

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS MANAGEMENT (CISM) AND DEBRIEFINGS (CISD)</b> <b>Pre-incident awareness for line officers, supervisors, or decision makers</b></p>
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## **Introduction**

When a critical incident occurs in the workplace, such as witnessing the shocking death of a fellow employee, cooperator, or member of the public, it can be a powerful, overwhelming experience evoking strong reactions. Critical incidents can generate significant stress response that may overwhelm the usually effective coping skills of healthy employees. These sudden, stunning events are typically outside the range of common human experience. Because they are so unexpected and upsetting, they can manifest notable cognitive, physical, behavioral, and emotional outcomes, even in experienced, well-trained, and resilient people (**Enclosure 1**). The negative effects of traumatic stress may be acute, chronic, or cumulative in nature, and can adversely the performance and well being of employees and the organization.

Following a traumatic event, a group debriefing is often provided. It is not mandatory that employees directly involved in a critical incident participate in a debriefing. Some employees may feel they do not need to attend, however, they should be urged to be there to support others involved which is what helps make the process work. Debriefings are intended to help facilitate “normal recovery, in normal people, who experience a normal reaction to an abnormal event” Sponsoring a debriefing is good way for the organization to formally acknowledge that something significant has happen in the workplace and serves as a rite of transition towards normalize workplace function.

In contrast to antidoctial stories of past unsuccessful debriefings, many successful debriefings have occurred when disciplined debriefing protocols were maintained and ground rules were followed. Many beneficial debriefings have emerged from peer lead facilitated group meetings where employees *directly* impacted by the event could safely discuss their experiences and reactions. A featured component of the debriefing process is stress awareness/prevention training. The common debriefing model adopted by the agency is intended to be confidential and does not include group counseling, psychotherapy, or a critique/review of the incident or individuals. Finally, the efficacy of a debriefing is limited and not aimed to address complex stress issues; therefore, individuals and leadership ultimately need to redeem their responsibilities for the ongoing care of themselves and others.

## **Critical Incident Stress Debriefing Tips**

Some decision makers may choose to use a pre-designated CISD provider, referred by the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Agency CISD teams are also available to conduct debriefings, as well as provide pre and post incident stress management services and resources. Government employees/peers who assist in debriefings are formally trained to deliver CISM services and perform CISD within established guidelines. CISD teams work closely with a mental health professional that provides program management oversight and guidance to the team during debriefings. A qualified mental professional experienced with the agency should also be assigned to complex incidents and one-on-

one needs/requests. Refer to your agency mob guide/dispatch, local/regional EAP, or occupational health and safety office for details on requesting CISM services.

Keep in mind that every incident is unique, requiring a prescribed intervention strategy based on the particular circumstances. Not all incidents are suitable for a formal debriefing. For example, grief in the aftermath of a fellow employee who died at home, or an employee who encounters a traumatic event while working alone, will require a different response. One principle of the debriefings model is that it needs to include three or more people who were directly impacted by a defined traumatic event. A debriefing is not the place for others not directly involved who may want to attend in order to express concern or satisfy curiosity.

Decision makers should focus on taking thoughtful and measured action following a critical incident. Timeliness is important; however, the debriefing process is generally most effective when performed a few days following the incident. This way, employees have the necessary time to recover from the initial shock, and are fit to engage in a formal group debriefing setting. Use this time to get it right. Contact an agency CISM team leader who can help you coordinate an appropriate response with an EAP provider, agency team, and other applicable services.

One of the most important actions you, as a line officer, can take to aid (defuse) employees immediately following a traumatic event is to be physically present to project leadership and empathy. In the initial stages following a traumatic event, those impacted will desire to know what is happening and what's next. This conversation is most effective coming directly from an authority figure in the agency. For example, will there be an investigation? What is the status of their jobs? It is okay at this point if you do not have all the answers. Simply being there to listen is what is important at this time (**Enclosure 2**). Finally, in the likely hood of an administrative review you will need to ensure that witnesses know their rights and responsibilities, and have satisfied any proposed interview and/or statement proceedings before participating in a group debriefing.

While many will look to line officers and supervisors for direction in times of crisis, remember to reach out and seek help because a critical incident will normally have a profound impact on you too. The following are a number of valuable resources that will help you through a crisis:

- Line Officers Duties – Line of Duty Death (**Enclosure 3**)
- [Agency Guide for CISM](#) (FS Web/BNF/Safety)
- [DB Trauma Information Page](#) – (Most comprehensive web site dealing with all aspects of trauma, stress, and grief)
- [Wildland Firefighter Foundation](#)
- [USFS EAP](#)

## **ENCLOSURE 1**

### **CISM FACT SHEET**

Stress is a normal part of every significant job. At different times during your Forest Service career your level of stress may reach a significant or critical point. An **acute stress** reaction is frequently related to a specific unusual event (death of a co-worker, multi-casualty incident, severe dismemberment or disfigurement of victim, death of a child, personally knowing or relating to the victim, etc.). A **delayed** reaction may happen days, weeks, and/or years after an event. This typically occurs after you are re-exposed or “triggered” by a similar sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, situation, etc. **Cumulative** stress is the buildup of stress over time, and/or when you are experiencing significant amounts of stress simultaneously in your life. This buildup may eventually reach a critical mass resulting in a stress reaction.

A stress reaction is an important signal – it is your body’s way of coping with the temporary state of being overwhelmed by a situation. The duration of the symptoms (hours, days, weeks, or months) depends on your personal circumstances. However, with self awareness and use of proven coping techniques, most acute stress reactions will significantly lessen within 24 – 72 hours and a thoughtful combination of stress management strategies can mitigate the impact of most situations.

Some common signs and symptoms of normal stress reaction to be aware of may include:

<u>Physical</u>	<u>Cognitive</u>	<u>Emotional</u>	<u>Behavioral</u>
Rapid heart rate Elevated BP Increased respirations Profuse sweating Nausea Dizziness Muscle tremors Twitches Head aches Thirst Chills Fatigue Muscle weakness Grinding of teeth Visual difficulties Vomiting Voiding of GI track Fainting *Chest pain *Difficulty breathing *Shock symptoms, etc.  *Needs immediate medical evaluation.	Poor &/or Impaired: ▶ Concentration ▶ Problem solving ▶ Attention ▶ Decision making ▶ Abstract thinking Memory problems Confusion Heightened awareness Hypervigilance Heightened &/or lowered alertness Difficulty identifying familiar objects or people Loss of time, place, or person orientation Disturbed thinking Morbid thinking Nightmares Intrusive images, etc.	Shocked, numb Indifference/cut off Denial Feeling overwhelmed “Inappropriate” emotional response Indecisiveness Loss of control Intense anger/rage Blame (self &/or other) Guilt Hate Irritability Agitation Anxiety Apprehension Fear Grief Extreme sadness Depression Relief, etc.	Increased &/or Decreased: ▶ Appetite ▶ Sleep ▶ Sex drive ▶ Drug/alcohol cravings ▶ Energy level Change in activity Change in speech Change in usual communications Emotional outbursts Withdrawal Crying Non-specific bodily complaints Somatization Internalizing Intensified Startle Reflex Hyper alert to environment Inability to rest Pacing Erratic movements Anti-social acts Suspiciousness, etc.

### **Potential Ways to Reduce a Stress Reaction:**

- ▶ Remember, you are a **NORMAL** person, having **NORMAL** reactions to an extremely difficult situation.
- ▶ Four natural physiological stress relievers are: **laughing, crying, exercise, and touch**. The more you can include these in your life, the greater the potential for reduced stress levels.
- ▶ Especially within the first 24 – 72 hours (if possible), include periods of strenuous physical exercise alternated with relaxation to alleviate some of the physical reactions.
- ▶ Drink lots and lots and lots of **water**.
- ▶ Eat well-balanced and regular meals (even if you do not feel like it).
- ▶ Get plenty of rest.
- ▶ Avoid self medicating with caffeine, nicotine, drugs, or alcohol. These chemicals tend to intensify the physiological stress reactions you are already experiencing. Additionally, don't complicate the situation by adding substance abuse to the list of problems.
- ▶ Do things that feel good to you: read, write, pray/meditate, listen to music, walk, sit quietly, cook, watch a movie, take a hot shower/bath, get a massage, do progressive relaxation & deep breathing exercises, etc.
- ▶ Talk and spend time with others – many find that talking is the most healing medicine.
- ▶ Help your co-workers as much as possible by checking out how they are doing and sharing your thoughts and feelings with them.
- ▶ Realize those around you may also be under stress.
- ▶ Allow yourself some down time to just relax and temporarily do nothing.
- ▶ Maintain as normal schedule as possible – structure your time and keep busy.
- ▶ Make as many daily decisions as possible which will give you a sense of control over your life (i.e. if someone asks you what you want to eat – give an answer even if you are not sure).
- ▶ Postpone *major* life decisions (moving, leaving the job, ending a relationship, making major financial investments, etc.) for a minimum of 30 days.
- ▶ Recurring thoughts, dreams, or flashbacks are normal. Typically they are just signals that your body needs to further process the details of the event(s). Find constructive ways to understand and integrate these details (talk, write, draw, pray, meditate, etc.).
- ▶ If you get “stuck,” consider consulting trained CISM peers, clergy, mental health professionals, and/or your physician – let the helpers do their job to serve you. It can make a significant difference.

### **How Can I Help My Loved One?**

- ▶ There is no “right” thing to say. **Listening** is often the best thing to do.
- ▶ Remember, the healing process is very dynamic and there is a wide range of normal reactions. Some individuals will want to share specific details, others will prefer a quiet, compassionate presence – most will want a combination of support. Remain flexible to his/her needs rather than “expect” certain reactions.
- ▶ Spend time with the affected individual – offer your assistance and a listening ear even if he/she has not asked for help.
- ▶ Assist with practical things like cooking, cleaning, caring for the children, grocery shopping, etc.
- ▶ Give him/her some private time.
- ▶ Don't take anger or other feelings directed at you personally.
- ▶ Don't tell him/her that they are “lucky it was not worse” – impacted individuals are not consoled by these statements. Instead, tell them that you are sorry that such an event has occurred and you want to understand and assist them.
- ▶ **Take care of yourself.** You will not be able to help anyone if you do not first care for yourself.

**U.S. Forest Service Employee Assistance Program (EAP/Com Psych): (888 290-4327**

## *ENCLOSURE 2*

### HANDLING STRONG EMOTIONAL RESPONSES:

#### Communications Skills for Line Officers and Supervisors

##### Preparation

1. **Self-awareness** of your own emotions, values, and prejudices (yes, we all have them) can afford greater ability to empathize with those of others and reduce the chances of being “blindsided” by your own unexpected strong feelings.

2. An **Accepting Attitude** regarding strong feelings, whether they are yours or another’s, can go a long way in establishing rapport, and allows you to show others that you have really heard what they have to say.

3. **Understanding:**

That feelings just “happen” without anyone having to be at fault – not you, not the other person.

That feelings, like the weather, are in a constant state of change. What you or anyone else feels right now will change to another feeling often in a relatively short time.

That most people simply want to have their feelings acknowledged or “validated” by others.

That feelings are not broken and do not need to be “fixed.”

That being recognized and appreciated as an individual, whose feelings and ideas are unique are basic needs that all people share.

That if given the chance to express how they feel, most people experience a reduction of discomfort and are less likely to act on feelings impulsively.

4. **Genuineness** in how you approach the situation is critical. If you feel uncomfortable in talking with someone who is having strong feelings, you are likely to communicate that discomfort (even nonverbally) to the other person. It may be much more effective to acknowledge the source of your discomfort, e.g., a sense of powerlessness, sadness, anxiety, not knowing exactly what to do to make things right.

5. **Respect** yourself and the other person as individuals who have personalities, ideas, emotions, preferences, values, and boundaries.

6. **Avoid judging** what you or the other person is saying or feeling. Psychologist Carl Rogers once said that he believed the major barrier to interpersonal communications lies in our very natural tendency to judge – to approve or disapprove of what is being said or felt.

7. **Avoid interpreting** what the other person is saying. Though this is as natural as judging, it is very easy to discount or distort what is being said. No matter how objective we think we are, we inevitably “filter” incoming communication in our attempts to understand it.

8. **Choose the setting**, if at all possible, so that you and the other person can have privacy and comfort. Simply closing the door of an office may help to achieve this, taking a ride in the pickup truck together, or taking a walk outdoors. You may not always have control of this variable, but you can be creative in changing the setting.

### **Active Listening Skills**

1. **Attending Skills**, which are primarily nonverbal, help to establish rapport. You are likely to have developed an array of these skills already. Here are examples of attending skills, which may facilitate your conversation with someone who is having strong feelings:

**Eye contact** at a comfortable level for both parties. Be aware that, in some cultures, not making eye contact is a sign of respect. A “stare-down” would be uncomfortable for both parties.

**“Open” body posture** can signal acceptance. Uncross your arms and legs, open your hands and experiment with a comfortable open body posture for yourself.

**Nod your head** to indicate understanding or acceptance.

**Sitting forward in a chair** can convey interest or excitement, whereas sitting back or leaning back can give the opposite message.

**Eliminating barriers** such as desks, counters, or tables can be very effective in reducing the physical and emotional separation between you and the other person.

2. **Tracking Skills** are verbal, and help show the other person you are listening. Examples of Tracking Skills that may be helpful are:

**Using the language of the other person** involves your use of the words or concepts the other person has used to communicate to you how he or she feels.

**“Tell me more”** statements encourage expression of feelings. Remember, one thing you want to do is to encourage expression of feelings.

**Respond nonjudgmentally** with remarks such as “I can understand how you might feel that way” versus “I think you’re doing great” or “You shouldn’t feel that way.”

**Noninterpretive responses** such as brief restatements of what the other person has said. To do this will require you actually listened to the words used, versus having interpreted it to yourself. Use your own personal style with this skill, or practice responses you wish to become more comfortable with. Paraphrasing, repeating single words or statements, or even sharing a similar experience you have had are examples of noninterpretive responses.

**Allowing the other person to choose the topic** versus steering the conversation to your own comfort zone tends to meet the other person’s needs. Balance this with Detracking Skills below.

3. **Detracking Skills** help return your conversation to the main topic, and are useful when the other person has “gone off on a tangent” or seems to be “lost.” They can also be used to avoid unnecessary information. Examples of Detracking Skills that may be useful are:

**Restating the other’s purpose for the conversation, e.g.,** “So, you wanted to let me know how things are going with you and your family . . . .”

**Returning to the previous topic, e.g.,** “About the \_\_\_\_\_ situation, could we talk a little more about that?”

4. **Questioning Skills** can be used to help the other person express ideas and feelings, and to indicate your interest and acceptance. Questioning Skills that may be useful are:

**Open-ended questions**, such as “What can you tell me about that?” to encourage free expression, elicit general information and indicate your accepting attitude.

**Abstract questions**, such as “What do you suppose that will be like?” often elicit opinions, thoughts, and feelings.

**Avoid close-ended and “yes-or-no” questions**, which tend to close down communication and expression of feelings.

5. **Focusing Skills** summarize everything that’s been said. You’ve probably practiced these skills at the end of meetings and in supervisory interviews. Focusing also helps when you feel overwhelmed with information or with the feelings of the other person. Focusing Skills that may be helpful are:

**Making a concise statement** of the key ideas and feelings expressed.

**Prioritizing** by repeating the key ideas and feelings and saying, “I’m not sure which of these is the most important to you right now.” This skill may be useful when you feel overwhelmed with what has been said.

6. **Reflecting Feelings** throughout your conversation will allow you and the other person to see how accurately you are receiving and how accurately they are communicating.

7. **Feedback** may be helpful and desired by the other person. Before you give feedback, make sure it is helpful, and most important, desired.

8. **Take care of yourself** in this process by recalling your personal boundaries – what your limits are with regard to the behavior of others. Some examples of Take Care of Yourself are:

**Paying attention to your own comfort level** and acting accordingly.

**Observe your “rules” and organizational policies** for interviews.

**Adopt a “learning by doing” attitude** and expect that you will make what you think are mistakes.

**Using your own support system** to allow you to express feelings, check out your skills and to gain some relief from this important and delicate task.

**Seek consultation** from superiors or peers when you feel uncertain about what to do or how to handle the situation.

**Seek consultation** from the professional staff at Project Concern.

### **The Next Step**

1. **Practice your new communications skills** with family, friends, in role-plays and in everyday life. Be sure to let those who are closest to you know what you are practicing.

2. **Help the other person focus on the next step** by asking those challenging questions, “What will you want to do next?”, “How will you know when to do that?”, or “When things start to get better, what do you think you’ll notice first?”

3. **Follow up** with the other person in a nonjudgmental, nonaccountable fashion, e.g., “How did that \_\_\_\_\_ turn out?”

4. **Expect that you may have to do all of the above again.** And again. And again. It might help to think of this phenomenon as practice.



*ENCLOSURE 3***LINE OFFICER – Notification Duties**

It is the responsibility of the Line Officer to properly notify the next of kin of an employee who has suffered severe injuries or died.

The Line Officer will contact the Forest Supervisor immediately of the incident.

Line Officer will assign a family liaison to the family.

The name of the deceased employee will not be released by the agency before the immediate family is notified.

If there is knowledge of a medical problem with an immediate survivor, medical personnel should be available at the residence at the time of notification (Liaison may also assist with this)

Notification will be made in person and never alone. A close friend, family liaison, chaplain or other staff could appropriately accompany the line officer. However, if the aforementioned persons are not available, notification should not be delayed until these people can gather. If there is an opportunity to get to the hospital prior to the demise of the employee, do not wait for the group to gather. The family should learn from the agency first- not from the press or other sources.

Never make a notification on the doorstep. Ask to be admitted to the house. Inform the family members slowly and clearly of the information you have. If specifics of the incident are known, the Line Officer should relay as much information as possible to the family. Be sure to use the employees name during the notification. If the employee has died, relay that information. Never give the family a false sense of hope. Use words such as 'died' and 'dead' rather than 'gone away' or 'passed away'.

The deceased or severely injured employees parents should also be afforded the courtesy of a personal notification whenever possible.

If the employee was from outside the area, the Line Officer will set up notification process' with the employees' local agency representatives or law enforcement. Arrangements should be made to have immediate telephone contact with the primary Line Officer.

A high-ranking representative and/or Line Officer should arrange to meet the family at the hospital when necessary.

Other employees who were at the scene or who were involved with the incident should be identified and be given leave as quickly as possible when necessary

Line Officer will contact a local/agency CISM team to start debriefing process for employees and people at the incident. A Forest contact for the CISM team is beneficial when setting up multiple debriefings and locations. The Line Officer will provide communication to employees regarding CISM activities and schedules.

Each Unit will designate a Line/Notification Officer.

The Line Officer will work directly with the PAO for the incident.

The Line Officer will take on the task at hand, assigning other duties to staff and other line officers as needed.