

Critical Incident Group Debriefing – Issues and Considerations

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Those who work in the helping profession are more likely than those in other professions to experience incidents that are often described as traumatic. As such, it is imperative that organizations develop a process for helping staff cope with incidents that cause distress.

Critical Incident Group Debriefing (CIGD) is one such method. CIGD is a short-term group intervention process that focuses on an immediate crisis. CIGD is one method that can be utilized to lessen the likelihood of participants experiencing symptoms of trauma and stress after a critical incident. This group debriefing process provides a place for participants to talk and share experiences, and for the facilitator to teach and provide information about the impact of critical incidents.

While CIGD can be very effective in many instances, there are times where CIGD may not be appropriate. For example, because of an issue of trust in a particular group, it may be more appropriate to utilize individual debriefing than group debriefing. It is important to note that every crisis situation is unique and will require thoughtful consideration to the following questions:

- Is this a *safe* environment (is there trust, is there *rank* in the room)?
- Who is suited to lead this debriefing? What are pros and cons of having an outside versus inside facilitator?
- How large will the group be?
- How soon after the crisis will CIGD happen?
- How many facilitators will be in the room? If more than one, how will they work together?
- Will attendance be mandatory?
- How long of a time should a group last?
- What if participants want to leave?
- Where will the debriefing happen?
- Should some members of the group be met with individually ahead of time?

The Crisis & Trauma Resource Institute Inc. (CTRI) is one of several organizations involved in the training of the group debriefing process. At their core, the different models of group debriefing have similarities and are focused on providing a structured environment for people to talk about their emotions and reactions to the event, with the purpose of lessening the likelihood of participants experiencing symptoms of trauma and stress after a critical incident. While there are similarities in the different models of group debriefing, CTRI brings unique perspectives driven largely by our background in counselling and therapeutic practices. We focus on the importance of providing a *safe environment* in *natural groups* to explore thoughts and experiences and view the *teaching component* as key to the debriefing process.

There is much discussion on whether group debriefing has the desired result of preventing post-traumatic stress disorder after traumatic incidents. The premise behind most of the critiques is that there is little evidence/research or in some cases inaccurate evidence/research on whether these processes work. In fact, on the contrary, some suggest there is evidence that this process has the ability to do more damage than good.

CTRI's perspective is to take these critiques seriously and to not become over zealous in our use of this model. It is important to have a thoughtful discussion about whether to use this process or not in each situation that arises. Following are some of the problems and benefits with group debriefing that have been identified:

Problems that may be associated with group debriefing:

- Minimal time for individual help.
- Creating a safe environment is difficult to accomplish in many situations. Also, a false sense of safety can result in self-disclosure that is regretted.
- Vicarious traumatization - some stories expressed may be distressing for others to hear.
- Negative energy (depending on what happens, people may leave the meeting more discouraged than encouraged).

Benefits of group debriefing:

- Normalization occurs (one learns that intense reactions are not just theirs).
- Teaching (learning about reactions and coping skills is usually beneficial).
- Time management (sometimes there is no time or resources to debrief everyone individually in a realistic time frame).
- Provides informal assessment opportunities.
- Additional resources are made directly available.

While CIGD is a very important part of helping organizations respond to unfortunate events, it is also a process that requires much consideration and reflection prior to implementing.

About the Crisis & Trauma Resource Institute Inc.

CTRI provides professional training and consulting services for individuals, communities and organizations affected by or involved in working with issues of crisis and trauma. For more details visit their website at www.ctrinstitute.com