

# Critical Incidents

Are often sudden and unexpected

Disrupt ideas of control and how the world works (core beliefs)

Feel emotionally and psychologically overwhelming  
Can strip psychological defense mechanisms

Frequently involve perceptions of death, threat to life, or involve bodily injury

## **Perceptual distortions include:**

Slow/fast motion

Muted/diminished sound

Amplified sound

Slowing/acceleration of time

Dissociation

Tunnel vision

Heightened visual clarity

Automatic pilot

Memory loss for part of the event or your actions

False memory

Temporary paralysis

# Possible Reactions to a Critical Incident

Heightened sense of danger

Anger, frustration, and blaming

Isolation and withdrawal

Sleep difficulties

Intrusive thoughts

Emotional numbing

Depression and/or feelings of guilt

No depression and feelings of having done well

Sexual or appetite changes

Second-guessing and endless rethinking of the incident

Interpersonal difficulties

Increased alcohol or drug use

Greif and mourning

*Seek professional assistance if you get stuck, if you do not "feel like yourself" or if loved ones notice dysfunctional responses or behavior*

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# Critical Incidents



## **Nicoletti-Flater Associates**

Experts in Police and  
Public Safety  
Psychology



## General Response Pattern

**Shock**-psychological shock is often the initial response to a traumatic incident and is comprised of a host of discernable reactions including denial, disbelief, numbness, giddiness, bravado, anger, depression, and isolation. Psychological shock reactions, although common following trauma, are not limited to trauma. It can occur in response to any significant event. For example, football players who have just won the Super Bowl frequently respond to questions during post-game interviews by saying, “I can’t believe it” (disbelief) or “It hasn’t sunk in yet” (no impact).

**Impact**-after the passage of some time (the amount of time differs for different

people) there is impact. Impact normally involves the realization that “I could have been killed” or “This was a grave tragedy.” These thoughts and the feelings that accompany them can be overwhelming. Officers should never be returned to full duty while they are working through the impact of a traumatic incident.

**Recovery**-with proper support and individual processing, impact slowly diminishes. As impact diminishes, recovery begins. A person can experience any degree of recovery. No or little recovery can result in lifetime disability. Full recovery involves becoming stronger and smarter, disconnecting the memory of the incident from any disabling emotional responses, and placing the incident into psychological history.

## Recovery

1. Accept your emotions as normal and part of the recovery process
2. Talk about the event and your feelings/reactions
3. Accept that you may have experienced fear and confront your vulnerability
4. Realize that your survival instinct was an asset at the time of the incident and that it remains intact to assist you again if needed
5. Accept that you cannot always control events, but you can control your response
6. If you are troubled by a perceived lack of control, focus on the fact that you had *some* control during the event. You used your strength to respond in a certain way.
7. Do not second-guess your actions. Evaluate your actions based on your perceptions at the time of the event, not afterwards.
8. Accept that your behavior was appropriate to your perceptions and feelings at the time of the incident. The decision likely had to be made in a matter of seconds.
9. Keep in mind that you are naturally resilient.