

Emergency Service Personnel and Stress

EMS, Police, Firefighters, Dispatchers, Nurses, Doctors, etc.

Emergency service personnel face stressful events everyday. The work they choose to perform can be emotionally difficult, physically draining and a threat to their personal safety. Yet this same work is seen as extremely rewarding and sometimes exciting.

Emergency service professionals absorb a constant dose of stress and occasionally the dose can be too high to handle. The constant intake of stress or encountering a highly stressful event can cause the emergency service professional to suffer the symptoms of a stress reaction including:

- fatigue
- nausea
- G I upsets
- memory loss
- concentration problems
- problem solving difficulties
- anxiety
- fears
- depression
- identification with the victims
- nightmares
- flashbacks
- fear of repetition of the stressful event
- mood swings and depression
- changes in sleep patterns
- changes in eating and work habits
- unusual actions or behavior

Stress

Stress is that normal state of physical and psychological arousal which we all need in order to function. Without stress we would lack challenges in life and fail to be motivated. However, stress can be difficult to live with when the stress has built up over time or involves a critical incident.

Critical Incidents

J Mitchell, Ph.D. developed the Critical Incident Stress Debriefing technique and defines critical incidents as:

“...any situation faced by emergency service personnel that causes them to experience unusually strong emotional reactions which have the potential to interfere with their ability to function either at the scene or later.”

Some examples of critical incidents include:

- suicides
- loss by death of an emergency worker
- serious injury of an emergency worker
- media interest in the event
- prolonged events
- injury or death of children
- mass casualty incidents
- threats to emergency worker's safety
- natural disasters

Without intervention, the symptoms of a stress response may cause you to be physically and emotionally ill; to end your marriage; to lose your job, or not want to continue in your profession.

The Team Approach

Virginia has chosen to institute CISM through a Team approach beginning with a Statewide Critical Incident Stress Management Committee of the State EMS Advisory Board to provide overall guidance and quality assurance for the regional Teams. Each EMS region of the state has formed at least one CISM Team and the Regional EMS Councils are serving as the coordination point for the majority of the Teams.

Virginia Office of
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VDH VIRGINIA
DEPARTMENT
OF HEALTH

HOW DO YOU MANAGE STRESS?

Critical Incident
Stress
Management
Can Help

CISM 
Virginia Critical Incident Stress Management

Virginia Office of
Emergency Medical Services
Virginia Department of Health

Critical Incident Stress Management

Providing Assistance Through Training and Intervention

Pre-Crisis Preparedness Training -

The goal of this training is to prepare emergency services personnel with what to expect when encountering a stressful event and to teach basic crisis coping skills in a proactive manner.

Demobilization - This intervention is used at mass disaster incidents to assist emergency services personnel in the transition from disaster scene to home or work. The demobilization process works with individuals who have been removed from the scene. In a comfortable environment, they are provided with refreshments and engage in an informational discussion about stress, trauma and coping techniques. This takes approx. 30 minutes.

Defusing - Defusings are group or one on one discussions, approx. 20-45 minutes in length and occur at the scene or no later than 12 hours after a crisis situation. Defusings are not meant to be formal debriefings. (see below)

Debriefings - Debriefings are also group discussions that are most effective when done two to three days after a stressful event and can last one to three hours. The goal is to allow those involved in a stressful event to achieve "closure."

Family Support Programs - Family and friends need support too! When emergency services personnel experience a stressful event, it is natural that their reactions will affect friends and family. When dealing with someone who has been involved in a stressful event, seeking some form of intervention is highly encouraged.

Referral Mechanisms - Critical Incident Stress Management also provides information on formal mental health services. Without crisis support services such as these, many individuals would not seek out the follow-up care they need.

Who Can Request a Debriefing

Anyone may request a debriefing. Feel free to talk with the CISM Team Coordinator in your area about the need for a debriefing any time you or your fellow workers are having

difficulty dealing with an incident. Some of the key indicators of the need for outside help are listed in the front of this brochure. A debriefing should also be requested if stress symptoms continue beyond the first 48-72 hours or overwhelming stress symptoms in the first 24-48 hours following a critical incident.

When a debriefing is conducted you should expect 2 to 4 team members to be present. Although the team usually works with a group, an individual who is having problems can consult with a team member on a one-on-one basis.

CISM Teams in Virginia

- 1 Southwest Virginia CISM Team
- 2 Western Virginia CISM Team
- 3 Blue Ridge CISM Team
- 4 Virginia Federation Area
Central Shenandoah CISM Team
Lord Fairfax CISM Team
Rappahannock CISM Team
Rappahannock-Rapidan CISM Team
Thomas Jefferson CISM Team
- 5 Old Dominion Alliance CISM Team
- 6 Peninsulas CISM Team
- 7 Tidewater CISM Team
- 8 Northern Virginia Teams
Alexandria CISM Team
Arlington County CISM Team
Fairfax County CISM Team
Loudoun County CISM Team
Prince William County CISM Team

