

Critical Incident Stress Management: The Standard of Care in Law Enforcement Support Services

By Elizabeth Dansie

Law enforcement requires the officer to possess a myriad of skills and personality traits and to judiciously use them in a variety of unpredictable, demanding and threatening situations.

Preserving and enhancing the law enforcement human resource is a difficult enough task in the face of the normal stress and strain of living in the post-9/11 world, but it becomes even more challenging when the employee routinely faces risks and working conditions well beyond the normal realm of human endeavor. Today's reality for law enforcement also includes threats to their security and well-being in the form of increasingly negative public perception, challenges to benefits and retirement funding (long part of the compensation for associated risk in the field), and diminished staffing and training opportunities as agencies struggle to fulfill the public mandate amid budget shortfalls.

Most readers would agree that law enforcement is a uniquely challenging and dynamic career field. Urgent warnings and dire predictions abound concerning the negative impact of stressors inherent in the profession. Law enforcement requires the officer to possess a myriad of skills and personality traits and to judiciously use them in a variety of unpredictable, demanding and threatening situations. Few would be willing to argue with the assertion that these individuals find themselves in uniquely stressful, high risk and potentially traumatizing pursuits as part of their careers. As a result, most law enforcers can cite the statistics demonstrating the all too high cost of doing business in this industry. But, do we *have* to accept the disproportionately high rates of divorce, suicide, substance abuse and heart disease among other negative outcomes when choosing to stand with the badge?

Gordon Graham, former officer, attorney and co-founder of Lexipol, is quoted as saying, "If it's predictable, it's preventable," thus putting us of all on notice that these predictable outcomes of law enforcement stress must be conscientiously addressed to 'shield' law enforcement personnel from the preventable aspects of stress exposure. Fortunately, the last

couple of decades have increased our understanding of the influence of these stressors and several profession specific protocols have been developed to address these predicted outcomes. Psychological services are not optional, they are essential in the law enforcement climate of this century if an organization wishes to function optimally and safeguard the social, emotional and physical well-being of its personnel.

Most agencies know *something* besides a protocol investigation should take place after critical incidents, such as an officer-involved shooting, death of a child, etc., but too often when we call for emotional back up, we simply lift the phone and utilize our "1-800-help-us-now!" line with little regard to the quality of care and credibility of the offered provider. Research and practical field experience endorse an approach to Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) programs and crisis intervention that enhance service delivery in this highly specialized field.

Every field develops through practice and policy a standard of care. Establishing an effective CISM program requires attention to five areas of development:

First, CISM programs should be comprehensive in nature identifying multiple tactical stress interventions, utilizing such interventions in combination to provide support to impacted employees, and covering the functional timespan of the critical incident event systematically so events do not get overlooked.

Second, research suggests that CISM services targeting highly specialized employee groups (think first responders) are best served by utilizing specially selected, trained and supervised peer support personnel to enhance credibility and consistency within the program. The importance of a thoughtful approach to peer selection and the consistent training of peers within a recognized CISM paradigm is integral to acceptance by rank and file.¹

Third, the research is unanimous in declaring that

no reactive response to crisis can replace the value of pre-incident training and preparation. Exposing law enforcement personnel to pre-incident stress awareness and resiliency training provides the most effective risk prevention in the CISM field. Additionally, an informed employee becomes a partner and participant in their own recovery in the aftermath of an incident, as well as being better prepared for a resilient response to traumatic events.

Fourth, provision for mental health consultation and direction from a culturally appropriate and trusted source will do more to enhance CISM services than virtually any other procedure. Without this therapeutic alliance, peer support has no backup, individuals in crisis will often struggle to find assistance and clinical guidance will be lacking. Even smaller agencies can attain this standard of care by engaging a law enforcement specialized clinician for a limited number of hours or by joining a consortium of agencies utilizing a single clinician or group.

Fifth, CISM practice needs to be integrated via departmental policy into operational directives. Provision for the training of supervisory and command personnel will ensure that critical incidents are addressed systematically, in a timely fashion and in a matter supporting impacted personnel. A program that is addressed in policy promotes acceptance by employees, answers questions related to protocols and endorses the confidentiality of the CISM setting.

Police officers are expected to make life and death decisions, with only seconds to assess the threat. Personnel routinely encounter belligerent, even dan-

gerous individuals and are expected to stifle any of their own human reactions to scenes that involve the worst that humanity has to offer. They do all of this on a daily basis in the context of their own lives and families. They are expected to listen patiently and react appropriately to the problems of a teenage child or the stresses of their own relationships. Family members are not exempt from the reality of the challenges encountered by the law enforcement employee—a healthy employee is better able to manage the significant challenges presented in the life of today's law enforcer. We are all aware that the functional line between emotional well-being at home and on the job is blurry at best. The enhancement of our most valued human resource by providing support in times of need is just good business sense.

CISM programs provide tremendous advantage to today's law enforcement personnel, enhancing their sense of well-being, promoting resiliency and stress resistance², increasing job satisfaction and providing support when the world seems to tilt on its axis. In a recent *California Peace Officer*, in an article titled, "Law Enforcement Budgets in a Falling Economy," the authors state, "... as our departments decline numerically and programmatically, we will be more dependent than ever on the skills and abilities of the individual."³ In an era where almost everything seems fair game to the parsimonious grappling of our budgetary woes, we can least afford to let our first responders down. In the words of Coach John Wooden, "Do not let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do."⁴



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1 ICISE.ORG

2 Kaminsky, et al. (2005) RESISTANCE, RESILIENCE, RECOVERY.

3 California Peace Officer Fall 2011

4 The Wisdom of Wooden: My Century On and Off the Court 2010