

Practical Concepts and Training Exercises for Crisis Response Teams

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Crisis is no stranger in our communities, our workplace or at school; anywhere people gather there is drama. Homes burn, autos crash, and parents die. In my work within schools, teachers, school psychologists and counselors, college deans and coaches have always provided informal student support during student emergencies. Over the past thirty years that support has been gradually formalized. Crisis intervention, specialized training in emergency mental health, and student support teams have become the order of the day.

Since the early 1980's when writings about Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) first began to appear, the focus was always for first responders. Times are changing, however, and present unprecedented challenges to communities and schools that require a broader, more comprehensive approach than ever before. The basics of individual crisis intervention are not enough to prepare schools to adequately meet student and staff needs following natural disasters, large-scale incidents, and civil unrest. Targeted school violence, bombs, and the growing specter of terrorist strikes on or near schools, call for more flexible and thorough approaches to school crisis response and management. Schools have never existed apart from their communities, but community events now reach the school more frequently and with greater intensity.

Training personnel to respond to emergencies takes special resources, and this book provides just that. Dennis Potter, James Stevens, and Paul LaBerteaux bring years of hands-on crisis response experience to the table. I have known Dennis and Paul for years through my work with the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation. They work within the framework of Critical Incident Stress Management (Everly and Mitchell, 1999), a comprehensive, multi-component approach that addresses crisis issues from pre-incident preparation through post-incident follow up and referral. This book utilizes CISM in a friendly, practical, no nonsense manner that has important implications.

The first implication recognizes the growing trend toward multi-agency community and school crisis teams (Johnson, 2000; Tortorici Luna, 2002). This book encourages and employs a community based and multi-agency approach. The authors recognize two critical aspects of contemporary crisis management. The first is that CISM teams can expect larger crises that involve the community. The second is that the community can provide precious human resources for the school. Coordination with community resources is critical, and school personnel working alone simply cannot provide the high standards of student care that communities expect.

With that comes the need to articulate a common language and shared strategies. In addition, school and community resources must work together in planning sessions to define the manner in which emergency responders and school personnel can coordinate their efforts to each other's benefit. Pre-incident planning provides this opportunity, and training provides the vehicle.

One of the strengths of this book is the compilation of simulation training scenarios. A number of interesting situations are provided for team exercises; these are carefully thought out, and are field-tested. I was fortunate to teach for a time at the California Specialized Training Institute (training arm of the Office of Emergency Service, and prototype for the FEMA Emergency Management Institute). CSTI has long utilized simulation exercises to assist emergency personnel in synthesizing diverse information and strategies, and become familiar with their orchestration. Until learning results in action, it is only partial.

Productive simulations must move beyond rote role-play. They must incorporate complex situations with variable options, unanticipated developments, and elements of duress in order to maximize training potential. I have tried to introduce such elements into my own team training.

This book is the first resource I have seen that provides a wealth of suggestions, scenarios and situations appropriate for action based team training. Simulation exercises are provided for incidents involving fire/EMS, law enforcement, community settings, as well as school incidents, using multi-agency, multi-disciplinary crisis teams.

Finally, it must be recognized that community organizations and schools are not emergency agencies. If materials and approaches are to be useful and helpful within these settings, they must allow for flexible adaptation to meet the complex and multi-dimensional demands of the organization, culture, scope, and-yes-political realities. The concepts and training exercises herein are highly practical. While they are firmly based upon solid theoretical ground, they are not dogmatic. The training approach utilized is suggestive and does not attempt to super-impose a rigid paramilitary structure. I'm sure you will find *A Coordinator's Guidebook: A Practical Manual for the Education and Operation of CISM Teams* both school and community friendly.

Potter, Stevens, and LaBerteaux are to be congratulated for providing a major and significant contribution to an essential field. Crisis management is becoming central to the safety of our nation, our community, our children, and the safety of our children is more necessary now than ever before.

References:

Everly, G., and Mitchell, J. 1999. Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM): A New Era and Standard of Care in Crisis Intervention. 2nd Ed. Ellicott City, MD: Chevron Publishing.

Johnson, K. 2000. School Crisis Management: A Hands-on Guide to Training Crisis Response Teams, 2nd Edition. Alameda, CA: Hunter House Publishers.

Tortorici Luna, J. 2002. "Adapting CISM to the schools: A multi-agency approach." Manuscript submitted for publication.