

Confidentiality in CISM

By: Rick Barton, ICISF CEO

The confidentiality of words spoken during critical incident stress management (CISM) sessions is a long tenured matter. The topic arises anew largely due to some current court cases. These cases are complicated matters, not effectively explained or mitigated with simple words or actions.

Please read this entire piece for a brief analysis of the issues along with what the ICISF is doing to help.

The complexity of these issues includes CISM techniques and practices, legislative actions, court interpretation, and the reaction of department leaders. Anything the ICISF will write or say does not alter legislative or legal proceedings. Those actions follow a process with an uncertain timeline. The idiom “time will tell” dates to the 1500s and applies to this situation.

It is entirely possible that individuals, institutions, and departments are reacting with “an abundance of caution”, perhaps calling for a halt to the use of CISM methods. There are times in management when “an abundance of caution” is merited. Sometimes that essentially becomes an excuse to avoid visionary leadership. We do not halt the use of motor vehicles due to the severity of accidents. Instead, the abundance of caution approach mandates safety precautions and thoughtful operating practices.

People may abandon the effective use of CISM because of the abundance of caution principle. The outcome likely includes unintended consequences that result in diminished employee wellness. The example of motor vehicle use is relevant. We should not abandon essential tools; instead, we use them properly.

The alternative to abandonment is to practice CISM effectively as taught by the ICISF. Dr. Jeff Mitchell, the ICISF Co-Founder and the man who developed CISM, reminds us to begin any CISM session with a statement that participants should not discuss operational pieces of the incident and the session leader must interrupt discussions if necessary. A CISM session should never become an after-action report.

The ICISF continues to offer sessions via our online program called “Learning With Leaders” that will help answer questions and provide guidance. Two of these recent programs specifically featured the confidentiality issue. Our programs remain available via in-person courses, online courses, and virtual live programs. These programs can serve as a refresher for anyone who seeks

reassurance about the best CISM practices. We also are developing increased guidance for CISM teams and for ICISF Approved Instructors regarding confidentiality. Remember, the best guidance is to honor the established practices of the ICISF model.

The ICISF did not track CISM legislation until relatively recently due to the complexity of the various statutes and case law. The ICISF now identifies relevant CISM legislation as part of developing a thorough database. There are statutes that protect the confidentiality of CISM sessions, but each is unique and requires interpretation. We intend to share this information with ICISF members and partners.

Please look to the ICISF for information, guidance, and leadership on CISM best practices. This includes the matter of CISM confidentiality. Also remember that we should not discard effective measures because of fear. Fear becomes helpful when it inspires thoughtful practices.
