

Critical Incident
Stress Debriefing
(CISD)
&
Defusing

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FIELD GUIDE SERIES

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

In the 1970s The University of Maryland and the Maryland Institute for Emergency Medical Services Systems (MIEMSS) obtained a grant from the Federal Government to provide stress management education to emergency personnel. The two institutions used the funds to offer a free, two-day workshop entitled “Emergency Services Stress.” Despite the fact that 10,000 invitations were issued to fire, rescue, law enforcement, and emergency medical personnel in six states, only four people showed up. That underwhelming response caused both the University of Maryland and MIEMSS to investigate why there was such a low turnout for a free educational program on stress. People told the investigators that many people did not want to admit that they had distress because they thought that their colleagues and supervisors would think that they were weak or mentally impaired and their careers could be jeopardized.

By using those who had attended the first program to call their friends and colleagues and encourage their attendance at the next stress program, the numbers jumped to 65 in attendance. Utilizing the same tactic, the third group of participants numbered 125. The fourth and last

program offered by the University and MIEMSS on funds from that grant numbered 185.

Half a century later, we can affirm that great progress has been made in understanding, reducing and recovering from stress. Sadly, we can still report that there is much ignorance, denial, misunderstanding of stress and a persistent reluctance to both manage it and to assist people in recovering from it. As a result, we have witnessed unnecessarily high levels of stress in emergency personnel resulting in marital and relationship discord, premature departures from emergency services, mistakes and accidents on the job, blockading of promotions by unsympathetic supervisors and managers, and even a number of, mostly preventable suicides.

From fires to floods and from baby deaths to line-of-duty deaths, Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) teams have been there for their distressed colleagues and friends. Thousands of times, CISM teams were dealing with groups of operations personnel. The team members selected from a long list of CISM tactics two interactive group crisis intervention tactics. They are the *Defusing* and the *Critical Incident Stress Debriefing*. These two tools are most effective at

Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) & Defusing

restoring unit cohesion and unit performance in homogeneous groups.

The CISM teams have several primary goals:

- to reduce stress,
- to restore people to adaptive function, and
- to identify anyone who may need additional assistance or a referral for care.

CISM team members have sat and kept vigil at the bedsides of dying emergency personnel. They were there at wakes and funerals. They supported the families of those injured and killed in the line-of-duty. CISM team members have served churches, schools, businesses, and communities too numerous to count and no doubt assisted many to recover careers, marriages, and lives.

This practical FIELD GUIDE on Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) and Defusing will be extremely useful for CISM team members and for anyone who wishes to join staff support programs in all walks of life. It will provide protocols and procedures for properly applying the Defusing and CISD tactics.