

After a Critical Incident

The first seventy-two hours, for first responders and healthcare workers

I spent 18 years in emergency services: 911 dispatch, the ambulance, flight, and the emergency department. I know what it is like to clear a bad call, restock the truck, and go right back in service like nothing happened. Then, sometimes hours later, something does happen. This guide is for that window.

What is normal right now

When the tones drop, your body floods you with stress hormones so you can do the job. After the call, that system takes time to stand down. In the first few days, many people notice:

IN YOUR BODY	IN YOUR HEAD	IN YOUR FEELINGS	IN WHAT YOU DO
Trouble sleeping, exhaustion, headaches, upset stomach, feeling shaky or wired	Replaying the scene, trouble concentrating, “what if” loops, forgetting small things	Numbness, irritability, sadness, guilt, anger, or feeling nothing at all	Wanting to be alone, or not wanting to be alone, jumpiness, snapping at people you love, eating or drinking more or less

These reactions are common and usually ease over days to weeks. They are signs that your nervous system did its job, not signs of weakness.

The first few hours

- **Handle the basics:** water, food, warmth, a bathroom break, somewhere to sit.
- **If you're shaking, spaced out, or not yourself, don't drive yet.** Take a few minutes, or get a ride.
- **Give home a heads-up.** You don't have to share details. “It was a rough one. I might be quiet tonight” is enough.
- **You don't have to talk about it yet.** If you want to, talk with someone you trust.

The first night

- Sleep may not come easily. Wind down the way you normally would and let yourself rest. If you're still awake after about 20 minutes, get up, do something quiet, and try again.
- Skip alcohol as a way to come down. It may knock you out, but it breaks up your sleep and makes the next days harder.

- If a nightmare wakes you, orient yourself: where you are, what day it is, that you are safe. Feet on the floor, slow breaths out.

Days one through three

- **Keep your routine** as much as you can: meals, sleep times, the dog walk, the kids' pickup.
- **Move your body.** A walk, a workout, yard work. It helps burn off the stress chemistry.
- **Stay close to people who get it:** your partner, your crew, a peer support team, a chaplain. The conversation at the station, on the tailboard, or in the break room counts, and it often does more than people realize.
- **Limit the replays:** news coverage, social media, scanner audio, rereading the report. Finish what the job requires, then set it down.
- **Hold off on big decisions** like quitting, moving, or ending a relationship.
- **Be patient with yourself and the people around you.** Short tempers are common. Name it: "I'm not upset with you. It was a bad shift."

About telling the story

You don't have to walk through the details before you're ready. Research suggests that pushing people to retell a traumatic event in detail right away does not prevent later problems, and for some people it makes things worse. What helps is feeling safe, calming your body, being with your people, and talking when and how you choose.

When to reach out for more help

Right now: call or text 988, or call 911

- Thoughts of suicide, or of hurting yourself or someone else
- You can't take care of yourself, or can't stop drinking or using
- You feel out of control

Soon: call me, your doctor, your peer support team, or your EAP

- Your reactions are getting worse instead of better
- Symptoms are still strong after 2 to 4 weeks
- Several nights in a row with little or no sleep
- You're avoiding work, places, or people because of the call
- You're drinking or using more to cope, or the people close to you are worried

Delayed reactions are common too. Sometimes a call hits weeks or months later, or the fifth call like it hits harder than the first. Reaching out then is just as valid.

My 72-hour plan

Fill this in now, while you have a minute, or with someone you trust.

People I can call or text

Things that settle me

On day three, I will check in with

EACH DAY, I...

- ☐ Ate and drank something
- ☐ Moved my body
- ☐ Talked to someone
- ☐ Got some rest
- ☐ Kept alcohol low, or skipped it

For the people at home

If someone you love just came home from a bad call, be close without pushing. Offer food, quiet, and presence. Let them know you're there when they're ready to talk, and try not to take the silence personally. If you see anything from the "right now" list, get help right away.

Help, any time

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: call or text. Veterans, press 1.

Safe Call Now: 206-459-3020. Confidential, 24/7, staffed by current and former first responders, for responders and their families.

Crisis Text Line: text FRONTLINE to 741741.

911 if you or someone else is in immediate danger.

About the author: Dr. Ellen M. Riccio is a dual board-certified psychiatric and family nurse practitioner. Before advanced practice she spent 18 years in emergency services as a 911 telecommunicator, paramedic, prehospital registered nurse, flight nurse, and emergency department nurse.