

# DEBRIEFING PHASES

\* AMERICAN ACADEMY OF EXPERTS IN TRAUMATIC STRESS [www.aaets.org](http://www.aaets.org)

- **INTRODUCTION PHASE:** During the introduction, ground rules are established for the process. Confidentiality is paramount. Only individuals involved in the event should be present. All personnel must be off duty because leaving in the middle of the CISD could prove harmful to the person and disruptive to the process. Emergency workers receive instructions that they do not have to talk and to not say anything that could potentially be incriminating. After the preliminaries, all personnel introduce themselves and identify their role in the incident.
- **FACT PHASE:** During this phase, specific details emerge for the group. Usually, a few individuals provide core facts, while others fill in missing details. This is important because incomplete knowledge may have elicited misperceptions. The introduction of missing facts helps correct misperceptions.
- **THOUGHT PHASE:** Touching on emotional aspects begins during the thought phase. At this point, the group considers the following question: "When did you first realize this was a bad one?" Responses are as varied as the group. Usually, sight experience (or involvement of another sense) is the first clue. Sometimes, a level of familiarity exists. Others discuss the sheer magnitude of the event.
- **REACTION PHASE:** In this most intense phase, some people bare their souls when they answer the following question: "How did you react to the incident?" For many, emotions are intense. Not everyone feels comfortable talking, especially at this juncture. The important part of participation is being present and listening. Many participants discover that their reactions were similar to their peers' reactions. Usually, it is a minority of participants who have more severe stress reactions. However, the presence of their less affected peers is important in showing support for the more affected individuals.
- **SYMPTOM PHASE:** During this phase, the many varied symptoms that people have been experiencing are discussed. Reactions, such as recurrent intrusive images, are common. In this phase, along with the reaction phase, workers realize that they are not alone in how they have been feeling. People only feel abnormal if they are different from a comparison group. The sudden realization that they are normal is the needed step for many emergency workers to start feeling better.
- **TEACHING PHASE:** Similar to pre-incident education, the teaching phase provides similar post-incident education. The process of CIS, stress reactions, and techniques to decrease stress are explored.
- **REENTRY PHASE:** This final phase allows an opportunity for team members to expand upon points that they feel are important and for answering questions. The main purpose of this phase is to ensure that emotions are not still raw when the participants leave.

## POST-DEBRIEFING

**Afterwards:** After the debriefing, prearranged healthy snacks are available, and the team members mingle with the group. This allows the team members to focus on those individuals who are troubled. Also, members of the group can bring up issues that they did not feel comfortable with in the larger group. Expansion of points brought up during the CISD is usually a part of this informal setting.

**Debriefing the debriefer:** The interaction between the CISM team members and the involved workers can be emotionally intimate. In this setting, it is possible for the CISM team to be vicariously traumatized by the experience of the debriefing. Their own emotions can be left raw, and stress reactions do occur. Remember, this group was not at the incident itself. Because of the potential for harm to team members, a post-debriefing contact, and possibly session, is important with the participating members to help alleviate lingering stress and to maintain their optimum functioning. This activity can be done by senior team members or by an outside team in a large event.