

## **What Is The Primary Purpose of All CISM Activities?**

**Dennis Potter, MSW, FAAETS**

This seems like a silly question, but have you really asked yourself what is at the core of all CISM activities? It is not something we really talk about explicitly during the core trainings. In fact, it is not something we give notice to from an overview perspective. I propose the following:

***The primary purpose of all CISM activities is education.***

While CISM is indisputably an effective series of crisis intervention techniques, at its heart is the provision of information...information which other people just like them, who have experienced a similar event, have found helpful to recovery. I believe that you must “over train” your team members with this one most important concept.

We all know that we end our CISM response teaching about some standard stress management techniques, but while useful, it is not enough. If we do not teach to the important issues that arise while the personnel are “telling their story” we have missed the most important part of this critical phase. It is important to teach to the critical issues that have emerged during the CISM response.

### **Listening for themes:**

I believe that in addition to knowing the various steps necessary to do effective CISM responses, debriefers also need to learn to listen for the themes that generally emerge during an intervention.

Each phase of an intervention brings forth information that is both factual (cognitive) and emotional (affective). When individuals are telling their story, it is important to listen for both. These themes are then used during the Teaching and Re-entry phases to make the education fit the needs of the individual or group receiving the service.

Teaching team members to listen for these themes during any CISM response will make their work more relevant and helpful to the personnel we serve.

### **Fact Phase (Debriefing)/Exploration Phase (Defusing)**

*The primary purposes of the FACT/EXPLORATION Phase are to equalize information among the participants, gain a complete understanding of the event in its many facets, and to begin to understand what parts of the event may be causing significant distress to the individual.*

As the group is answering the questions in the FACT/EXPLORATION phase, the team should be listening for the following issues:

- Did any revealed fact contradict intake information?
- Did anyone reveal any factual information unknown to other debriefees?
- Was there any blaming going on regarding other debriefees or other groups?

- Based on the information given, what are the significant factors that make this a Critical Incident for each individual? (Who had “hands on”, Who was more in the periphery? Who had previous similar event in their life?)
- Is there enough information now for the group to understand the event?
- Were there any “surprise elements” to the story? (i.e. personnel expecting one thing and finding something significantly different when they arrived)

### **Thought Phase (Debriefing)/Exploration Phase (Defusing)**

*The primary purpose of the THOUGHT/EXPLORATION phase is to begin to lead the participants into more introspective look at the effects of the event on themselves. Often times, the thoughts that they have around the event reveal where they are most uncomfortable or feel guilty.*

As the group is answering the questions in the THOUGHT/EXPLORATION phase, the team should be listening for the following issues:

#### **Process themes:**

- Did you pick up on any unrelated issues that one or more debriefees have?
- Did any debriefee link this event with previous events?
- Are there any similar thoughts from more than one debriefee that you can link and validate?

#### **Content themes:\***

- Disruption of world-view as just or fair
  - Abandonment or betrayal
  - Violation of sense of self (self-esteem or worth)
  - Destruction of sense of personal safety
- (\* Psychotraumatology, Everly, 1998)

### **Reaction Phase (Debriefing)**

*The primary purpose of the REACTION phase is to allow participants to discuss their inner-most reactions to the event. This is usually the area in which they discuss how this event has been personalized by them, how the event has challenged their sense of personal safety or attached concerns for members of their own family.*

As the group is answering the questions in the REACTION phase, the team should be listening for the following issues:

- How has this event slipped past their “protective shield” and been personalized by them?
- Did you sense that any debriefee is blocking this or other events?
- Did any debriefee appear to be making excuses to cover perceived self-guilt?
- What are the reactions that are common to more than one person in this group?
- Did you get any indication that the process frightened any debriefee?

### **Symptom Phase (Debriefing)**

*The primary goal of the SYMPTOM phase is to identify anything that the person has noticed that is different about themselves since the incident. The participants will struggle to give voice to their physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioral struggles since the event.*

- Did any debriefee indicate any symptoms that could be injurious (e.g. drinking and driving)?
- Did any debriefee appear to lack any kind of support system (no family or close friends)?
- What are the common reactions that were not mentioned during the debriefing, but you know have probably shown up? (anger, guilt, etc.)

### **Teaching Phase (Debriefing)/Information (Defusing)**

*The primary goal of the TEACHING/INFORMATION phase is to highlight the major themes that the group has discussed during the debriefing and to do some practical teaching on those subjects. While the basic teaching around the issues of exercise, diet, and substance abuse should always be included, at times additional topics should be taught that are relevant to the specific issues of the group. Topics like an understanding of the grief process, what to say to grieving family members, the protocols of the funeral, or the suicide thought processes, are especially helpful at times.*

While one team member might have the primary responsibility of facilitating the TEACHING phase, the team should be about the following issues:

- What were the major themes you heard? Were they covered by the facilitator of this phase?
- What do you want to add to or emphasize as part of this phase?

In summary then, the primary purpose of all CISM is teaching to core issues that have been identified during the response and helping the participants understand that their reactions are normal, what particular things can they do to address those issues, and how can they take care of themselves and each other.

Often times, you can predict some of the core issues and have specialized handouts available on a particular topic, i.e. the grief process; what to say to victim's family members, flashbacks, etc.

This will enhance the work of the CISM team and be seen as particularly helpful by the participants.

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