

People who are close to someone who has suffered in a critical incident can experience feelings similar to that of the person primarily impacted. In addition there is usually a desire to give the person who has been directly impacted support, but people often don't know what to say or do. They sense a need to help the person who is primarily impacted deal with his/her feelings, but they also need to deal with their own feelings regarding the incident and the way that it might change their relationship with this person.

Some of the feelings that those who are close to the person primarily impacted may have are:

- Concern for the sufferer of the critical incident.
- Confusion about how to deal with the trauma.
- Difficulty understanding why the trauma occurred.
- Helplessness - wishing they could have protected the sufferer of the critical incident or prevented the incident, and wanting to "fix" the situation so

that life can get back to "normal."

- Temporary loss of closeness to the sufferer. It may be difficult not to take this personally. Sufferers have been faced with their own vulnerability, and as a result may find it difficult to relate to people they have been close to, even when the relationship is strong and nurturing.
- Feeling out of control of their life. The critical incident has changed the person's life; nothing feels the same. Feeling out of control is a normal response to a critical incident; control will return with time and healing.
- Frustration with other professional systems.
- Anger. Anger is a healthy response to a critical incident and may be directed at the person responsible or the systems that don't work. Although anger is appropriate, acting out violently is not appropriate. Significant others need to understand that venting

anger on the sufferer will further her/his feelings of guilt and self-blame.

- Difficulty expressing their own feelings, difficulty asking for help. People may feel that because they aren't the primary sufferer, they shouldn't be using sufferer support systems or that they should be able to "handle it."

Hints to help you:

- Giving support means listening, asking how you can help, encouraging the person involved to ask for what he/she needs, being sensitive and patient, not trying to "fix" the person or the situation, supporting the person's decision in order to allow her/him to regain control over her/his life.
- You are responsible for dealing with and finding support for your feelings regarding the critical incident.

- Healing from a critical incident takes time, and it's a normal reaction to want it "over with." "Hurry up and get well" messages will only force the person involved to stuff feelings, internalizing her/his anger and pain, causing him/her to distance from those they care about and feel further isolated.
- Pushing the sufferer to reconnect before they are ready will only slow down their healing process and can be damaging to the relationship.
- A disruption of routine, even without crisis, is anxiety-producing. Prioritize issues that need immediate attention and let go of decisions that can wait.
- Be sensitive in the way you ask questions regarding the incident. "What were you

thinking?" may suggest to the sufferer that she/he might be to blame. Even if the person's action may have contributed to the problem, blaming them is not helpful.

- All sufferers blame themselves to a degree for an incident or for being unable to prevent it. Reassure the victim that she/he did the best they could, given the situation.
- Your own feelings, personality or your role with the sufferer may make it difficult to ask for help. It's important for you to talk about the incident and its effect on you with a supportive person, who has knowledge or sensitivity about the issues surrounding the critical incident - a friend, a family member, or a counsellor.

Adapted from: Spouse/Significant Other Support/Secondary Sufferers by Mark Goulston. Counseling Services, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire with information on page 1 initially taken from Chippewa Valley Emergency Support Service, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, USA. Retrieved from <http://www.uwec.edu/counsel/pubs/spouseso.htm>

**When Someone
You Care About**