

MEMBER RESOURCE

CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS

Processing the calls that don't leave you.

CODE ONE SUPPORT

CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS

Some jobs are different from the rest. Not harder in the ordinary sense — different in kind. They stay with you in a way that doesn't respond to just getting on with the next shift.

Critical incident stress is the specific response to a single significant event — not the slow accumulation of an ordinary hard year, but the sharp aftermath of one particular job that's landed differently than the others.

WHAT IT ACTUALLY IS

A critical incident is any event that overwhelms your usual ability to cope in the moment — often because of its severity, its suddenness, a personal connection to it, or simply because it happened when you had nothing left in reserve. Your brain stores significant experiences differently than routine ones: in fragments, sensory pieces, and emotional flashes rather than a clean, filed-away memory. That's why a specific job can keep resurfacing uninvited, long after the shift has ended.

This is a normal response to an abnormal event. It isn't a sign of weakness, and it isn't a permanent state — but it does need somewhere to go, and "pushing through" often just delays it rather than resolving it.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

Most of your jobs don't stay with you past the shift. This one does. It replays without being asked to — while you're driving, while you're trying to sleep, in the quiet moments where nothing else is competing for your attention. You might notice a specific smell, sound, or image keeps coming back attached to it. You tell people you're fine, because explaining what "fine" actually means after a job like that feels like more effort than it's worth.

HOW IT SHOWS UP

- The incident replaying uninvited — specific moments, or a general unsettled feeling
- Sleep disruption specifically tied to the event, including vivid or disturbing dreams
- A sensory trigger — a sound, smell, or image — that brings it back sharply
- Avoiding reminders of the job, or the location, or people involved
- Second-guessing decisions made in seconds, using information you only have now
- A sense of being unsettled that doesn't track to your usual baseline

Timing matters, but it isn't a deadline. Processing tends to be most effective within the first two weeks, while detail is still accessible. That said, this isn't time-limited – if you're picking this up months later because something finally surfaced, the work is still worth doing.

WHY IT HITS THIS JOB HARDER

Most people go their entire lives without a single critical incident. You're statistically likely to accumulate several over a career — and the gap between jobs is rarely as long as your nervous system needs to fully reset before the next one arrives.

There's also a structural problem: formal debriefs, where they exist, don't cover everything. Plenty of jobs that genuinely qualify as critical incidents for you personally don't meet the threshold for an organised debrief — a job that hit you hard for a personal reason, or one where nothing technically went wrong but it still landed heavily. That leaves a real gap between "bad enough for a formal process" and "bad enough that it's still with you," and most people fall into that gap without any structured way through it.

WHAT ACTUALLY HELPS

Get it out of your head and onto something external. Writing the incident out factually and chronologically — what happened, in order, without editing yourself — starts to organise the fragments your brain is holding onto. It doesn't erase anything. It gives you somewhere to put it besides just replaying it.

Separate what was in your control from what wasn't. A significant amount of the weight from a critical incident comes from treating outcomes you didn't control as if they were failures of judgement. They're not the same thing, and it's worth being precise about which is which.

Talk to someone who's stood in a similar spot. Not to be told it's fine — to be heard by someone who understands the specific weight of what you're describing without needing it explained first.

Know the difference between processing and dwelling. Working through a critical incident deliberately, once, with structure, is different from replaying it on a loop with no direction. If you notice you're stuck in the second one, that's the point to bring in more structure — a peer, a proper debrief, or professional support — rather than trying to out-wait it.

WORTH SITTING WITH

Is there a specific job that's still resurfacing, weeks or months after it happened?

Is there a sound, smell, or image tied to it that keeps coming back?

Have you actually told anyone the details, or has it mostly stayed in your head?

IF THIS IS URGENT RIGHT NOW

This resource isn't a crisis tool. If you're having thoughts of suicide, of not wanting to be here, or of harming yourself – stop reading and reach out now:

AU: Lifeline 13 11 14 **US:** 988 **UK:** Samaritans 116 123 **CA:** 1-833-456-4566

This resource will still be here when you're ready.

Rick – Founder, Code One Support

Firefighter · Former Infantry · Trauma & Grief Peer Support

MORE FROM CODE ONE SUPPORT

If this helped, here's where to go next.

MEMBERSHIP

CODE ONE PEER SUPPORT

Real conversations with a trained peer who's lived this job. Not a crisis line, not corporate wellness – ongoing support, on your terms. Plans from AU\$29/month.

SELF-GUIDED WORKBOOK – \$27

THE CODE ONE DEBRIEF

A structured post-incident recovery workbook. Seven sections. Private, practical, yours to keep.

FREE – WEEKLY EMAIL

THE HANDOVER

One practical mental health tool every week, written for first responders and their families.

FREE DOWNLOADS

THE 3-MINUTE RESET, AFTER THE JOB, LIVING WITH THE JOB

Quick regulation tools, a guide for volunteers, and a guide for partners and families.

TikTok & Instagram: @codeonesupport · codeonesupport.com · info@codeonesupport.com

This resource is for informational and educational purposes only and does not replace professional mental health support. If you are in crisis, contact your local 24/7 crisis service.

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