



**Service Instruction**  
Critical incident Stress Management

*“An Excellent Authority”*

**Document Control**

**Description and Purpose**

This document is intended to give guidance to MFRS personnel regarding the Critical Incident Stress Management procedure which should be applied following a Service critical incident.

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**Amendment History**

Version	Date	Reasons for Change	Amended by

**Risk Assessment (if applicable)**

Date Completed	Review Date	Assessed by	Document location	Verified by(H&S)

**Equalities Impact Assessment**

Initial	Full	Date	Reviewed by	Document location

**Civil Contingencies Impact Assessment (if applicable)**

Date	Assessed by	Document location

**Related Documents**

Doc. Type	Ref. No.	Title	Document location
	TBC	Service Chaplain SI	
	PODPOL07	Positive Mental Health and wellbeing policy	
	SI0069	Incident Debriefs	

**Contact**

Department	Email	Telephone ext.
Occupational Health	Occupational Health Services	0151 296 4917

**Target audience**

All MFS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Ops Crews	Fire safety	Community FS
Principal officers		Senior officers	Non uniformed	

**Relevant legislation (if any)**

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## CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS MANAGEMENT PROCEDURE

### Introduction

Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority (MF&RA) have a responsibility to ensure, as far as reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare of its employees. MF&RA will develop our policies and procedures to provide appropriate health and wellbeing interventions which seek to remove barriers and aid employees to remain in work.

By the very nature of the Fire Service's work, employees (particularly operational employees) are at risk of exposure to potentially distressing events. Physical, emotional and psychological reactions to these events are normal (and not always negative).

For the majority of the time, most people will be able to function efficiently and manage their own reactions by drawing on existing coping strategies. However, some people may experience negative reactions ranging from anxiety to depression; and this could have the potential to interfere with both work and home life.

People develop their own methods of coping with potentially distressing incidents which they may have been exposed to. These methods may include peer support and humour, and may work well for most people most of the time.

There is however a particular need for operational personnel to understand and be aware of the potential impact that could occur from being exposed to distressing incidents without the appropriate support mechanisms in place.

It is acknowledged that incidents occasionally may be so distressing for staff, or an everyday incident may have an unusually strong impact on staff, that these normal coping methods may not be satisfactory. These incidents are termed 'critical incidents'.

In compliance with the Authority's Duty of Care, MF&RA have developed a staff support programme incorporating education and awareness, and, following a critical incident, a defusing and debriefing process.

Defusing and debriefing will provide a response to critical incidents; as well as promoting an understanding and developing a framework for the individual or team to manage any reactions encountered.

This implementation is aimed at being proactive, with the aim of helping personnel to realise that problems may be developing and signposting further help which is available should it be necessary.

The aim of the Service Critical Incident Management procedure is to:

- Ensure MF&RA have a single common approach to the process and support those who have been involved in critical incidents
- Provide a timely, high quality and confidential support service to employees
- Offer an opportunity to talk through potentially traumatic events using a structured approach; within a safe and controlled environment
- To enable personnel who have experienced distressing incidents within work to talk openly about their emotions and feelings, in order to lessen any potential effects
- Identify and signpost those individuals who may require additional/ ongoing support of Occupational Health and/or other health care professionals

## **Mental Ill Health Education**

There is a need for employees, particularly operational employees to understand and to be aware of the potential psychological impact from being exposed to traumatic incidents and how best to cope with any adverse reactions. In order to minimise any harm that may be triggered by psychological injury it is important that all personnel are aware of the potential impact and are able to identify the symptoms of mental ill health.

Education and Awareness around mental ill health is important to MF&RA because:

- It prepares employees prior to potential exposure to critical incidents and the reactions/feelings they may experience thereafter; and can enhance an individual's coping skills
- It will help employees to recognise the signs and symptoms of mental ill health and inform them of how best to support their colleagues who may be experiencing mental ill health
- It will assist all employees to develop a more comprehensive understanding of mental ill health and associated problems.

MF&RA will aim to educate all employees about mental ill health during their induction process. All new employees will receive:

1. An Occupational Health Induction presentation (inc. Bridging Team)
2. Mental Health First Aid Training (MHFA) – 2 day course
3. A presentation on both the Service Critical Incident procedure and processes; and on the traumatic incidents personnel may experience during their career with MF&RA. This is to be conducted by a member of the Debriefing Team (presentations will vary dependant on operational/non operational personnel)

When approaching retirement, personnel will also receive a presentation from Occupational Health as part of their pre retirement course in order to help them live a healthy, happier retirement. Those on pre retirement courses will receive:

1. Occupational Health presentation (covering health in retirement)
2. Opportunity to undertake a pre retirement health screening

## **What is a Service Critical Incident?**

A Service Critical Incident is any situation faced by MF&RA personnel that may cause them to experience unusually strong emotions which could possibly affect their ability to function either at the scene/in work or later on.

Criteria where a Critical Incident **MUST** be declared:

- Serious injury or death of a colleague
- Death of a child
- Incident involving horrific injury/death
- Mass casualties/ fatalities
- Major disaster or incident
- Civil disturbance – an incident which contains high levels of violence or aggression towards fire crews

Criteria where a Critical Incident **MAY** be declared:

- Incident involving a fatality
- Where the involved person is known to the firefighter(s)/ employee(s)
- Where crews are exposed to a series of traumatic events over a short period of time
- In the case of control staff, where an operator has handled an unusual, difficult or traumatic call
- An incident which may entail excessive media interest
- An incident in which the Senior Officer(s) present consider it to be deemed 'critical'

This is not an exhaustive list of incidents or events that could be classified as potential triggers. It is important that the definition is flexible and applied to any incident where any attending Officer(s) considers it to be 'critical'.

It is important to note that a critical incident can also be applied to non operational occurrences. The department's Senior Manager should be the person responsible for declaring a critical incident within their remit.

All personnel at the incident must attend the defusing session once they return to station; although participation is voluntary.

## **The Critical Incident Debriefing Team and Defusing Officers**

The Critical Incident Debriefing Team will be managed by the Occupational Health Department.

The Critical Incident Team will consist of those who have undertaken defusing or debriefing training courses with an authorised trainer.

Defusing will be the first response to critical incidents.

Critical incident debriefing will be a more in-depth response (if required) by fully trained critical incident debriefers.

Defusing Officers will be all Managers conditioned to the flexi duty system.

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## Service Instruction: Critical Incident Stress Management

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Defusing is the first line response and is set within the context of a range of support systems. The use of this intervention may interrupt the development of any psychological injury by helping an individual to understand their response to the incident and encourage that individual to seek further support at an early stage.

Defusing also identifies those personnel who may be at risk and those who may present ongoing symptoms that may well develop in to mental ill health such as post traumatic stress disorder. It also provides ongoing support to those who are being routinely exposed to high impact events.

Defusing is effectively a shortened version of debriefing but is more immediate in its application and therefore is not intended to go as deep as debriefing does. The defusing will be conducted by a Service trained defusing officer, and should always be conducted on return to station from any critical incident whether a subsequent debrief is required or not.

Defusing should occur as soon as possible following the conclusion of the incident, always before personnel go off duty.

It offers the opportunity for those involved to talk briefly about their experience with the aim of better understanding any intense reactions of the incident. Recognising similar reactions in other individuals can help and support each other in future incidents.

- Critical incidents in the 'optional criteria' – The defusing session will be attended by all personnel attending the incident. Debriefing is optional. The defusing officer will assess whether a debrief is required after the defusing session has been completed.
- Critical incidents in the 'mandatory criteria' – Both defusing and debriefing will be undertaken following the incident.

Critical Incident Debriefing is the second stage of the process.

The Critical Incident Debriefing Team are a group of MF&RA trained volunteers specifically trained to conduct critical incident debriefs following a traumatic incident.

Critical Incident debriefing will consist of a structured meeting where the group who attended the incident will share their experiences of the critical incident and review the facts, feelings and reactions that they have experienced during or subsequent to an incident. It is not counselling nor is it a regurgitation of a hot debrief.

Critical incident debriefing provides employees with a safe environment in which to talk. It is an aid to put events, thoughts and feelings into perspective and raise awareness of personal reactions, as well as the reactions of their colleagues.

A list of critical incident debriefers will be held by the Critical Incident Coordinator.

## **The Bridging Team**

The Bridging Team will be led by the Service Chaplain, and all members will be trained to Mental Health First Aid standards at a minimum.

Where appropriate, members of the bridging team may be requested or offered the opportunity to participate in further relevant training appropriate to their Bridging Team role.

A member of the bridging team will be requested to attend a station following a critical incident, after the debriefing session has been completed.

Bridging Team members will attend a station within 7 days of a critical incident debriefing being completed. Their role is to attend in an informal manner, to offer extra peer support to those whom attended the critical incident.

## **Confidentiality**

The Defusing and Debriefing process is confidential. However, it must be emphasised that confidentiality may be breached in circumstances where the individual is deemed to be a risk either to themselves, to other people or to MF&RA. If there is a conflict between these statements then it should be stressed that the safety of the individual and/or the safety of other members of the community takes precedence over confidentiality as per the Authority's confidentiality policy.

## **Procedure for Critical Incident Defusing and Debriefing**

MACC will be contacted by the incident Senior Officer who will declare a critical incident.

MACC will record this on the incident log, and if no incident log exists, then one will be created. MACC will then email the critical incident team mailbox with the incident log details.

The incident Senior Officer on declaring a critical incident, will return to the station from where crews were mobilised and conduct a defusing session with the attending crew members. Where more than one station is involved in the incident then other flexi duty officers should be utilised to carry out defusing at these other locations. Prior to these officers attending stations they should, in the first instance, make contact with the incident Senior Officer to ensure they are aware of the incident details (all crew members must attend the defusing session).

After completion of the defusing session(s), the defusing officer (incident senior officer) will decide whether a full critical incident debrief is required or not.

The defusing officer will complete the relevant areas of the OSHENS debriefing module. The defusing officer will report within this module whether or not they request a full critical incident debrief.

If a critical incident debrief is not required the Critical Incident Team Coordinator will consider further interventions using the Bridging Team.

Once a debrief is requested, the Critical Incident Team Coordinator will arrange for a full incident debrief to be conducted. Debriefers will be nominated to attend whilst on duty, where possible, their attendance will be managed by Time and Resource Management in liaison with the Critical Incident Team Coordinator.

The Critical Incident Team Coordinator will when possible select the debriefers in such a way that experience and expertise are equally met by those debriefers available.

Once arrangements for the debrief are established, the Critical Incident Team Coordinator will email the MACC Watch Officer with the details of date/time and location.

On completion of the debrief, the debriefing officer will complete the relevant OSHENS sections.

The MACC Watch Officer or a department Manager may request a critical incident debrief in the same way. The Critical Incident Team Coordinator will arrange the date, time, venue and debriefers for this. The Critical Incident Team Coordinator will inform the relevant Area/Group Manager of these actions.

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## Service Instruction: Critical Incident Stress Management

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The Critical Incident Team Coordinator will aim to plan the debriefing between 48-72 hours of the incident occurring, taking into account the practicalities of this regarding shift patterns.

In liaison with the relevant Areas, the Critical Incident Team Coordinator should:

- Obtain a copy of the incident log for the debriefers, together with a list of officers and appliances that attended the incident
- Identify individuals who have attended the incident
- Arrange a date, time and venue for the debriefing
- Check that individuals are aware of the date and time of the debriefing
- If known and relevant, inform the debriefers of the current status of the person(s) involved in the incident

Debriefing Officers should allow for approximately 1-2 hours for the debriefing, but make themselves available at the end of the meeting to allow individuals to approach them with further concerns.

Debriefing sessions should not consist of groups of more than 10 people. If the number is greater than 10 then either a second debriefing session will be arranged on an alternative date, or an additional debriefing team will be sent to debrief the others.

It is important that all disruptions possible during the meeting should be minimised. Therefore, when possible the team should be taken off the run, and all mobile phones and pagers should be turned off.

Station personnel not involved in the meeting if possible should be utilised to ensure that appliances remain available to attend further fire call.

MACC will be informed of the start and finish times of all critical incident debriefing meetings.

Any individual who does not attend the meeting will be sent a letter and information leaflet from the critical incident team coordinator.

Attendance/non attendees at the meeting should be recorded on the relevant OSHENS report by the Debriefing Officer. This is to ensure that all personnel receive the necessary follow-up support from the Critical Incident Team/ Occupational Health Department.

At 3 month and 6 month intervals following attendance at the critical incident, personnel will be contacted on an individual basis to review their wellbeing. Further intervention support will be applied if necessary.

The debriefers do not make any verbal or written reports. The level of confidentiality will, at all times, be respected by MF&RA.

After a Critical Incident Debriefing meeting has been conducted; the debriefing officers will be contacted by the critical incident team coordinator. This is in order to check on the health and wellbeing of the debriefing officers.

Defusing will be conducted by defusing officers, who will be all Managers conditioned to the flexi duty system. Defusing officers will be contacted by the critical incident team coordinator to establish whether they need further support or indeed debriefing themselves.

## **Scheme Coordinator**

The Snr Occupational Health Officer will act as the critical incident team coordinator of the scheme. Occupational Health will work closely with the Health and Safety Department in this area and a Health and Safety Officer will be appointed to assist the coordinator and be a point of contact.

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