Critical Incident Stress Debriefing

A model developed by the American Red Cross to debrief emergency workers and survivors following natural disasters
Critical Incident

- An event or situation that has sufficient emotional power to overcome the usual coping abilities of people working in environments where some degree of exposure is expected (Mitchell & Bray, 1990)
- Critical incidents fall outside normal professional routines and may pose a significant threat to the participants.
Purpose

• Critical Incident Stress Debriefing is an organized approach to support persons who are involved in stressful or emergency operations.

• Critical Incident Stress Debriefing assists in separating the incident related aspects of the reaction from other personal responses.

• Purpose is to restore effective functioning of individuals, groups or agencies involved in the critical incident.
When conducting a debriefing, a trained debriefer will need to:

1. Introduce the session and outline the rules of confidentiality, non-judgement and freedom to talk.
2. Invite the group to give an account of the incident, which is then clarified and completed.
3. Invite participants to share their thoughts at the time of the incident or in the time since it occurred. These indicate important meanings that will be significant factors in the development of stress.
4. Review staff reactions at the time. These often indicate other aspects of the meaning and significance of the events, and account for the development of symptoms.
5. Review stress symptoms as these form the basis for the following stage.
6. Provide focused education, advice and information to assist in understanding and managing the symptoms.
7. Undertake problem solving for issues arising in the course of the session and prepare for the recovery process or return to work. Requirements for continuing the integration of the incident are discussed. This may include assessing the need for follow-up sessions.
Introduction

• Go through basic steps of beginning a group
  – Introductions
  – Establish agreements and confidentiality
  – Debriefing is independent from personnel records
  – Summarize the incident
  – Assess the impact of the event on personnel and survivors
Fact Phase

• Have each person talk about where they were (or roles they assumed in the case of emergency workers)

• Have them talk in detail about where they were when the incident occurred, what they heard, saw, smelled.

This process makes the experience come alive, and participants get to know each other and there is a sense of bonding that develops.
Feeling Phase

- Encourage sharing of feelings.
- How did it feel when it happened?
- How are you feeling now?
- Have you felt this way before?
- What unusual things are you experiencing now?

It is very important that facilitators validate all that is shared.
Symptom Phase

- Encourage participants to share physical symptoms
- With earthquake victims: many talked about recurring migraines which occur suddenly, not being able to soak in the bath tub for feel that they would be naked when another earthquake struck.
• SOME PEOPLE ARE SCARED BY THEIR OWN PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL REACTIONS.

• IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO LET THEM KNOW THAT WHATEVER THEY ARE EXPERIENCING IS A NATURAL REACTION.
Teaching Phase

- Provide education on stress response syndrome:
- Provide education on how natural these reactions are.
- The important message is that: abnormal reactions that people might be experiencing are normal reactions to abnormal situations.
- Responses include:
  - headaches, insomnia, flashbacks, anxiety, inability to concentrate, crying spells, lack of appetite, irritability, intense anger, depression
Advice

• 1) Do not use alcohol or drugs to cope
• 2) Do not isolate yourself from friends, family or co-workers
• 3) Prevent yourself from becoming obsessed with the incident
• 4) Eat well, exercise
• 5) Assess work situation, Is time off needed?
• 6) Watch for fixation of the incident, don't become obsessed with finding their reasons for the tragedy, allow time to pass
• 7) Give yourself time to heal, don't have unrealistic expectations for recovery
• 8) Expect the incident to bother you
• 9) Learn about what you are going through
• 10) Get help if necessary
Re-entry phase

- Ask the group what they want to do, do they feel a need for another de-briefing?
- Group facilitators should debrief after the session
Phases of Disaster Recovery in Communities

Four phases:

• Heroic
• Honeymoon
• Disillusionment
• Reconstruction
Heroic

• Time of impact -- one week post impact
• Perform heroic acts to save lives and property
• Sense of sharing with others
• Sense of "family"-- immediate support of family members, agencies, government disaster personnel
• Pain and losses--may not be recognized
Honeymoon

- Time of Impact - immediately after impact to 3 months
- Development of a strong sense of a shared danger or experience
- May experience physical symptoms such as digestive problems, changes in appetite, difficulty sleeping, migraines
- Anger, suspicion, apathy, social withdrawal, heightened anxiety about the future
- Unrealistic expectations of help from outside sources that will be receive to restore their lives
- "Super-volunteers," who are not ready to deal with their own losses, work from dawn till dark helping others
Disillusionment

- Time of Impact - one month to one or two years
- Feeling isolated and let down by others
- Question whether the incident could have been avoided
- Survivor guilt: feeling guilty for being spared or not having as much damage as others
- Relationships neglected, estrangement of family members begin
- Domestic violence may begin or be aggravated, children are emotionally at risk as they react to signs of stress in parents
continued

- Anger and frustration increase rapidly
- Victims may begin to seek revenge (law suits)
- Depression, moodiness and crying increase
- Physical health begins to suffer,
- Relief efforts from others decreases
- Increase in use of alcohol and drugs
Reconstruction

- Survivors come to realize that the rebuilding of their lives, homes, businesses and community is primarily a personal responsibility.
- May take several years or rest of their lives depending on amount of damage,
- If the rebuilding is delayed, the recovery will also be delayed.
The end

• Alternatives to critical incident stress debriefing
  – Employee - resident ombudsman
  – Employee assistance
  – Grief counseling
  – Psychiatric consult
Bibliography

- ifs.sc.edu/documents/Critical%20Incident%20Stress%20Debriefing.doc
- http://www.aaets.org/article54.htm