

Critical Incident Stress Debriefs: Effectiveness for First Responders

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Introduction

First responders encounter incidents that much of the public will never see. These first responders (police, fire, EMS, corrections, dispatch) experience these situations consistently and frequently throughout their careers and often live their lives as if nothing unusual has occurred. Occurrences of mass trauma or destruction that the responders encounter may be referred to as critical incidents. With first responders regularly encountering such situations, we must ensure they are receiving appropriate care so they remain mentally strong. One resource to assist in after care is the critical incident stress debrief (CISD). As researchers, we need to assess if this intervention is beneficial to first responders or if care needs to be upgraded. First responder care is crucial after a critical incident and must always provide positive benefits when used.

What is a critical incident?

Critical incidents can be defined as “events or situations that have sufficient emotional power to overcome the usual coping abilities of people working in environments where some degree of exposure is expected.” (Ruck et al., 2013)

Benefits of CISD

CISD can be described as psychological first aid (Ruck et al., 2013)

CISD allows responders to vent emotions, clear up confusion, and understand they are not suffering alone (Scurfield et al., 2003)

CISD is thought to help identify responders in immediate distress (Regel, 2007)

CISD programs may be the only resource an employee has due to lack of other support networks (Scurfield et al., 2003)

First responders who participate in CISD show lower levels of PTSD symptoms after the debriefing (Ruck et al., 2013)



Negative Aspects of CISD

Although with all the positive remarks on these debriefing methods, there is uncertainty if early intervention actually assists first responders (Ruck et al., 2013)

Some research suggests that CISD may cause more harm than good in some individuals (Jahnke et al., 2014)

One challenge is to determine if first responders would even be willing to participate (Carleton et al., 2020)

First responders may be reluctant to speak to professionally trained personnel or do not have the opportunity (Scurfield et al., 2003)

There is often a lack of training for those who lead a CISD (Regel, 2007)



Conclusion

After reviewing the literature, there is still uncertainty if critical incident stress debriefings positively assist first responders after they experience a critical incident. Although these programs help agencies identify employees needing immediate care, those conducting the intervention may not be fully trained on how to effectively lead the debrief. These programs may be the only assistance an agency is able to provide but may be harmful or provide no benefit in some situations. Therefore, this form of psychological first aid may be beneficial if paired with additional professional assistance. Additional research is needed on CISD. Even if CISD provides benefits, researchers should always be searching if there is better care available to provide to first responders.

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