

# The Critical Incident Response Programme (CIRP)

By F/O Louise Cullinan

Scenarios where there was a real threat of death or injury but were resolved successfully or even the perception of such a threat can lead to critical incident stress developing.

The first question that needs to be asked is “what is a critical incident?” In CIRP, we define a critical incident as a stressful event that may evoke stress reactions by those either directly or indirectly involved. It may be an incident or accident, an occurrence such as an unruly passenger on the flight deck, or investigating an aircraft accident. A critical incident may overwhelm the normal coping mechanism and leave the individual feeling out of control or helpless. Like any stressful event aviation accidents prompt strong reactions for those involved, that almost goes without saying. Again unsurprisingly, pilots, cabin crews, accident investigators and their families have an elevated risk of developing critical incident stress reactions and this is best described as a psychological or physiological reaction to a critical incident; it often appears as a characteristic set of symptoms (some typical reactions are detailed in figure 1). Sometimes these normal reactions to an event can develop into the more serious post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

While there are obvious examples of the kind of critical incident that may induce stress reactions like being involved in an accident where serious injuries or deaths have occurred or an incident where there has been significant aircraft damage, we must also consider the effect of less obvious “survivor syndrome” scenarios where, for example, there was a real threat of death or injury (for example a bomb threat or near mid air collision) or even the perception of such a threat. It might be an incident where, because of its nature, there is major coverage by the media. An obvious example of these two factors coming into play was the ditching of US1549 in New York’s Hudson River. Clearly, this high stress situation did not conclude with the successful evacuation of the aircraft. In the weeks and months following the event the crew (and their families) had to deal with their hero status and the glare of media attention as well as the more typical stress that such an incident would bring.

In addition to being directly involved with an incident or accident, taking part in an investigation into an accident brings its own risks. Naturally, pilot investigation representatives are placed in situations of elevated stress as they seek to discover the reasons behind an accident in often gruelling and distress-

ing circumstances, perhaps heightened by a greater empathy the situation that the crew involved found themselves in. Other factors that may elevate critical incident stress risk include an engine failure or fire, an unruly passenger, a windshear event on approach or an unexpected deviation into an unusual attitude.

## *The stealthy stressors*

Besides these more obvious stress inducing scenarios, a number of less obvious events common to the lives of pilots have been demonstrated as factors that can elevate stress including a simulator check failure, a crew member injured on the way to, from or during a layover as well as less obvious factors like a disturbance such as a fire in the layover hotel. Sadly, we live in times where there are additional risks to crews, a prime and tragic example being when terrorists attacked the Oberoi Trident and the Taj Palace hotels in Mumbai in 2008. As you may know, these hotels are used by a number of airlines as



Accidents, incidents or even terrorist attacks while on layovers are all potential sources of stress related illness

Physical	Thinking/Cognitive	Emotional	Behavioral
Chest tightness	Blaming	Abandoned	Alcohol consumption
Chills	Confusion	Agitation	Antisocial actions
Cold	Difficulty calculating	Anxiety	Changes in activity
Diarrhoea	Difficulty concentrating	Apprehension	Changes in sex life
Dizziness	Difficulty in problem solving	Denial	Emotional outbursts
Fast breathing	Difficulty making decisions	Depression	Erratic movements
Fatigue	Difficulty naming common objects	Fear	Harsh with family
Grinding teeth	Difficulty reading	Feeling isolated	Hyperalert to environment
Headaches	Disorientation (place/time)	Feeling lost	Inability to rest/relax
Hormone changes	Distressing dreams	Feeling numb	Increase/Loss of appetite
Nausea	Hypervigilance	Grief	Job changes
Profuse sweats	Increased/decreased alertness	Guilt	Nonspecific body pains
Rapid heartbeat	Intrusive memories	Intense anger	Pacing
Sleep problems	Memory problems (short or long)	Irritability	Paranoia
Thirst	Offensive/Defensive self reviews	Limited contact	Relationship problems
Tremors (hands)	Overwhelmed by normal routines	Sadness	Speech pattern changes
Twitching	Poor attention span (decreased)	Uncertainty	Startle reflex intensified
Upset stomach	Seeing event over and over again	Wanting to hide	Suspiciousness
Visual difficulty	Slower thought process	Worry	Withdrawal into oneself

Figure 1: Typical reactions to critical incident stress

layover hotels. While this was a horrific event, it also revealed the capabilities of the global CIRP network with teams from KLM and Lufthansa's CIRP programmes working with those from the Mayday Foundation and ALPA-Int.

### What is a stress reaction?

In the context of critical incident stress management, stress reactions are psychological and physiological changes that occur in a person who has been exposed to a stressful event. Often we may not recognise our stress reactions and may even believe that because of our training and experience we are immune to them. Almost all people exposed to a critical incident will suffer some form of critical incident stress. Each person's stress reactions will be different (see Fig 1). However, CIRP has found that crewmembers experiencing stress reactions from an accident or incident most often complain about sleep problems, anger at the company, or the loss of "flying as fun." The ALPA Aeromedical Office has also found that of the pilots with post-traumatic stress disorder or long-term severe stress, approximately 70 percent of those who received proper assistance continued their aviation careers. Of those pilots not receiving any critical incident stress support, 60 to 70 percent left their aviation careers within two years of the critical incident or accident. Stress reactions may appear within days or they may take months or years to surface. If stress reactions do not diminish in frequency and intensity within a few weeks of the event it may be a sign that PTSD is developing. PTSD is a psychiatric diagnosis described as the development of characteristic symptoms following a psychologically distressing event that exposes a person to an intensity and/or duration of emotions outside the range of usual human experience. Major characteristics may include:

1. The traumatic event is persistently re-experienced, often as flashbacks or intrusive memories,
2. There is persistent avoidance of things associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness, such as the inability to enjoy aspects of life previously important, e.g.

sex, hobbies, children, etc., and

3. There are persistent symptoms of increased arousal such as hypervigilance (always being on the alert for something to happen), sleep problems, irritability and outbursts of anger, difficulty concentrating, and exaggerated startle response.

PTSD has long-term debilitating effects but it can be treated. The diagnosis is not made if the disturbance lasts less than one month. A less severe form of PTSD is Acute Stress Disorder. These stress disorders seriously threaten your health, career, and family. Early intervention has proven effective in preventing or mitigating the development of long-term stress disorders.

### What is the Critical Incident Response Programme?

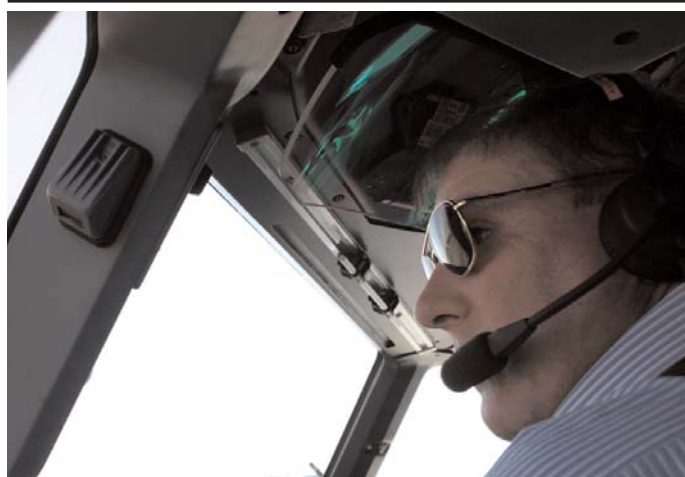
The Critical Incident Response Programme was implemented by ALPA-Int in 1994 as a flight safety initiative aimed at assisting crew members, accident investigators and their families following a serious incident or accident. The programme, which provides pre incident education and post incident/accident intervention services is aimed at aiding normal recovery before the effects of harmful stress reactions can begin to affect job performance, careers, families and health. It works through a system of peer support volunteers (PSV) who have been specifically trained and certificated under the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, using peer support and CIRP protocols that assist crew members, accident investigators, or their families with a critical incident. This support consists of phone calls and person-to-person contact. The first step is referred to as a One on One and is designed to provide education on stress reactions. One on Ones usually take place as soon as possible after an event and may be done by telephone. The next step is a defusing and it is a three-step process that lasts about 20 minutes and may involve follow-up calls. In most cases the process will do much to relieve the symptoms however, this may not always be the case which is where a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) process can

be instigated. The CISD is a seven-step managed venting of thoughts and reactions to a critical incident by those involved. This debriefing usually occurs within a week after an accident or incident; however, it can be done weeks, months, or even years later. The CISD is conducted by Peer Support Volunteers and always includes a mental health professional. Debriefings are confidential and do not involve management personnel. CISDs are not operational debriefings. They are conducted to provide support to the individuals involved and to mitigate the long-term effects of stress reactions. No records or notes are kept during debriefings. A typical CISD lasts from 1 ½ to 3 hours depending on the size of the group.

Remember, it's normal for individuals to suffer the effects of critical incident stress - it's a normal reaction to an abnormal situation. It is normal for individuals to be unable to recognise their own stress reactions. But you can mitigate the effects of stress reactions; stress management information is available in the ALPA-Int CIRP Guide which is available in the member's area of the IFALPA website. If you want to find out more about the CIRP or how you can develop a CIRP at your association, contact me through IFALPA's Human Performance Committee.



*Louise has been the ALPA National CIRP Chairman for the last two years. She holds the CIRP portfolio for IFALPA and assists airlines around the world in developing their own CIRP program. Currently, Louise is a pilot for Mesa Airlines, flying the CRJ200 and CRJ900 out of Phoenix. Her interest in intervening in cases of grief, shock, and distress goes back to an early course in thanatology. She continued her experience by volunteering at the American Cancer Society in Michigan and at her university after the crash of Northwest flight 255 in Detroit. With over 20 years of grief experience, she continues to volunteer her time in her hometown of Steamboat Springs, Colorado, where she is called upon to assist the community in dealing with tragedy and loss.*



**Have an idea for an article or want InterPilot to cover your story?** Contact Gideon Ewers, Tel. +44 1932 579041 or email [gideonewers@ifalpa.org](mailto:gideonewers@ifalpa.org)

## Dates for your Diary

### February

No meetings scheduled

### March

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#### 20th Executive Committee Meeting

Marrakech

Contact: Heather Price [heatherprice@ifalpa.org](mailto:heatherprice@ifalpa.org)

15-17

#### 20th Executive Board Meeting

Marrakech

Contact: Heather Price [heatherprice@ifalpa.org](mailto:heatherprice@ifalpa.org)

19-23

#### 65th Conference

Marrakech

Contact: Heather Price  
[heatherprice@ifalpa.org](mailto:heatherprice@ifalpa.org)



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#### 21st Executive Committee & Board Meeting

Marrakech

Contact: Heather Price [heatherprice@ifalpa.org](mailto:heatherprice@ifalpa.org)

### April

No meetings scheduled

### May

3-5

#### Accident Analysis & Prevention Committee Meeting

Amsterdam

Contact: Arnaud du Bedat [arnauddubedat@ifalpa.org](mailto:arnauddubedat@ifalpa.org)

17-19

#### Security Committee Meeting

Sydney

Contact: Arnaud du Bedat [arnauddubedat@ifalpa.org](mailto:arnauddubedat@ifalpa.org)

## InterPilot

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