

How to deal with traumatic or critical incidents: Information for community residents

This document aims to help you when a traumatic or critical incident happens in your community. It provides information on how to help family, friends and community residents who have been traumatized by a critical incident:

- How to talk to them
- When to reach out for support
- How to care for yourself

What is a critical incident?

A critical incident is defined as “a sudden, unexpected and personally upsetting criminal event that is powerful enough to potentially overwhelm and dismantle the natural coping mechanisms of an individual or a community.” These are incidents such as shootings, violent attacks, robberies, or situations where police respond.

Critical incidents may be traumatic for some people and not others. It depends on how a person experiences the event in relation to other things happening in their life. Someone who has experienced violence in their past may be impacted more by a violent incident than someone who does not have that same past experience.

What you need to know about trauma

For a response to be effective, it needs to be “trauma-informed.” This means:

- Trauma is common and impacts the way people cope.
- Trauma often impacts a person’s physical and mental health.
- Each person’s response to a trauma is different and should not be judged.
- Some people may want to discuss their trauma, while others will not want to talk about it.
- Trauma often leads to a lack of trust. If trust is broken, it may take time to get it back.

How to handle a stressful situation

There are several things to consider when you are dealing with people after a trauma:

- Don’t assume you need to “fix” a trauma.
- There is no one-size fits all solution.
- Providing information alone is not enough. It is important to engage with people impacted by trauma.
- Be aware of your body language and facial expressions. You don’t want to seem distressed or shocked in front of impacted people.

Why it’s important to provide support

It is important to connect with leaders in your community and neighbourhood volunteers to figure out how residents are feeling. Getting the support and involvement of your community is important after an incident takes place. This is because people are often most comfortable talking with other residents.

Information that community volunteers uncover and share with you can lead to a more effective trauma response. However, in some cases, residents may not want to communicate with each other. This is a normal reaction. It is important to know that the impacts of trauma can be reduced and communities strengthened when residents are involved in the response to an incident.

Steps you can take to help your community heal

STEP 1: Use local resources

Local community health or resource centres, as well as a police officers, are great sources of information. If you live in a rental building, you can approach your landlord or a tenant community worker.

STEP 2: Talk to neighbours

Talking to neighbours can help start the healing process after a traumatic or critical incident. Here are some tips to help you:

- Never force people to talk about an event or their feelings. Some neighbours may be more open than others.
- Share only the facts about a situation, as gossip can be damaging.
- Familiarize yourself with typical reactions to trauma, which vary from person to person. Pay attention to words and body language.
- Provide emotional support to people in need.
- Do not try to treat trauma or give advice on how to manage it.
- Be aware that some people who are suffering may need professional help.

STEP 3: Be an advocate

Share the information you learn from your community with:

- Staff at community health or resource centres
- Landlords
- Police officers
- City councillors
- Social workers and others

You can use information and open communication to advocate for what the community wants and needs after a traumatic event.

STEP 4: Care for yourself

It is important to take care of yourself too. Sometimes, in an attempt to help the community, people bear the burden of others' trauma. This can compound the stress of living in an area where a critical incident happened. To help yourself, remember the following:

- You are a resident and you are a leader advocating for the community. Make sure you understand your different roles.
- Use relaxation and breathing exercises to calm yourself.
- Do regular exercise and eat healthy to help feel better during stressful times.
- Maintain good relationships and socialize.
- Believe in what you've done as a neighbour or fellow resident.
- Find faith in whatever form works for you, be it a walk in a park or going to a place of worship.

*For more information on dealing with a traumatic or critical incident, read *Neighbourhood trauma: What to do When a Violent or Traumatic Incident Happens*. It is available on the Crime Prevention Ottawa website at www.crimepreventionottawa.ca.*