

CISM Blitz #3: Talking to Friends and Family After a Critical Incident

Spending time with friends and families after being involved in a critical incident is important. They are some of the people that know you best and offer a safe place for you to talk about what you are feeling without judgement.

It can sometimes be difficult to know what to say to them or how to ask for help. Here are 3 useful tips to help you discuss critical incidents with your friends and family. This works great with kids too!

Step 1 - Keep it Simple –Often, the explicit details of what we see and do at work can be challenging for others to hear. These details can overwhelm our loved ones and leave them struggling to know what to say or do next. Keeping the description of the critical incident simple removes these specific details that may be alarming or cause vicarious trauma. This will also prevent you from providing any details that could be seen as a breach of confidentiality. I like to start with “I had a really hard shift today...” and then describe what made the shift hard while keeping it really simple. Some examples of how this could look are:

I had a really hard shift today...

- Someone was hurt really badly and now a lot of people’s lives have been changed forever.
- We had a really sick patient that died even though we tried really hard to help them.
- Someone hurt another person really badly and we had to work really hard to stabilize them/ make them better.

Be careful with how much info you provide to young children as they can often have very strong imaginations, can worry a lot about you or can have a whole bunch of follow up questions. When in doubt, just keep it extra simple and leave it at “I had a really hard shift.”

Step 2 - Tell Them How You Feel – It is difficult to know how to help someone if you don’t know how they’re feeling. We all respond to critical incidents differently and can have a wide range of emotions afterwards. Your family and friends may not know how to help you after a pediatric code blue, for example, but if you tell them how you’re feeling (sad, guilty, angry, scared etc) that gives them something to work with. Almost all of us, regardless of profession, life experience or age, have felt scared about something, angry at someone, sad about how events unfolded, or like we wished we could’ve done more.

Step 3 - Let Them Know What You Need – When we know someone we care about is hurting we often try to reach out but it can be hard to know exactly what would help them. If you let your friends and family know what would help you when you’re feeling down, you can bet that they are going to try and help as much as they can.

This doesn’t have to be some intense therapy or anything like that. It can be as simple as taking the night off of regular household duties, watching a TV show or movie together, going for a walk, ordering take out, having a bath, receiving a massage, sleeping in, or just spending some quiet time reading a book. You will find that your loved ones appreciate the suggestions and will often gladly try to implement them.

Try telling your young children, “I had a really hard shift. I could really use 10 big hugs from you throughout the day to help me feel better,” and you will get 10 of the best hugs you’ve gotten in a long time.

Tell your close friend, “I had a hard night, we had three really sick patients come in at the same time. I felt like it was chaos and that we should’ve been able to do more. I would really like to go grab some food, and hangout with you sometime this week,” and they will quickly start planning something with you.

That’s it!

1) Keep it Simple

2) Tell Them How You Feel

3) Let Them Know What You Need.

Remember connecting with the ones you love is a great way to help you after a critical incident and in times of stress. Letting people know what you’re going through will help them know how to be there for you. They can be a huge help in making sure that you’re taking care of yourself during this difficult time. They are also great at identifying signs and symptoms that you might be struggling more than you realize and can help encourage/support you to reach out for more help.

During the pandemic it may be difficult to connect in the same ways we’re used to. Don’t be afraid to utilize technology. Things like Zoom, Skype, FaceTime or other video call apps offer a great way to connect, support social distancing and can run from your phone.

Stay Safe, Stay well!

In Solidarity,

Your ED CISM Team