

Beyond the Horizons Consulting

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Workplace Violence: Part VII

This is the seventh article in a series about workplace violence. If you are just “tuning in” now, please read the six previous articles (June through November Newsletters) containing 11 important warning signs of workplace violence and the first steps to creating a *workplace violence prevention program*. We continue our series by offering you some information on Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD), a helpful technique in dealing with the aftermath of a traumatic incident.

What Is Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD)?

Whenever an extremely stressful or traumatic incident occurs, people cannot be expected to just “carry on.”



An eruption of violence in the workplace, for example, has effects on everyone employed in the organization. Some persons have been directly involved; others have been bystanders. Still others have close relationships with those directly affected, and some are vicariously affected by the incident.

The effects of workplace violence and other “extraordinary” events not only affect us on a thinking level; more importantly, they touch our very core. Our emotions affect our physiology, causing us to experience recurring images of the stressful event, and reverberate

back to our thinking self. We are thrown off balance.

Critical Incident Stress Debriefing is the first step toward returning a group of individuals to normal functioning. It does not take the place of brief or even longer-term counseling, but rather serves as a space/time to verbalize one’s thoughts and emotions in a group setting. The group itself becomes the container for the shared reactions, which are then sifted through and “normalized.” The facilitator is like a conductor of a symphony with several movements, which serve to lead participants through perception to thought to emotion and back to thought. The process usually ends with the presentation of self-care techniques, which will hopefully form the basis of a plan that each individual participant can tailor to his/her own needs. There is also the suggestion that “perhaps we can learn something from this tragedy.” That is, no matter how horrific a situation has been, we need to seek ways to learn from it — to adopt preventative measures, to develop better communication, to utilize technology more effectively, and at the very least to appreciate the sanctity of human life and the human relationships that we so often take for granted.

When Is It Advisable to Utilize CISD?

There are a number of situations in which managers and human resource personnel should consider arranging for a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing. Clearly, when there has been a natural disaster of some sort — a flood, fire, earthquake, chemical or nuclear spill — people are scared, grieving losses of colleagues, and confused about the aftereffects on the business and their future role. The same holds true for a manmade disaster, such as September 11th. Many trained debriefers were called in by the Red Cross and other agencies to help the survivors.

Workplace violence is another example of a situation

in which CISD is helpful. Again, this should be just the first step of a total program to return the workplace to normal. Each of us is affected differently by a traumatic event, depending on past associations. For example, if someone had been displaced from their residence by a natural disaster that occurred during their childhood, this person is more likely to be affected by a flood that destroys their worksite. Or a person who is already suffering from posttraumatic stress syndrome (without being consciously aware of it) will probably react more strongly. Examples of persons in this category are Vietnam veterans or survivors of sexual abuse.

Another situation that calls for CISD is the death of a well-loved manager or a long-term employee. Many individuals in these categories have become mentors to their employees or coworkers. They have endeared themselves to their colleagues, not only because of the familiar interactions among them, but also because they know quite a bit about each other's personal lives. Because there is a variety of relationships between a key person and his/her many colleagues, there will be a variety of thoughts and emotions upon the loss of a key person — all the way from severe grief to anger to guilt. People will also wonder what changes may be forthcoming as a result of this loss.

Downsizing or elimination of a facility also calls for Critical Incident Stress Debriefing. This is a severe loss that threatens a person's livelihood and way of life. It could demand enormous changes that affect every aspect of a person's life — for example, where one lives, whether one has to relocate far away from extended family, what wants or needs must be curtailed because of limited monetary resources, how one's daily routine is affected, and more. Besides that, comfortability with a workplace and collegial relationships are basically turned upside down.

How Is a CISD Conducted?

Normally management or human resources will initiate the process. They may contact the Employee Assistance Program to send a debriefer onsite. They may also engage a regional or local consulting company for the same purpose. This person should not only be trained in professional psychology. *More importantly, your onsite provider of CISD services should have completed special training in this procedure.* Often the amount of grief during the procedure is palpable on a gut level, so that only those who are truly prepared to deliver such services should be enlisted.

The group debriefing should be scheduled for a time when

most of those affected will be onsite. We are firm believers that attendance at such debriefings should be mandatory or at least strongly suggested. After all, those who do not attend may be just avoiding dealing with the painful reality, which may affect them in many ways during the weeks and months to come. If it affects employees, it affects their work performance, and thus negatively impacts the business.

A CISD should be conducted in a space that is private and whose size is adequate comfortably to house the



group. If possible, arrange to use a neutral area such as a conference room, and be sure that doors can be firmly shut. The idea here is to

ensure safety for the participants to share whatever will help them in their recovery from trauma. All cell phones should be turned off, and participants should agree to stay for the duration of the debriefing.

What Do We Hope to Achieve with a Debriefing?

First of all, we want to emphasize that a CISD is *not* a group counseling session. Instead it is more like triage when a person has been incapacitated due to an accident. What we are attempting is to prevent the shock of the occurrence from “freezing” into lasting trauma. For many individuals the debriefing may be all they need to get a grip on things and return to good functioning within a week or so. Others may need further help in the form of a visit to a physician and/or one-on-one counseling.

The debriefing gives participants a chance to put into words what they have been thinking and feeling since the incident occurred. This in turn helps them gain a minimum sense of control over the situation. In that different persons have different reactions to any given loss, the group debriefing allows everyone to normalize their reactions to the event. All emotional responses are perfectly normal and understandable in terms of what has gone before in the individual's life.

The debriefer will lead the group through an abbreviated “grief womb,” in which participants will be asked voluntarily to share

- ◆ Their perceptions of the event — what they heard, saw, directly or indirectly experienced
- ◆ Their thoughts about what has happened
- ◆ Their feelings about various aspects of the event
- ◆ Personal symptoms of distress

This fourth stage of sharing allows participants to transition back to the thought level.

We continue next month’s Newsletter with helpful *DO’s* and *DON’Ts* for self-care after a traumatic incident. We then look at the role of communication in disaster prevention.

Stay tuned to **Beyond the Horizons Consulting Newsletters** for timely information to solve your management challenges! Please feel free to write us at

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or to call us at **505-466-4990** to schedule a free, complimentary coaching session or consultation for your business needs.

Beyond the Horizons Consulting offers a variety of services for individuals, teams, and organizations.

- ◆ **Individual coaching for managers is a process that begins by identifying your style, what you want to retain and strengthen, and what you want to modify. Objective assessments are part of the process, as are also a mutual give-and-take process of creative problem solving and supportive guidance.**
- ◆ **We offer group seminars on identifying and dealing with stress in a relaxing and supportive environment.**
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- ◆ **It is our pleasure to tailor a seminar to your company’s, department’s, or team’s needs!**

Take a look at our **May and June, 2005, Newsletters** to see our new, serene home, a place we invite you to take advantage of!

Call us to schedule a complimentary consultation for yourself or your business!

Our helpful Office Administrator, Stan, will work with you to schedule a meeting time that fits your schedule.

**Stan and Jean Eva can be reached at
(505) 466-4990**