

Critical Incident Debriefing

Introductory Paper by Marion Knell

What is Critical Incident Debriefing (CID)?

Most commonly this term is associated with the Mitchell model (Mitchell, 1983). This is a formal, structured process led by trained facilitators (not exclusively mental health professionals) that occurs soon after a potentially traumatizing event. The CISD process involves telling the traumatic story, exploring the thoughts and sensory experiences during the trauma, sharing emotional reactions, teaching common reactions of trauma, and coaching in coping skills. The purpose of CISD is “to prevent unnecessary after effects, accelerate normal recovery, stimulate group cohesion, normalize reactions, stimulate emotional ventilation, and promote a cognitive grip on the situation” (Dyregrov, 1997). It is not therapy. It is one method of crisis support that is intended to be part of a more comprehensive critical incident stress management program.

Debriefing is *not* counselling or therapy.

- It is *not* something you just do when people are not handling a situation well.
- It is *not* an opportunity for the listener to satisfy their curiosity or to share their own story; it's not a social event.
- It is *not* an opportunity for administration to gather information, evaluate or confront.

Debriefing is

- Intentional and structured
- Invitation to tell the story
- Invitation to share feelings
- Opportunity to learn
- Opportunity to reflect
- First step to grief and recovery

Supports to put in place:

- Confidentiality – trust has been shattered and needs to be re-established. Reassure you are not an authority figure
- Social support – having a trusted friend present?
- Health issues – range of other supports regarding health, diet, hygiene
- Community group – working with groups, creating a sense of community
- Access to mental health care
- CID is not a substitute for therapy – beware of superficiality

Why Debrief?

1. To identify areas – people who might need follow up
2. To help people digest the event quicker and safer
3. To prevent unnecessary after effects (e.g. PTSD)
4. To come back to level ground (regaining control over thoughts and feelings)

When?

For events that

1. Threaten life
2. Threaten physical integrity
3. Bring on horror
4. Bring on helplessness
5. Are overwhelming

For WHOM?

1. People who have gone through the same event together
2. Primary victims (had to go through it)
3. Secondary victims (had to watch/ hear it all)

Seven Steps of CID

Step 1: Introductions

Step 2: The facts about the experience

Step 3: The thoughts during and after the experience

Step 4: Sensory impressions and emotions

Step 5: Teaching about normal symptoms

Step 6: Discussing coping strategies and future planning

Step 7: Ending the session.

The benefit of CISD is that it can help victims begin to articulate what has happened to them and to face it in a way that protects them from using avoidance as a defence mechanism. Avoidance is one aspect of PTSD and is often a key element of anxiety disorders. If the person can be assisted in talking about what has happened in an atmosphere of trust, safety, and low anxiety, it will counteract the tendency to use avoidance as a means of self-protection. It prevents PTSD, feeling of being unsafe, lack of meaning in life, self- guilt, and it puts the memory into context.

Training

Those trained in CID have awareness of PTSD symptoms, of so called 'red flags' which indicate the person needs professional mental health care. This is a safe and tried way of enabling trauma sufferers to process their experience and move on. It is very acceptable to those from a shame and honour culture and provides a way whereby they may be willing to access professional help.