

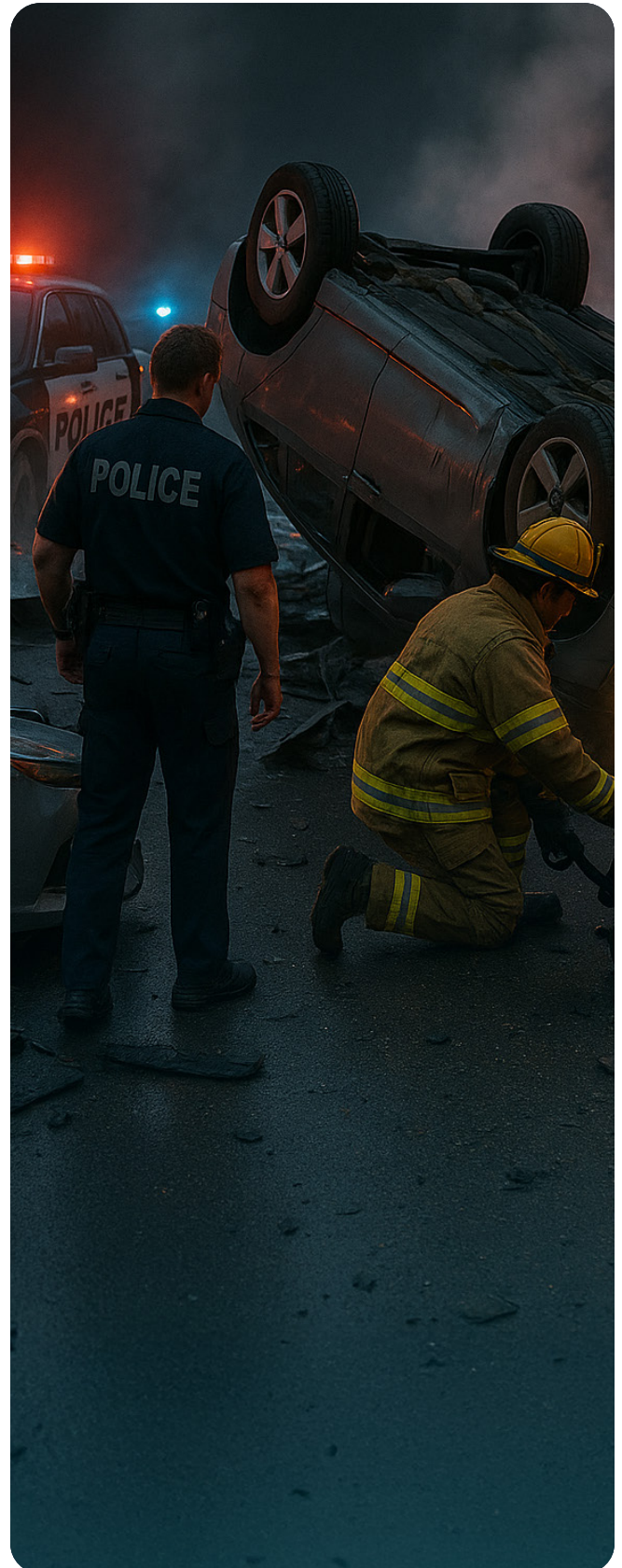
Critical Incident Self-Care

Best Practices for Protecting Your Mind and Body Following a Serious Incident

Public safety professionals—law enforcement officers, firefighters, EMS providers, dispatchers, and correctional staff—face traumatic events far more often than the general public. A vehicle crash with an entrapped child, a family trapped in a fire, witnessing a colleague injured in the line of duty, or responding to a violent assault in a correctional facility—these kinds of calls can take a toll.

Knowing how to care for yourself in the aftermath of a critical incident is essential. Left unaddressed, these experiences can contribute to stress, sleep disruption, and other lasting effects. In the first days after a critical incident, focus on the basics: safety, calm, rest, and small, practical routines. Use simple reset strategies—like steady breathing, walking, or grounding exercises—to calm your body and mind. Lexipol’s wellness app also offers guided meditations designed specifically for public safety personnel, which can help downregulate the nervous system.

Following are additional strategies to support recovery and build resilience.



Critical Incident Self-Care



Physical Care

- Avoid alcohol and drugs, which interfere with your body's natural recovery.
- If you sustained a head injury or develop concerning symptoms (e.g., worsening headache, repeated vomiting, confusion), seek medical evaluation.
- Stay active with moderate exercise—walking, stretching, light workouts. Movement helps regulate stress and improve mood, but avoid extreme exertion in the early days, as it can sometimes trigger flashbacks or replays of the incident.
- Prioritize sleep; it's critical for memory, healing, and emotional recovery.
- Eat balanced meals on a regular schedule. If stress makes eating difficult, try something lighter like a smoothie or protein drink to keep your body fueled—nutrition is especially important for recovery.
- Stay hydrated to reduce fatigue and support recovery.
- Limit caffeine, especially later in the day, to help sleep and reduce anxiety.

Outreach and Connection

- Connect with a trained peer supporter, chaplain, or trusted colleague who understands the demands of public safety. Talking with someone who shares the culture can be especially effective.
- If talking with family or friends, keep it simple: Let them know you had a tough call and are recovering, without going into details that could overwhelm them.

- Be open to receiving support from those you trust.
- Communicate your needs clearly.
- Be patient and compassionate with yourself and with peers who may also be under stress.

Processing and Decision-Making

- Write down your thoughts and feelings to help clarify what you're experiencing (shred or delete afterward if you want privacy).
- Hold off on major life decisions in the immediate aftermath (moving, financial commitments, etc.).
- Focus on small, everyday choices (like what to eat for lunch or when to go for a walk) to restore a sense of control.
- Limit exposure to news or social media about the incident to reduce intrusive reminders.

Emotional Management

- Strong reactions—fear, anger, sadness, worry—are normal after abnormal events. Everyone processes differently.
- Some people may have little or no emotional response, and some may never develop problems related to trauma at all. That's okay too—it doesn't mean you don't care. It simply reflects how your brain and body process stress.
- Give yourself permission to experience (or not experience) whatever comes up, without judgment.
- Remind yourself that emotional states are

Critical Incident Self-Care

temporary. Most people naturally “bounce back” with time.

- It’s normal to second-guess yourself or do some “Monday morning quarterbacking” after a tough call. Remember—you likely had to make split-second decisions with little or no warning.
- Practice self-compassion: Treat yourself with the same understanding you’d extend to a trusted colleague going through the same thing.

Red Flags: When to Seek Help

In the first few days after a critical incident, it’s common to feel shaken, emotional, or on edge. These symptoms are often strongest during that time because your brain and body are beginning the healing process. For most people, reactions gradually lessen over the following weeks. Sometimes responses can also be delayed, showing up days or even weeks later. That doesn’t mean you’re weak or doing it wrong—it’s another way the brain processes stress.

If you notice that your reactions are getting worse or not improving, it’s important to reach out for help.

Warning signs include:

- Ongoing sadness, hopelessness, or frequent crying
- Sleep problems that don’t improve
- Thoughts of suicide or indifference to life
- Withdrawing or shutting down emotionally
- Avoiding reminders of the incident
- Flashbacks, intrusive memories, or nightmares
- Persistent hypervigilance
- Anger outbursts, irritability, or rage
- Confusion, poor concentration, or memory issues
- High anxiety, panic attacks, or overwhelming fear
- Intense loneliness or feeling unsupported
- Increased use of alcohol or substances

Final Note

Critical incidents can be tough. With awareness, support, and intentional self-care, you can draw on your natural resilience and return to work stronger and better prepared for what lies ahead.



**Learn more about
Lexipol Wellness**