

ADOPTED: March 1, 2019

REVISED:

PURPOSE:

To provide for the emotional health of first responders and those impacted by stressful event(s).

OBJECTIVE:

The fire service can be both physically and emotionally demanding. Any event that causes unusually strong emotions has the potential to interfere with the ability to function normally. Emotional events can affect a single crew member, several crew members or an entire agency. It is important to deal with the emotional health of the first responders as soon as it is safe to do so.

INTRODUCTION:

Case studies by medical groups of major incidents where numerous injuries or fatalities occurred, have revealed that significant numbers of rescue personnel experienced some form of stress-related symptoms following the incident. Many of these symptoms were brief, and most personnel had no long-term detrimental effects. These studies, however, have also revealed that a small percentage of personnel do experience continuing, long-term detrimental effects resulting from exposure to such incidents. Some of these effects have been delayed, surfacing later after a period of no apparent symptoms. Without intervention, these personnel have experienced declining work performance and deterioration of family relationships as well as increased health problems. Personnel that have been repeatedly exposed to serious incidents or personally significant incidents, over a period of time may also exhibit stress-related problems, called cumulative stress.

Response to incidents that cause personnel unusually strong emotional involvement should qualify for some form of critical incident stress intervention, such as defusing, debriefing, or one-on-one contact. Strong emotions can result from a “flashback” where a person’s senses were stimulated at a scene that causes the person to recall a prior strong emotional event.

PROCEDURES:

On scene personnel should self-report, following the unity of command, if they are experiencing unusual strong emotions. It is the responsibility of crew members, company officers, division/group supervisors and incident command to recognize when a member or crews are showing signs of emotional stress.

Individuals showing signs of post-event emotional stress should follow their organizations procedures for seeking help. Every member of an organization is important to their family, organization and community and seeking help is not an indication of weakness, but an indication of self-awareness.

- A. Company Officers, Division/Group Supervisors.
 - 1. Following the unity of command notify the Incident Commander when personnel have been affected by the event.

- B. Incident Commander
 - 1. Command should reduce the crew's exposure by rotating personnel and removing initial personnel from the scene as soon as possible.
 - 2. Arrange for the crews to be taken to a facility that provides ample space, privacy, and freedom from distractions.
 - 3. Assign a Group Supervisor, who was not involved in the incident. Depending on the number of individuals make sure to assign additional staff support for the Group Supervisor.

- C. Group Supervisor
 - 1. Get a briefing of the situation from Command.
 - 2. Arrange for the crews to be taken to a facility that provides ample space, privacy, and freedom from distractions. This may already have been done.
 - 3. Notify and assemble Critical Incident Stress Team*.
 - 4. Conduct a defusing session. Attendance of defusing should be mandatory of all personnel who were directly exposed to the traumatic aspects of an incident. A defusing is an intervention that last from 30 to 60 minutes but may go longer if needed. A defusing is best conducted within one to four hours after a critical incident. The main purpose of a defusing is to stabilize people affected by the incident so they can return to their normal routines. Where appropriate, a formal debriefing may also be required.
 - 5. Make sure those attending the defusing know whom to contact, and how to contact someone if they need further help.

- D. Considerations
 - 1. Are there secondary personnel that need emotional assistance such as dispatchers, investigation team members, law enforcement, public works and/or bystanders?
 - 2. Have family members of the affected personnel been briefed so they know what to look for or how to get further assistance.

***THE CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS TEAM**

Agencies may use peer support, chaplains or mental health professionals to provide emotional support for their members.