

2017-136 Critical Incident Stress Management



Westbrook Fire & Rescue Department
Standard Operating Procedure

Section: Administration	TOPIC: Critical Incident Stress Management
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Purpose:

The purpose of this Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) guideline is to provide intervention by CISM trained members between twenty-four (24) and seventy-two (72) hours of a critical incident to minimize stress-related injury to any Westbrook Fire & Rescue members directly involved. The guideline identifies application of "Critical Incident Defusing" and "Critical Incident Debriefing". Research and experience demonstrate that immediate, focused professional intervention can, and does, significantly reduce the negative effects of exposure to traumatic events. An incident does not have to be a disaster of major proportions for personnel to experience the effects of a traumatic event. Proper intervention assists personnel in recognition of stress symptoms and enhances their ability to deal with distress. The CISM team's function is to provide support and professional intervention to mitigate the impact of stress reactions on Westbrook Fire & Rescue members. This should follow any situation, which causes them to experience unusually strong emotional reactions having the potential to interfere with their ability to function either at the scene or later.

Scope:

This SOP applies to all Westbrook Fire & Rescue personnel who are engaged in any critical incident

Policy:

Command and company officers are responsible for proper identification and recognition of significant incidents that may qualify for recommended intervention. In recognizing "critical incidents," the determining factor is not the incident itself, but the reaction of personnel to the incident. When an incident is identified as critical, a request for debriefing consideration should be made as soon as possible.

The Critical Incident

Fire/Rescue response to incidents that expose members to unusually strong emotional involvement, which has the potential to interfere with their ability to function either at the

scene or later, may qualify for "Critical Incident Defusing" and/or "Critical Incident Debriefing".

The following are examples of incidents that **MAY** be considered for CISM:

- a. Serious injury or unexpected death of some fire/rescue member or other Public Safety personnel.
- b. Mass casualty incidents.
- c. Serious injury or death of a civilian resulting from fire/rescue operations (i.e. auto accident).
- d. Death or violence to a child.

The following are examples of incidents that **MAY** need defusing and/or debriefing:

- a. Loss of life following extraordinary and prolonged expenditure of physical and emotional energy during rescue efforts by fire/rescue members.
- b. An incident in which the circumstances were so unusual or the sights and sounds so distressing as to produce a high level of immediate or delayed emotional reaction.
- c. Incidents that attract extremely unusual or critical news media coverage.
- d. Incidents that are charged with profound emotion.
- e. Personal identification with the victim or the circumstances.

Recognition for the Potential Incident to Require (CISM)

Minimizing a member's exposure to physical and visual contact results in fewer stress related problems. Command and company officers should reduce this exposure by limiting physical and visual contact to **ONLY** those members necessary to mitigate the emergency. Company and command officers should be aware of the need to identify/recognize significant incidents that may qualify for defusing/debriefing.

Activation of the Debriefing Process

When an incident is identified as a "Critical Incident" that causes or has the potential to cause an adverse impact of personnel involved, a request for debriefing should be made as soon as possible. Any command officer may initiate the debriefing process. Company Officers whose crew may have experienced a traumatic event may also initiate the debriefing process. Any personnel who recognize the need for activation may contact the Fire Chief or Deputy Fire Chief whichever one is the most available. The Chief Officer will investigate and contact the CISM team if indicated, which will then activate the debriefing process.

***Note:** Only personnel directly involved in the incident **SHALL** be permitted to participate in the CISM process. Participation in the CISM process is **STRICTLY** voluntary.*

Initial Defusing

Defusing is primarily informational and shall be conducted shortly after the incident. The purpose is to offer support and information, allow venting of reactions, establish a

need for a formal debriefing, and stabilize members so they can go home or return to service. Defusing shall include an update and status report on the incident and related injuries, as well as a brief review of stress-related symptoms and techniques for stress relief. All affected members who had responded on the call shall attend this session as to ascertain all information necessary to assist in the Stress Management process.

Objectives of the defusing:

- a. Allow participants to tell what happened.
- b. Allow for freedom of discussion on the "worst part" for participants.
- c. Allow for venting of reactions to the incident.
- d. Offer information on possible signs and symptoms of stress those participants may or may not experience and information on what they can do about it.

Debriefing

Critical incident debriefing *is not a critique* of fire/rescue operations or personal performance at the incident. Performance issues will not be discussed during the debriefing. It is a confidential, non-judgmental discussion of the involvement, thoughts, reactions, and feelings resulting from the incident. It serves to mitigate the normal stress impacts resulting from exposure to a critical incident through venting of feelings and education. Several types of debriefings may be conducted depending upon the circumstances of a particular incident. They may be conducted on an individual basis or, more typically, in small groups of not more than twenty members.

1. Formal Debriefing Meetings:

- a. Conducted within seventy-two (72) hours of incident.
- b. Confidential, non-evaluative discussion of involvement, thoughts, and feelings resulting from the incident.
- c. Discussion of possible stress-related symptoms.

2. Follow-up Debriefing:

- a. Conducted weeks or months after incident.
- b. Concerned with delayed or prolonged stress symptoms.
- c. May be done informally.

3. Individual confidential consultation: Available at any time, as needed.

4. Objectives of the debriefing:

- a. Provide stress education.
- b. Provide a mechanism for venting of feelings before they can do harm.
- c. Provide reassurance that what participants are experiencing is normal.
- d. Forewarn those who have not been impacted that they may be impacted later and inform them of ways to deal with it.
- e. Reduce the fallacies of "uniqueness" and "abnormality".
- f. Provide positive interaction between groups.
- g. Screen those who may not be ready to return to service.
- h. Refer those requesting or requiring additional services.

Location

Defusing/debriefings should be conducted in a location that provides ample space, privacy, and freedom from distractions. Public Safety facilities are not suggested for defusing/debriefing.

The Debriefing Team

Members from the Fire, Police and Dispatch center make up our Peer Support Team. This group of professionals who are trained in debriefing will provide the initial support for our membership.

Relieving Members from Duty

Circumstances of a critical incident may result in a recommendation that those individuals or companies be taken out of service. Decisions may include returning members to their station(s) in an out-of-service status and allowing crew(s) to participate in a defusing. The available Chief Officer shall determine what further actions are to be taken. In making this determination, the available Chief Officer may confer with mental health professionals and/or CISM trained members. Appropriate steps should be taken to notify spouse, roommates, or family of the member's status and to provide direction on how they can best assist the member through this difficult time. Under no circumstances is such action to be construed as negative toward the member. Members taken out of service are to be viewed and treated with the same consideration as anyone with an "on the job" injury.

i. Confidentiality

In all cases, the content of interventions will be strictly confidential.