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Critical Incident Stress Management Frequent Asked Questions

What is Critical Incident Stress Management?

Critical Incident Stress Management, or CISM, is an intervention program developed specifically for dealing with traumatic events like auto accidents, child injury or death, or any event which causes stress on police, fire or rescue personnel. It is a structured and professionally recognized process for helping those involved in a critical incident to share their experiences, express emotions, learn about stress reactions and symptoms and given referral for further help if required. It is voluntary and confidential during a meeting with trained mental health and peer debriefers.

What is a Defusing?

Defusing is an intervention that is a shorter, less formal version of a debriefing. It generally lasts from 30 to 60 minutes, but may go longer and is best conducted within one to four hours after a critical incident. It is not usually conducted more than 12 hours after the incident. Like a debriefing, it is a confidential and voluntary opportunity to learn about stress, share reactions to an incident and vent emotions. The main purpose is to stabilize people affected by the incident so that they can return to their normal routines without unusual stress. Where appropriate, a formal debriefing may also be required.

What is a Debriefing?

Debriefing is a proactive intervention involving a group meeting or discussion about a particularly distressing critical incident. Based on core principles of crisis intervention, the Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) is designed to mitigate the impact of a critical incident and to assist the persons in recovery from the stress associated with the event. The CISD is facilitated by a specially trained team which includes professional and peer support personnel. Ideally it is conducted between 24 and 72 hours after the incident, but may be held later under exceptional circumstances.

Often, a major incident will not just affect the provider but may affect the whole family. Providers are encouraged to take home the family brochure.

What kind of events should we consider for debriefing?

Any type of event that causes stress or emotional stress such as a death or suicide, disaster, multi-casualty event, events involving children, long events, night time events, or a line of duty death.

Who are the people who will come to debrief us? The team is composed of trained mental health professional and peer responders who specialize in dealing with stress.

Is the debriefing confidential?

YES. The discussions are completely confidential. The debriefing will be documented using only the number of debriefers and number of participants.

Who may (and may not) attend?

Debriefings include responders who were actually involved in the event. No one is allowed to be in the debriefing if they were not on the actual call.

When should a debriefing be held?

A debriefing should be requested if stress symptoms continue beyond the first 48-72 hours of the incident. In the event of a very long incident, the incident command may call for an onsite debriefing. Overwhelming stress symptoms usually occur in the first 24-48 hours following a critical incident. The debriefing is not a critique of the actual event.

What should I do if someone is in need of additional services? (Debriefing is not enough)?

If additional services are needed following an event or debriefing, contact the CISM Team at (540) 665-5645 and a mental health specialist will assist you or you may call the contact person for the original CISM debriefing.

What should I do if I recognize that someone will not open up in a group setting?

After the debriefing is finished, feel free to speak to the mental health debriefers about your concerns.

What should I do if I recognize a certain incident is bringing up past incidents that have not been processed or resolved?

After the debriefing is finished, feel free to speak to the mental health debriefers about your concerns.

Can a debriefing be held if we find people with problems a month after a critical event?

Yes. After the debriefing is finished, feel free to speak to the mental health debriefers about your concerns. This can be addressed at any time after the incident.

What can we do when we have a new member who encounters his first serious event (bloody trauma, shooting, death) and he seemed to have trouble on the call?

If the new member is the only one stressed over the call, a one-on-one meeting will be arranged with a debriefer.

We had a debriefing a month ago and one of our members is still troubled by the call. What should we do?

After the debriefing is finished, feel free to speak to the mental health debriefers about your concerns.

I am a family member of a provider who is having a problem with a recent call, what can I do to help?

Contact the CISM Team at (540) 665-5645 and a mental health specialist that was involved with the original debriefing. The Lord Fairfax EMS Council has a brochure for families that may help answer some of your concerns.