

Critical Incident Debriefing



What is a Critical Incident?

A critical incident is any event that causes significant emotional distress or disrupts normal operations in a way that affects individuals, teams, or the working environment. These events can be traumatic or highly stressful and often lead to feelings of shock, confusion, or helplessness. For those working with assistance and therapy dogs, critical incidents could involve situations where the dog or handler faces unexpected challenges, leading to emotional or psychological impact.

Examples of Critical Incidents

- **Dog Injury:** If an assistance dog is hurt during training or an incident, it could cause emotional distress for both the dog and the handler, especially if it impacts the dog's ability to perform tasks.
- **Handler Crisis:** A handler experiences a personal emergency or crisis while working with their dog, which could include health issues, emotional challenges, or a sudden crisis that affects their ability to manage the dog.
- **Behavioural Setbacks:** If a therapy dog behaves unpredictably or aggressively in a setting where they are expected to remain calm, it can be very upsetting for handlers, clients, and the team.
- **Public Misunderstanding:** A situation where the dog is misidentified as a pet in a public space or where the handler is questioned or treated disrespectfully, leading to emotional harm or frustration.
- **High-Stress Public Encounter:** A therapy dog reacts negatively to an overwhelming environment or stimulus during a public visit, impacting the handler's confidence and the success of the interaction.

These incidents often require emotional processing to help those involved recover and move forward effectively.

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How Does Critical Incident Debriefing Work?

Critical incident debriefing is a structured process conducted shortly after the event to help those involved process their emotions and experiences. This typically involves professionals like counsellors or experienced trainers who are trained in guiding individuals through difficult situations. Here's how the debriefing generally works:

- 1. Response:** Once a critical incident occurs, it's important to act quickly. Emotional distress needs to be addressed promptly, so the team can start the healing process. A debriefing session often happens within hours or a day of the incident to ensure the emotional needs of those involved are met early on. For example, if a handler witnessed their dog being hit by a car, the immediate focus of the debriefing would be to check on the handler's emotional state and offer initial emotional support.
- 2. Structured Reflection:** The facilitator will guide the group or individual through a reflective conversation, helping them express their feelings about the incident. This process allows for a safe space where emotions can be acknowledged and validated. For instance, if a therapy dog had to leave a session due to unexpected behavior, the handler could share their feelings of embarrassment or frustration, while the trainer helps them process those emotions.
- 3. Processing the Event:** This stage focuses on exploring what happened, why it might have occurred, and how the individuals involved are feeling. It's not just about talking through the event, but also about making sense of it emotionally and psychologically. For example, a handler who had a difficult encounter with a member of the public questioning the legitimacy of their assistance dog could process their feelings of anger, confusion, and sadness during the debriefing session.

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4. Support and Coping Strategies: A major aspect of critical incident debriefing is helping participants develop coping mechanisms. This could involve learning relaxation techniques, gaining perspective on the incident, or finding ways to regain confidence and trust in the training process. For example, if a therapy dog struggled during a session with a client, the debriefing might provide strategies for both the dog and handler to manage stress or anxiety better in future situations.

5. Follow-Up and Ongoing Support: It's important that critical incident debriefing doesn't end with the immediate conversation. Ongoing support through follow-up sessions, check-ins, or referrals to counseling services can help individuals continue to process and heal.

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Why is Critical Incident Debriefing Helpful?

Critical Incident Debriefing has a lot of benefits, both for the dogs and the people working with them.

- 1. Emotional Support and Healing:** Critical incidents can have a strong emotional impact, and it's vital that the feelings of those involved are addressed quickly. Without this support, there's a risk of unresolved emotional distress, which can affect both personal and professional life. For instance, a handler who faces a challenging event may feel emotionally exhausted or unsure about their future with their dog. Debriefing offers a safe space to talk it out and begin healing.
- 2. Prevents Burnout and Compassion Fatigue:** Working with assistance and therapy dogs often involves exposure to highly emotional situations. Critical incident debriefing helps to prevent compassion fatigue, which occurs when individuals become emotionally overwhelmed by the needs of others. It also helps to prevent burnout by giving individuals the opportunity to manage their emotional reactions in a healthy way.
- 3. Improves Team Cohesion:** After a critical incident, teams might feel fractured or disconnected. A well-conducted debriefing helps restore trust and improve communication, allowing everyone to come together, share their perspectives, and support one another. For example, if a therapy dog struggled during a particularly challenging visit, a debrief might help the handler, dog, and trainer better understand what happened and work together to improve their approach.
- 4. Promotes Psychological Resilience:** Critical incident debriefing helps individuals develop the mental tools they need to recover from distressing events. Over time, this builds psychological resilience, making people more capable of handling future challenges. For instance, if a handler feels shaken after a public incident with their dog, the debriefing may help them learn how to handle similar situations in the future without feeling discouraged or anxious.

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5. **Safeguards Mental Health:** Without debriefing, repeated exposure to traumatic or stressful events could lead to anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). By engaging in critical incident debriefing, individuals can process their emotions in a safe, supportive environment, ensuring their mental health remains strong.

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Critical incident debriefing is an essential process for anyone involved in training and working with assistance or therapy dogs. It provides emotional support after traumatic or stressful events, helping individuals recover, regain confidence, and build resilience. Whether it's an injury, behavioral issue, or difficult public encounter, debriefing allows handlers, trainers, and others in the team to reflect on the incident, process their emotions, and move forward in a positive, healthy way. By addressing the emotional needs of those involved, critical incident debriefing ensures the ongoing wellbeing of both the people and the dogs they work with.

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