

# CISM 101

# Introduction to Critical Incident Stress Management

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**ROYAL CANADIAN MARINE  
SEARCH & RESCUE**



With thanks to the BC Search and Rescue Association

# Introductions

- Who are we and why are we here?
- Your connection to RCMSAR



# Agenda

- What we do as RCMSAR members
- Stress and stress reactions
- Critical Incident Stress
- CISM and our program
- Working through CIS





# Group Agreement

- Interaction is encouraged
- Sharing is voluntary
- Learning goes
- Stories stay

# What is SAR, really?



- **Searches** (people and vessels)
- **Rescues** (people, sometimes animals)
- **Recoveries** (when the subject has died)
- **Emergency scene support** (evacuations, fire support, other mutual aid)



# What is SAR, really?



RCMSAR can also include:

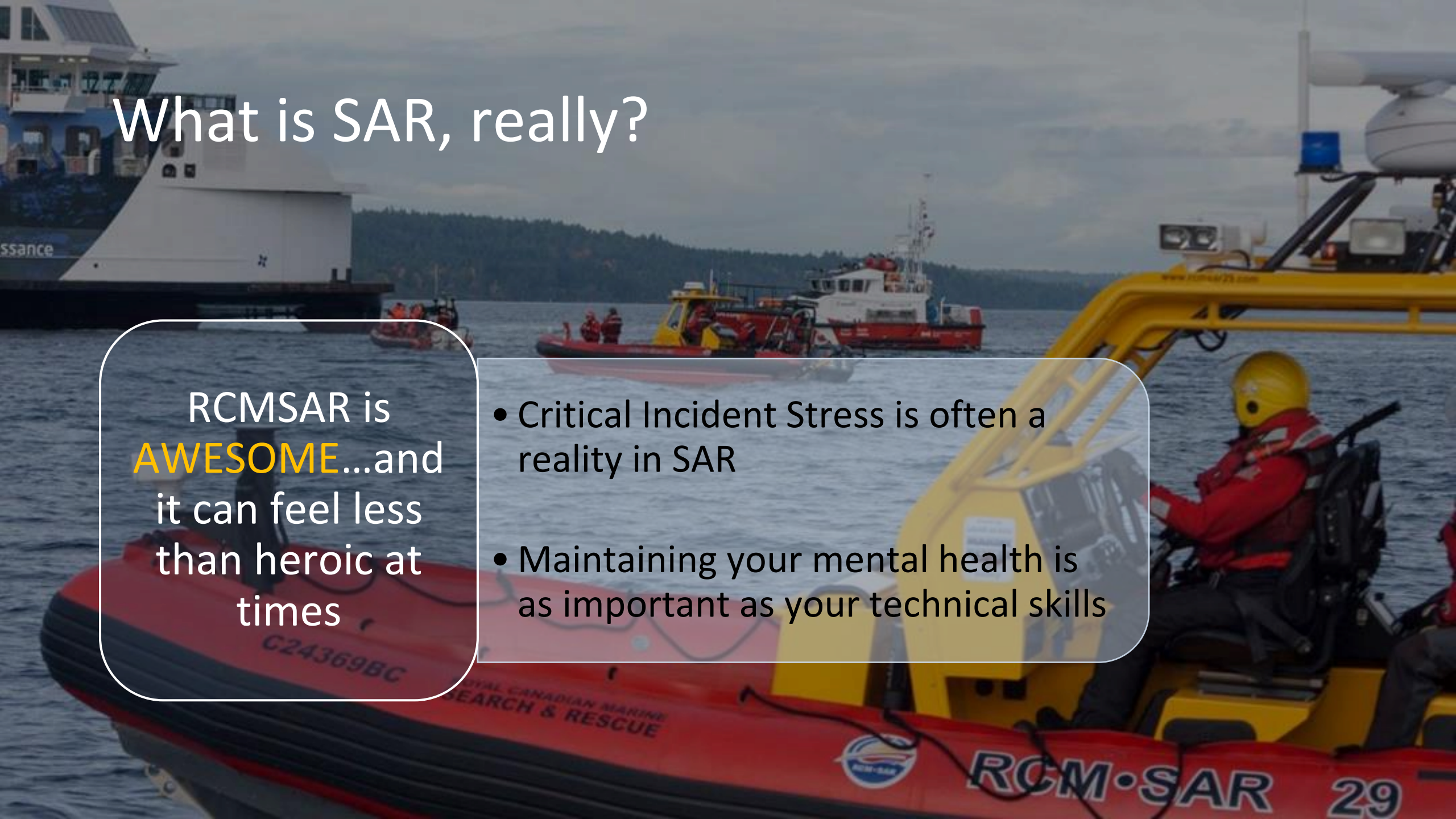
- Search termination or suspension
- Managing big risks and hazards
- Working with others in crisis
- Moments that make you confront stress, death, suicide, and strong emotions like anger, grief, sadness, and guilt



# What is SAR, really?

RCMSAR is  
**AWESOME**...and  
it can feel less  
than heroic at  
times

- Critical Incident Stress is often a reality in SAR
- Maintaining your mental health is as important as your technical skills





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- Prolonged tasking
- Intense community/media involvement
- Subject is known/relatable
- Member death, injury, or near miss
- Incidents involving children
- Perception of task/outcome
- Life-saving care or severe trauma
- Body recoveries



# Questions?

Any surprises, concerns, or things you want to highlight in the info so far?

# Let's talk about stress



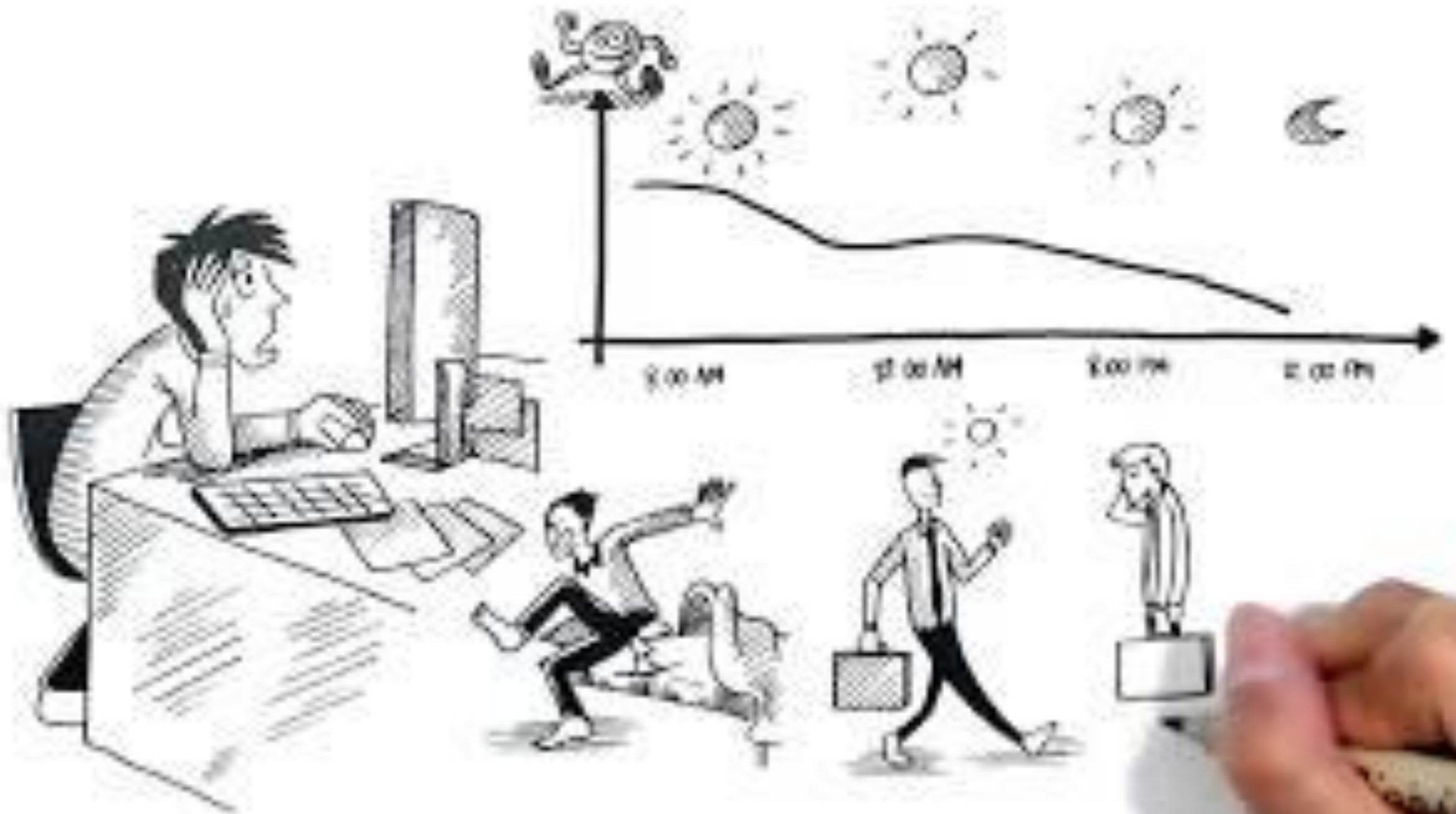
Stress is mostly good and needed (we rely on it in our roles)

Stress danger zone:  
too much and/or  
for too long



A red plastic bucket with a handle is suspended from a boat's rigging. The bucket is hanging from a chain and rope. The background shows a blue sky with some clouds, a body of water, and a distant shoreline with trees and buildings. The text "The Stress Bucket" is overlaid in white on the image.

# The Stress Bucket

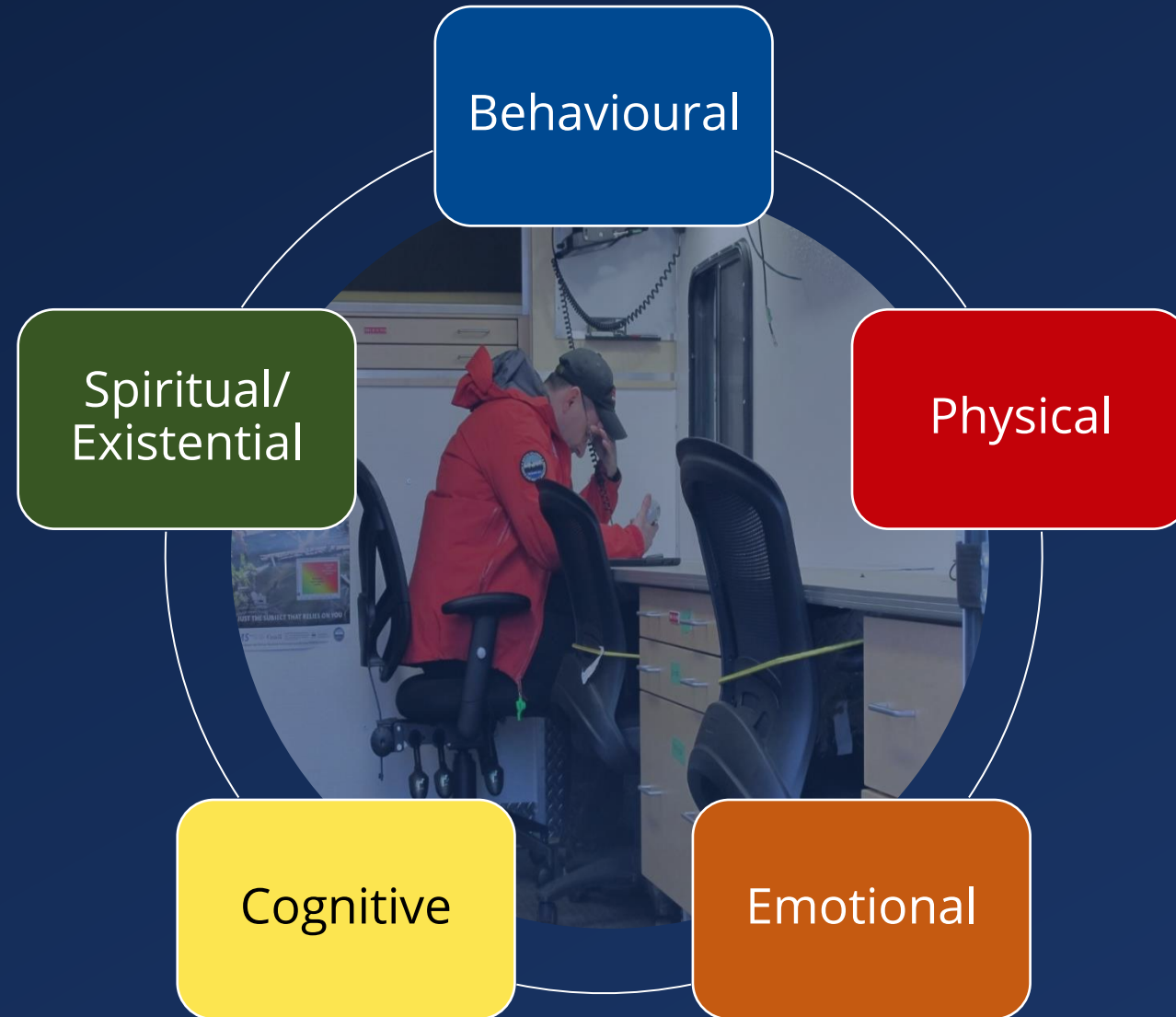




# What is Critical Incident Stress?

CIS is a common, normal reaction to an uncommon, stressful experience.

# Possible Signs and Symptoms of CIS



# Possible Signs and Symptoms of CIS

## Behavioural

- Change in usual behaviour or routine
- Eating/sleeping
- Withdrawn
- Easily startled
- Restlessness

## Physical

- Muscle tension/tremors
- Digestive issues
- Racing heart
- Chills
- Thirst
- Fatigue
- Headache

## Emotional

- Anger
- Anxiety
- Grief
- Feeling spent
- Hopelessness
- Helplessness
- Guilt
- Shoulda/coulda

## Cognitive

- Confusion
- Poor concentration
- Self-blame
- Intrusive thoughts or images
- Nightmares or preoccupation with task

## Spiritual/ Existential

- Moral injury
- Questioning beliefs
- Disrupted world view
- Cessation of faith-based practice

# MENTAL HEALTH CONTINUUM MODEL



**HEALTHY**

**REACTING**

**INJURED**

**ILL**

- Normal fluctuations in mood
- Normal sleep patterns
- Physically well, full of energy
- Consistent performance
- Socially active

- Nervousness, irritability, sadness
- Trouble sleeping
- Tired/low energy, muscle tension, headaches
- Procrastination
- Decreased social activity

- Anxiety, anger, pervasive sadness, hopelessness
- Restless or disturbed sleep
- Fatigue, aches and pains
- Decreased performance, presenteeism
- Social avoidance or withdrawal

- Excessive anxiety, easily enraged, depressed mood
- Unable to fall or stay asleep
- Exhaustion, physical illness
- Unable to perform duties, absenteeism
- Isolation, avoiding social events

## ACTIONS TO TAKE AT EACH PHASE OF THE CONTINUUM

- Focus on task at hand
- Break problems into manageable chunks
- Identify and nurture support systems
- Maintain healthy lifestyle

- Recognize limits
- Get adequate rest, food, and exercise
- Engage in healthy coping strategies
- Identify and minimize stressors

- Identify and understand own signs of distress
- Talk with someone
- Seek help
- Seek social support instead of withdrawing

- Seek consultation as needed
- Follow healthcare provider recommendations
- Regain physical and mental health



# Critical Incident Stress Management

*A package of tools designed to reduce the negative impact of traumatic events that people have been exposed to, to support return to daily routine more quickly and with less likelihood of experiencing negative long-term effects.*

A form of “psychological first aid”.

# Critical Incident Stress Management

1. Defusing (optimally within 24h)
2. One-to-one (optimally 2-7 days after)
3. Debriefing (optimally 2-7 days after)

CISM peers guide your group through a process to talk about the experience and their reactions to it.

**All CISM processes are voluntary and confidential.**

# RCMSAR CISM Team

12 RCMSAR volunteers trained through the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation.

We provide:

- Critical incident stress support
- Education & awareness sessions
- Referrals to additional services



Any RCMSAR member can activate the team by emailing [cism.request@rcmsar.com](mailto:cism.request@rcmsar.com)  
Expect a response within 24h



# Leadership Role in the CISM Program

Coxswains and other leaders have an important role in CISM in RCMSAR. This can include:

- Identifying events that could lead to higher stress reactions on the crew and reducing exposure where appropriate.
- Championing volunteer wellness and endorsing the CISM program.



# Leadership role in the CISM program

After a critical incident, leaders are involved in:

- Activating the CISM program.
- Providing space for reflections on stress in task debriefs.
- Reminding crew of stress reactions and CISM tools

# Helpful Things You Can Do

- Attend debriefs (operational and CISM)
- Hydrate
- Exercise
- Engage social supports
- Get adequate sleep
- Maintain routine
- Implement your 'go to' coping skills



# Important reminder

You are a volunteer  
and at anytime,  
including mid task,  
you can say NO.



# Group Agreement

As an RCMSAR group:

- Does everyone know how the CISM program fits into RCMSAR?
- Do you know how to support each other?
- Do you know how to activate the CISM program?

A photograph of an RCMSAR inflatable boat navigating through rough, white-capped waves. Three crew members wearing orange and yellow safety gear are visible in the boat. The boat is red with yellow accents and has 'RCMSAR' printed on its side. A large, semi-transparent watermark of the RCMSAR logo is overlaid on the center of the image.

To activate the RCMSAR CISM team,  
email:

**[cism.request@rcmsar.com](mailto:cism.request@rcmsar.com)**

**[rcmsar.com/cism](http://rcmsar.com/cism)**