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**PURPOSE:**

The City of Langford supports the concept of stress counselling and traumatic incident debriefing for each and every member of the Langford Fire Department and the members of his or her family. Such counselling and debriefing sessions will be funded by the City and conducted either in an individual setting or in group discussions as needed.

**SCOPE:**

All fire department personnel and family members.

**POLICY:**

Langford Fire Rescue is committed to the safety, security and psychological well-being of all fire fighters, employees, and their family members. It shall be the responsibility of the Incident Commander during the particular incident to determine the need for debriefing or counselling, based upon the nature of the incident and personnel reactions to it. Members may approach the Incident Commander to discuss individual reactions and request counselling: or their immediate supervisor at the scene.


Fire Rescue personnel, like police officers and emergency medical personnel, are highly likely to be exposed to critical incidents in their line of duty. A critical incident is any event that has sufficient impact to overwhelm the usual coping abilities of those individuals exposed to the incident. Examples of critical incidents include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Serious Injury
- Suicide
- Sudden Death
- Death of a Child
- Injury or death of a co-worker
- Identification with Victim
- Repeated exposure to less serious incidents

In the event of a critical incident, victims, onlookers, rescuers, co-workers or relatives may display varying levels of immediate and in some cases, delayed physical and emotional distress. The extent and duration of the distress is dependent on the suddenness, intensity and length of the event itself, as well as the human support available during and after the event. The distress experienced in the face of a critical incident may have serious negative personal and career consequences if appropriate intervention does not take place. Appropriate pre-incident education and training coupled with appropriate response can prevent or attenuate most adverse consequences.

Langford Fire Rescue supports the concept of stress counselling and critical incident debriefing for all members of Langford Fire Rescue and their family members. Such counselling and/or debriefing sessions will be funded by Langford Fire Rescue and conducted by either qualified personnel from a local organization or by qualified peers as seen fit, either in an individual or group setting.

It shall be the responsibility of a Chief Officer to determine the need for defusing and/or debriefing based upon the nature of the incident and personal reactions to the incident. Members may approach any Officer to discuss individual reactions to an incident and to

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request counselling or a debriefing.

Each member of Langford Fire Rescue will be provided with a copy of this policy so that they will be educated about Critical Incident Stress.

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**PROCEDURE:**


**1. Critical Incident Stress Debriefings (CISD)**

A Critical Incident Stress debriefing (CISD) is a formal, structured group meeting that may last up to three hours, and that follows a sequenced process which allows participants to share their experiences of the incident, ventilate emotions, learn about stress reactions and symptoms, and discover where further help is available if required. Note that CISD is not psychotherapy. A CISD should be conducted between 24 and 72 hours after the critical incident, but may be conducted up to twelve days after the incident. If the CISD is not conducted within twelve days of the critical incident, a general education/information session for all persons involved in the incident is appropriate. After a CISD, those persons still suffering from the effects of the critical incident should receive individual counselling. A CISD emphasizes the ventilation of emotions and reactions to the critical incident, and educational and informational elements. The two major goals of a CISD are to reduce the impact of a critical incident and to accelerate the recovery of people suffering through normal but painful reactions to stressful events.

**2. Defusing**

A Defusing is a shorter, less formal, and less structured version of Critical Incident Stress Debriefings. A Defusing is conducted within a few hours of a critical incident, anywhere from one to four hours is ideal. If it is not conducted within twelve hours, then it is not given at all and a formal CISD may be necessary. The key to successful reduction of stress resulting from a critical incident is rapid intervention.

A Defusing is a group process which lasts about 20 to 30 minutes, depending upon the size of the group. Defusing allows for an initial ventilation of emotions and reactions to the critical incident, and provides an opportunity for stress-related information to be presented. The main purpose is to stabilize the individuals affected by the critical incident so they can return to their normal activities or return home without unusual stress. In some cases, individuals may not be able to return to their normal activities due to the intensity of the incident. In this case, either a CISD for the group or individual counselling as indicated. Langford has qualified members trained in diffusing incidents as well there are personnel outside of the department that are trained in diffusing and debriefing.

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### **3. Voluntary Participation**

Attendance at Defusing or CISDs is strictly voluntary. Persons involved in Critical Incidents will be strongly encouraged to attend even if they believe they were not seriously affected by the incident. Much of the benefit derived from Defusing and CISDs are through the review of the shared experience and the educational portion of these interventions. Defusing and Debriefings, while identified here as a response to critical incidents, are actually preventive of subsequent dysfunction such as post traumatic stress disorder. Therefore, even those people not manifesting stress symptoms immediately after an incident may benefit from attendance at a Defusing or CISD.

### **4. Limitations on Attendance**

Defusing and Debriefings are intended solely for those people involved in a critical incident. In some cases it might be deemed appropriate to defuse or debrief persons who were not directly involved in the incident, but such groups or individuals will be defused or debriefed separately from those directly involved. Media personnel will not attend debriefings or defusing.

Subsequent to some critical incidents, a WCB investigation or an operational debriefing may be required. An operational debriefing seeks to discover the facts of an incident; what went right and wrong, corrective and/or preventative action to be taken, and responsibility/culpability. Persons who may be called upon to conduct WCB investigations or conduct operational debriefings for an incident will not attend a critical incident Defusing or Debriefing for that incident.

The Defusing or Debriefing Leader has the authority to ask any person to leave a Defusing or Debriefing if the legitimacy of their attendance is in doubt.

### **5. Media**


Inquires by the media will be referred to the Chain of Command. Requests by the media to attend a Defusing or Critical Incident Stress Debriefing will be denied.

### **6. Educational Information for Fire Rescue Personnel**

#### **What is Critical Incident Stress?**

- a) A normal reaction to an abnormal event.
- b) The unusually strong physical and emotional reactions experienced in the face of a critical incident which could interfere with one's ability to function during or after the event.

A strong reaction is a normal reaction; few remain unaffected by a critical incident, although reactions may differ. Some reactions are immediate and some may occur and/or recur days, even weeks later.

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Reactions may be:

- Physical
- Cognitive (thinking)
- Emotional (feeling)

#### **Common Immediate Physical Reactions:**

Nausea	Muscle tremors
Sweating	Dizziness
Chills	Increased heart rate
Increased blood pressure	Hyperventilation (fast, deep breathing)

#### **Common Delayed Physical Reactions:**

Fatigue  
Exaggerated startle response  
Increased use/misuse of alcohol and drugs  
Sleep-related difficulties:

- difficulty falling asleep
- nightmares
- night sweats
- restlessness
- awakening early
- difficulty awakening

#### **Common Immediate Cognitive Reactions**


Confusion	Difficulty making decisions
Impaired thinking	Difficulty problem solving
Memory loss	Calculation difficulties
Amnesia (difficulty remembering the names of things)	

#### **Common Delayed Cognitive Reactions:**

Decreased attention span	Poor concentration
Memory problems	Flashbacks (re-experiencing the event)

#### **Common Immediate Emotional Reactions:**

Anxiety, Anger, Fear, Irritability, Guilt, Overwhelmed, Grief, Hopelessness

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### **Common Delayed Emotional Reactions:**

Feeling abandoned, Resentment, Feeling of alienation, Withdrawal, Numbness

### **What can you do about Critical Incident Stress?**

Research and experience with Fire Rescue personnel provide a variety of techniques to assist you, both during and after the incident.

### **During the Critical Incident:**

- ❖ Recognize the signs of critical incident stress.
- ❖ Maintain a positive attitude.
- ❖ Try to control breathing - slow, regular.
- ❖ Focus on the immediate task.
- ❖ Stay in contact with others by talking.
- ❖ Care for yourself - food, water, clothing, water, rest.
- ❖ If prolonged exposure, take breaks and rotate tasks.

### **After the Critical Incident:**

**TALK** - about the event; what you saw, heard, smelled, did, etc.  
 - about your reactions, particularly how you felt

### **PRACTICE STRESS MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES, SUCH AS:**

- ❖ deep breathing exercises
- ❖ progressive relaxation
- ❖ meditation and/or prayer
- ❖ physical activity
- ❖ music, reading


Use humour to facilitate acceptance of reactions

Participate in Critical Incident Stress Defusing as soon as possible after the event, and later in Critical Incident Stress Debriefing.

### **Coping Skills to Assist Recovery:**

#### **DO:**

- expect the incident to bother you
- remind yourself that your reactions are normal
- spend time with family, friends, and co-workers
- maintain balanced diet with minimum caffeine and sugar
- exercise daily, on a moderate basis
- take time for leisure activities

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- learn as much as possible about Critical Incident Stress
- talk to trusted family, friends, counsellor
- minimize use of alcohol and drugs
- treat yourself especially well - you deserve it!

**DON'T:**

- think you are going "crazy"
- try to resist recurring thoughts, dreams, or flashbacks
- withdraw from family, friends, and co-workers
- think you are the only one who has been affected
- drink alcohol excessively
- have unrealistic expectations for recovery - it takes time


**Suggestions for Family and Friends:**

- listen carefully
- spend time with the affected person
- offer your assistance and listening ear
- reassure them that they are safe and normal
- help them with routine tasks like cleaning, cooking, caring for the family
- allow them some private time
- do not take their anger (or other feelings) personally
- tell them you are sorry such an event occurred and you want to understand and assist them.
- call for help or support as soon as you think you need it.

**This Critical Incident Stress Policy is for your benefit. If you or your fellow firefighter needs help, then speak with an Officer.**

**REFERENCE:**

F:\WPWIN\ALARMRM\New Emergency Binder\Critical Incident.doc

 <b>Signature of Fire Chief</b>  <b>Date of Issue: December 12, 2003</b>	<b>This O.G. Replaces: 5.01.06</b>  <b>Issued on: June 22, 1995</b>
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