nonetheless, there are common reactions which many people share. This advise sheet describes some of these common reactions.

**How Does Our Mind Respond After A Critical Incident?**

**FLASHBACKS** Memories or flashbacks where images or feelings associated with the critical incident come into mind when you don’t want or expect them.

**NIGHTMARES** Distressing dreams or nightmares about the incident

**REMINDERS** Anxiety or distress when you see or hear something that reminds you of the critical incident e.g. T.V., news items, a film, etc.

**TRYING TO FORGET** You actively try to forget or put out of your mind thoughts and recollections of the critical incident

**CONCENTRATION** Problems with thinking, in concentrating or remembering things

**DIFFICULTIES**

**PREOCCUPATION** Preoccupation with the critical incident

**UNABLE TO RECALL** You may not be able to remember particular aspects of the critical incident even when you want to.

**Why Does Our Mind Respond To Critical Incidents In This Matter?**

It is important to remember that these reactions are temporary. They are a result of intrusive and distressing feelings and memories about the critical incident. In an attempt to make sense of what happened to you, your mind is constantly going over the critical incident, bringing it back up, chewing it over, trying to digest it. Naturally this means that you have less mental space available to concentrate on other things.

These experiences are intrusive – they happen whether you want them or not, and you may well come to feel that you have no control over what you are feeling, thinking and experiencing, day or night. Trying to push flashbacks and memories out of your mind will not stop them from coming back, and may in fact make them all the more persistent.

**How Does Our Body Respond After A Critical Incident?**

**PHYSICAL** Physical symptoms such as tense muscles, soreness in neck,

**SYMPTOMS** shoulders and back, trembling or shaking, heart palpitations,

diarrhoea or constipation, nausea, headaches, sweating, tiredness, exhaustion and fatigue.

**DISTURBED SLEEP** Sleep problems including falling and/or staying asleep, waking in the middle of the night, distressing dreams or nightmares.

**IRRITABLE** You may become more irritable or more short-tempered. You may find yourself snapping at people close to you, or losing your temper for trivial reasons.

**INABILITY** You may find that you have an inability to unwind or relax

**TO UNWIND**

**JUMPY** You may be more “jumpy” than usual or easily startled by loud noises or sudden movements

**AVOIDANCE** You may find yourself avoiding situations or thoughts that remind you of the critical incident

**LOSS OF INTEREST** Lack of interest in usual activities, including loss of appetite or sexual interest

**Why Does Our Body Respond To Critical Incidents In This Matter?**

**Physical Arousal** is a common reaction to critical incidents. After critical incidents adrenaline, a powerful hormone is released to help you to respond adequately to threat or danger. After a critical incident, your body may stay constantly on the alert, prepared for instant action, even though the critical incident has passed. The critical incident has forced you to realise that there is danger in the world, and you are all set to deal with it. It is as if your body has failed to realise that the danger is past. Your body stays on “red alert” and it continues to react as if you are still under threat. With high levels of adrenaline in your body this is why you may feel keyed up, tense, jumpy, irritable and have trouble sleeping.

**Avoidance** is a strategy to protect yourself from things that you feel have become dangerous, and thoughts and feelings that seem overwhelmingly distressing. While avoidance reduces distress in the short term, it is not always the best longer-term strategy for getting over the critical incident and one is advised to confront their avoidances.

**How Does Our Emotions Respond After A Critical Incident?**

**FEAR** of being alone or other frightening situations

**&** of damage to oneself and those we love

**ANXIETY** of being left alone, of having to leave loved ones

of “breaking down” or “losing control”

of a similar event happening again

**ANGER** You may feel angry at what has happened, at whoever caused it or

**&** allowed it to happen, at the injustice and senselessness of it all, at

**IRRITABILITY** the shame and indignities, at the lack of proper understanding by others. You may ask WHY ME?

**HELPLESSNESS** Critical incidents show up human powerlessness, as well as

strengths. Critical incidents can make people feel powerless and out of control

**SADNESS** for deaths, injuries and losses of every kind and feelings of loss or aloneness. Your mood may be low you may have feelings of hopelessness and despair, frequent crying spells.

**EMOTIONAL** The loss of the ability to feel anything very much, including

**NUMBNESS** affection and pleasure is another common way of trying to cope

with painful feelings and thoughts about the critical incident. It

may include feeling alienated from people you care about. Because they have not experienced what you have, it is as if they cannot possibly understand what you are going through.

**GUILT** You may feel guilt related to something you did, or did not do, in order to survive during the critical incident. Guilt may be present for being alive, not injured, for being better off than others.

**SHAME** You may feel shame for having been exposed as helpless, emotional, needing others or for not having reacted as one would have wished.

**NUMBNESS** The shock of the incident can leave you feeling numb and emotionally exhausted.

**LOSS OF CONTROL** Following a critical incident, your life, and the lives of those you care about, may have been threatened. You may have felt that you had no control over your feelings, your body, your physical safety, or your life. Sometimes the feelings of loss of control may be so intense that you may feel as if you are “*going crazy*” or “*losing it*”.

**LOSS OF INTEREST** Loss of interest in people and activities you used to enjoy often follows critical incidents. Nothing may seem much fun to you any more. You may also feel that life is no longer worth living, and that plans you had made for the future no longer seem important or meaningful.

**MIXED-UP** You may find that your emotions are “all mixed-up”.

**FUTURE FEARS** You may feel that something dreadful is going to happen to you or your loved ones in the future

**Why Do Our Emotions Respond To Critical Incidents In This Manner?**

Critical incidents impact powerfully on our minds and bodies. As a result there are numerous challenging emotions present. The complexity of the human condition tries to make sense of these experiences. Consequently, feelings of the experience tend to come into our minds. It is generally thought that this may in fact be part of a natural healing process as our brains try to come to terms with what has happened.

**How Do Critical Incidents Impact On Our Family And Social Relationships?**

Flashbacks, nightmares, sleep disturbance, anxiety, low mood, anger and irritability may lead to strains in family and social relationships. Given the intensity of thoughts, feelings and emotions you are experiencing, you are more likely to express your frustration and unhappiness with those closest to you. Consequently strains in relationships may appear. This is normal. It would be helpful to give your family or close friends this advise sheet so they can try to understand what you are experiencing.

**Is there anything that will help my recovery?**

Although people may recover in many different ways it is generally thought that the following may help:

* Being able to talk through your feelings.
* Support and understanding from friends and/or family.
* Gradually getting yourself back to work.
* Trying to make sure you are still doing enjoyable or pleasurable activities.
* Spending enjoyable time in others’ company.
* Lots of rest and relaxation, to help body and mind to recover.

**Is there anything I might be doing that may not help my recovery?**

Again, although there are no hard or fast rules, it’s generally thought that the following may not be helpful:

* Refusing to think about the critical incident or anything relating to it.
* Refusing to talk about feelings and thoughts.
* Carrying on as if nothing had every happened.
* Avoiding anything that might remind you of the critical incident.
* Becoming withdrawn and not doing anything enjoyable.
* Thinking about nothing other than the critical incident.
* Using alcohol and other drugs to numb the effects of the critical incident

**How Long Will These Reactions Last?**

You may find that returning to your normal self takes some time and that you have periods when thoughts or feelings related to the critical incident come back. There may be some aspects of your experience you will never forget. Many people find that the nightmares and flashbacks decrease, though this commonly takes up to a year or so.

As the time since the critical incident increases, feelings that there is a danger around every corner also tend to become less. However, many people remain more sensitive to danger than they were previously, though this does not necessarily make people overcautious, perhaps just more realistic than others.

**How Will I Know When I’ve Recovered?**

People generally feel they’ve recovered when they are able to enjoy life again, and when they return to activities they did previous to the critical incident. When the nightmares and flashbacks have decreased. When they do not restrict their activities or avoid doing something because it reminds them of the critical incident. When you find that you are able to talk about it without becoming very distressed.

Some people seem to recover well without professional help, but with much support and encouragement from friends and family. However, some people find that additional help is needed in order to reduce the physical, thoughts and emotional feelings associated with critical incidents and to put it in the past where it belongs.

**When To Seek Help?**

* If you don’t notice a decrease in the physical, thought and emotional symptoms which are outlined in this advise sheet within a couple of months.
* If you notice the physical, thought and emotional symptoms increase – either they are stronger or more frequent as the weeks go by.
* If you find you are unable to function effectively in your family or working life.
* If you find that you are unable to relate satisfactorily in your family or working life.
* If other people who know you well say that you have been very changed by the experience.

Unrecognised and unattended levels of stress may gradually lessen your quality of life and wreck relationships with work club member s, families and friends. The most serious stress reactions are anxiety, panic attacks and depression with or without suicidal tendencies. Should these reactions occur, you are advised to seek prompt attention from your General practitioner G.P.

**From Where Can I Get Further Help?**

If you feel you need further help as a consequence of being involved in a critical incident, you are advised to contact:

* Your family General Practitioner
* A Psychologist / Counsellor with expertise in the area of critical incidents / trauma

**Conclusion**

In this advice sheet you have read about common reactions to critical incidents and you will have had an opportunity to identify those which particularly fit how you have been feeling. **The main message is this: the feelings, thoughts and body sensations you have been experiencing are entirely normal. They are a natural, human reaction to extreme stress associated with critical incidents**.

**Do’s & Don’ts Following A Critical Incident**

###### DO’s

**DO** remind yourself that your reactions are a normal result of critical incident and will pass in time.

**DO** take some long slow breaths and remind yourself that you are safe and that the critical incident is over if you feel uncomfortable, afraid or anxious.

**DO** talk to your family, friends, and club member s about the critical incident, as this will help you to get over your feelings.

**DO** try to get back into your normal routine as soon as possible.

**DO** make sure that you are doing things that are relaxing and enjoyable.

**DO** take every opportunity to review the experience within yourself and with others.

**DO** ensure that you have adequate rest, sleep, a good diet, and regular exercise

**DO** confront your fears step by step

**DO** show this advice sheet to your family/those you live with. It will help them better understand what you are going through.

**DO** Drive More Carefully And Be More Careful Around The Home And With Machinery.

**ACCIDENTS ARE MORE COMMON AFTER CRITICAL INCIDENTS: DO TAKE CARE!**

###### DON’T’s

**DON’T** bottle up your feelings

**DON’T** reject support from family, friends or work club member s

**DON’T** avoid situations that remind you of the critical incident

**DON’T** expect the memories to go away – the feelings will stay with you for an extended time

**DON’T** usealcohol &/or illicit drugs to manage your symptoms