

Critical Incident Stress Management for Law Enforcement

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Abstract

Critical incident stress is a state in which an individual has faced a traumatic experience in life and the impact of that experience causes a person to become severely affected emotionally, physically, and psychologically. The management of this type of stress is necessary, as it can leave an everlasting effect on the mind of the individual. Critical incident stress management (CISM) is a model law enforcement agencies use to conduct stress debriefing that assists the release of post-traumatic stress. The Polk County Sheriff's Office has established a CISM team to address these stressors and this paper is focused on determining if the members of the agency would rather be debriefed by a peer trained in CISM or a professional psychologist.

Introduction

A critical incident is defined as any event that produces sufficient emotional reactions in people and is considered generally outside the range of ordinary human experiences (Mitchell & Everly, 1993). The occurrence of a critical incident may lead to the development of post-traumatic stress. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) originates, or is observed, after exposure to a highly traumatic event, such as assault, rape, kidnapping, or an accident. Images of the distressing situation reappear again and again in the mind of the individual (flashback), against their will, despite the passage of time. This flashback is imagined in exceptional detail, accompanied by acute anxiety reactions like worry, fear, pain, lack of control, high emotional arousal, or avoidance of related situations. This generates high stress, exhaustion, intense emotions and irrational thoughts that increase the intensity of the effects of the stress.

PTSD is characterized in that victims attach great importance to these images and the anxiety they cause. Victims of PTSD develop many thoughts about the traumatic event and its consequences. The victim also attaches considerable importance to these thoughts, which generate more anxiety, more stress, and more insecurity. The victim perceives the world as highly dangerous and they tend to lose their sense of control over their personal security. They remember many details of the event or the feelings they experienced in the moments of the critical incident, with great vividness, strong intensity, and high frequency. These visual, auditory, and tactile sensations remain deeply etched in the victim's memory. These images and feelings can become intrusive, especially if they try to ignore them. When they try to avoid thinking about the incident, it increases the frequency of unwanted thoughts and the victim becomes more stressful even long after the incident has occurred. This stress can cause strong emotional distress, high arousal, and behavioral problems that can prevent the victim from readjusting to the facets of everyday life (Malim & Birch, 1998).

The Polk County Sheriff's Office has created a Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) team to help in preventing stress disorders, such as PTSD, in deputies who have been involved in a critical incident. The purpose of this research project is to describe the history of CISD/CISM, the CISD process and how it developed into CISM, and then to examine the following question: Do members of the Polk County Sheriff's Office prefer to be debriefed by the agency's CISM team or seek counseling on their own?

Literature Review

Stress following a critical incident is a comprehensive reality for first responders. During their careers, it is estimated that nearly 90% of police officers, firefighters and other personnel who respond to emergencies will be affected by a critical incident (Conroy, 1990). Reactions to these events occur in a wide variety of physical responses, emotional responses, and behavioral characteristics, which can undermine a person's ability to function during or after the event. If this condition is not treated, stress following a critical incident may continue to have adverse effects on the welfare of the individual long after the event has occurred. Stress can affect an individual in a way that the critical incident can remain in the mind of a person for a lifetime. There are several cases in law enforcement that have shown that the occurrence of a single critical incident in an agency can affect the life of its working officers in a very negative manner. To control the negative impacts on an individual's life, a critical incident stress management program has been introduced for such people who are liable to face stressful events in the course of their work.

Managing stress after a critical incident teaches officers how to recognize the effects of stress following a critical incident and provides techniques that can be used to minimize the impact of the event. Stress management explains the potential effects of stress following a critical incident and can help an agency's administration identify potential problems that can cause stress reactions and allows them to address the stress responses following a critical incident (Mitchell & Everly, 1993).

The need for stress management of officers became evident during the mid-1980's. The initial programs were conducted post incident after a prison riot at Kirkland Correctional Institution in Columbia, South Carolina in 1987 (Bergman & Queen, 1987.) Bergman and Queen (1987) recognized the need for stress management for the officers; as a result of the stress put on the officers during the riot. A critical stress debriefing of the officers was conducted immediately after the incident (Mitchell, 1983; Mitchell & Everly, 1993). Approximately 25% of the officers involved in the riot experienced headaches, nightmares, or sudden weight loss as a result of the stress that was placed on them during the riot (Montgomery, 1987.) These debriefings would ultimately assist in the development of Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM); which is utilized by many agencies today to manage the stress of their officers after they have been involved in a critical incident.

Critical incident stress debriefing (CISD) was first described by Dr. Jeffrey T. Mitchell (Mitchell, 1983) as a method of group counseling for outpatient work with officers experiencing a traumatic incident during the execution of their duties. The CISD model represents semi structured debriefing procedures that reduce initial distress and

aid in the prevention of delayed psychological disorders, particularly PTSD. It is believed that any person who has survived a traumatic event should undergo a debriefing process regardless of whether or not they have psychopathological symptoms. Many of the participants debriefed after a critical incident meet the criteria for either acute stress disorder or PTSD and may show symptoms of anxiety and/or depression (Everly & Mitchell, 1997).

Debriefing has been conducted with individuals and survivors of various traumatic events, as well as employees and rescue services professionals by providing psychological assistance to them. Participants have explained that they were perfectly normal people who were placed in an abnormal situation. Everly and Mitchell (1997) believe that the debriefing should be understood as part of a widespread, systematic, multidimensional approach to the management of traumatic stress and should be an independent approach to providing assistance after experiencing a traumatic event and not mixed with the psychological treatment.

The CISD model has led to the development of Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM). CISM is a program designed primarily for employees of an agency that are likely to be involved in critical incidents due to the nature of their work. This program focuses on two aspects. The first aspect is preventive and aims to educate and prepare employees to face the possible risk of exposure to highly stressful events. The second aspect aims to provide support, assistance, and monitoring for people who have been involved in a critical incident. Some support services, assistance, and monitoring may also be available for non-employees who may be affected by the critical event; such as the employee's family, witnesses to the incident, or others that may have been affected by the incident. Examples of stress incidents can be related to many things: The death of a partner, hostage taking, death or injury caused by an officer during the performance of his or her duty; witnesses to mutilation or the agony of another person; being a victim of assault, or target of any serious threat to the officer's physical well-being or that of a family member; suicide of a colleague, or offender; any incident that is the subject of intense media coverage; or any other incident deemed critical by management in consultation with the Regional Employee Assistance Program (EAP) Coordinator and a mental health professional (Everly & Mitchell, 1999).

CISM divides affected officers into four categories (Everly & Mitchell, 1999):

Primary Category: People who have directly experienced the traumatic event, the first observers attending the scene or trying to end the situation, and direct witnesses to the critical incident.

Secondary Category: People who have to bear the loss of a loved one or who are affected by the fate of a victim of the critical incident due to an emotional connection with the critical incident.

Tertiary Category: Other groups affected by the critical incident. This is to assess the possibility that other groups who were not involved in the critical incident, such as support staff, may need support. For these groups, it is more appropriate to inquire about their stress, to learn about their perceived needs and provide services appropriate to individuals or groups.

Executive Category: Following a critical incident, the employees of the Executive category must receive support services that are distinct from those offered to employees and are given by speakers who come from outside the operational unit.

Today, many police agencies use CISM as a psychological intervention. It is evident that psychological debriefing should be conducted to relieve officers of the stress gripping them after the incident in which they are involved. CISM is based on relieving the stress of the affected person by psychological stress management by organizing psychological counseling sessions in which the affected person is encouraged to let his emotions out using different methods. Counseling, group therapy, and sharing of experiences are part of debriefing which helps the person to manage the stressful situation in which he finds himself. Due to the effectiveness of the CISM model and the rise of critical incidents involving law enforcement officers, many law enforcement agencies have begun focusing on CISM as a way of debriefing officers who have been affected by a critical incident.

There have been many studies of CISD and the eventual development of CISM, However there are little factual studies that report the effectiveness of CISM by those officers who have been debriefed after a critical incident or the willingness of the officers to participate in the debriefing. Law enforcement officers have historically displayed a “macho” attitude towards any psychological debriefing or have been unwilling to seek counseling on their own. This has also been shown through a study conducted by the United States Army on leadership effectiveness of CISM in the Military Police. The study showed that many army leaders felt that the soldiers should be “hardened” and not need CISM (Brookshire, 2011.) Many young soldiers returning from war fronts were told that good soldiers were unaffected by war and directed away from stress debriefing by their supervisors.

In 1988, the rise in officer deaths led the Tampa Police Department (TPD) to develop a CISM team. The CISM team’s mission is to get affected officers involved in debriefings and help them cope with the stress caused by critical incidents and line of duty deaths. Sergeant Mark Delage, TPD’s CISM Coordinator, stated that during the early years of the CISM team, few officers were willing to participate in the debriefings. However, Sergeant Delage stated that over a period time, training, exposure, and a cultural change has increased participation by even the most “hardened” officers. Sergeant Delage further stated that he has observed that when a “macho” officer experienced a stress debriefing, they were the first ones to support the debriefing process in the future and to encourage other officers to participate (M. Delage, personal communication, August 18, 2012).

Members of the Polk County Sheriff’s Office (PCSO) are also routinely subjected to critical incidents as part of their tour of duty. Since 1997, nine law enforcement officers have been killed in the line of duty in Polk County and three others severally wounded by gunfire. Two of those wounded were injured so badly, they were forced into a medical retirement. The other one was able to return to duty after several operations to repair the damage caused by the gunshot wounds he received.

The agency has historically used a CISM team comprised of members from the Polk County Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) to debrief deputies involved in these critical incidents. However, in 2012, PCSO created a CISM team comprised of

members from its agency to debrief those members who have experienced a critical incident.

In December 2011, the Lakeland Police Department (LPD) lost an officer in the line of duty by gunfire. Over fifty deputies from PCSO responded to the scene and assisted in the investigation and eventual apprehension of the suspect. Stress debriefing was offered to each of them but declined. Many of the deputies knew the LPD Officer personally and worked alongside him nightly, however, each deputy returned to work the next night without any stress management.

Like most law enforcement agencies, PCSO is also experiencing “hardened” attitudes by its members and participation in stress debriefings is low. The program is voluntary and no member is forced to participate in a debriefing. Due to this fact, it is unknown if the program is beneficial to the members or if it is not being used due to the “macho” or “hardened” persona of law enforcement officers.

Method

To research data on whether members of the Polk County Sheriff’s Office would prefer to be debriefed by a professional psychologist, a member who has received training in CISM, or another source, I developed an eight question survey to be distributed to the Polk County Sheriff’s Office’s Department of Law Enforcement and Department of Detention. The survey was preprinted and distributed to each Delta platoon in the agency. The Polk County Sheriff’s Office has five (5) Law Enforcement Delta platoons and two Detention Delta platoons that work from 6:00 P.M. to 6:00 A.M. The survey was passed out at roll call by the platoon lieutenant and the participants were advised participation was strictly voluntary.

The survey consisted of eight questions. The first four questions were demographic in nature. The last four questions were related to CISM and the participant’s experience with being involved in a critical incident. The last two questions centered on who the participant would rather use for a critical incident debriefing and if the participant had ever observed a Deputy Sheriff or Detention Deputy benefit from CISM.

I chose to conduct the survey in this method for two reasons. The first reason was that the preprinted forms were inexpensive to print and more could be easily printed if necessary. The second reason I used this method was because of the fast response I would receive by handing the survey’s out to the seven Platoon Leaders and then quickly picking them up after the platoon’s roll call.

The survey was developed to record responses from deputy sheriffs and detention deputies. The agency’s make up of law enforcement officers is approximately 60% deputy sheriffs to 40% detention deputies. I used the agency’s Delta Platoons to record an accurate sample of members from the Department of Law Enforcement and the Department of Detention. Because this research is centered on the Polk County Sheriff’s Office, no other agency was surveyed.

While this survey method was chosen for the cost savings and quick response of the participants, a negative variable was discovered while analyzing the results. Of the 90 members surveyed 78, or 87%, had less than 20 years’ experience and no one had

more than 30 years' experience. This is attributed to the survey of only Delta platoon (night shift) members, who typically are comprised of mostly junior deputies.

Results

Out of the 111 members of the Polk County Sheriff's Office surveyed, 90 completed the survey. Fifty-one of the sixty-six deputy sheriffs surveyed responded, while thirty-nine of forty detention deputies surveyed responded. Of the members surveyed 23.3% were between 18-29 years of age; 26% were 30-39 years of age; 32% were 40-49 years of age; and 19% were over the age of 50. Of the members surveyed 74% were male while 26% were female. Sixty-four percent of the members surveyed had less than 10 years with the agency, 22% had between 11-20 years, 13% had between 21-30 years with the agency.

Out of the fifty-one deputy sheriffs that completed the survey, 23.5% were between 18-29 years of age; 29% were between the ages of 30-39; 35% were between the ages of 40-50; and 12 % were over the age of 50. Out of the 39 detention deputies who completed the survey, 23% were between 18-29 years of age; 20.5% were between the ages of 30-39; 28% were between the ages of 40-50; and 28% were over the age of 50. Seventy-two percent of the deputy sheriffs surveyed were male compared to 28% being female. Seventy-seven percent of the detention deputies surveyed were male compared to 23% female.

While the demographics between deputy sheriffs surveyed and detention deputies surveyed were relatively close in relation to age, gender, and years of service there was a large difference in relation to questions concerning CISM. When asked, "Have you ever been involved in a critical incident in your position," 72 % of deputy sheriffs stated they have been involved in a critical incident compared to 28% of detention deputies.

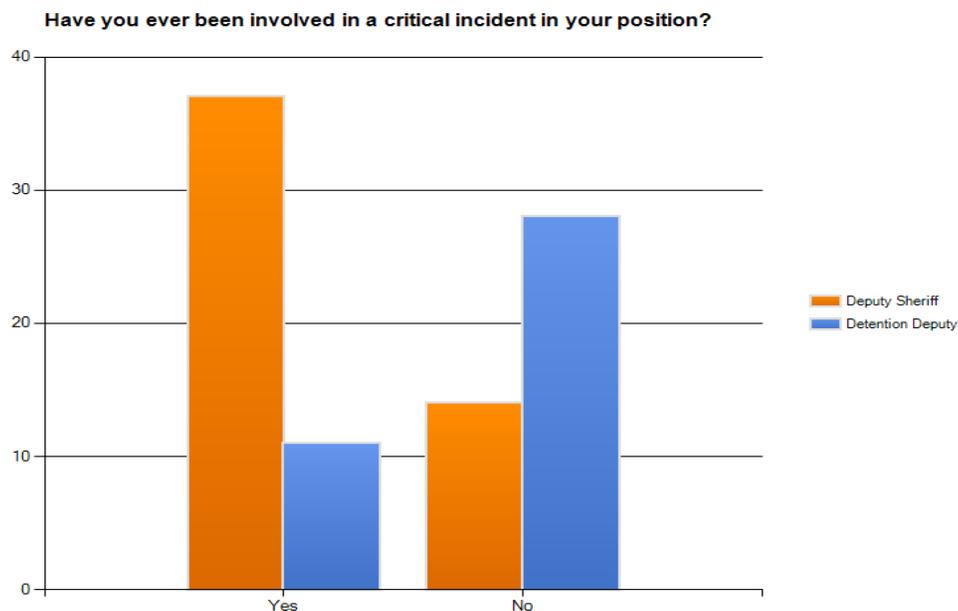


Figure 1

Those surveyed were asked, “Do you think psychological debriefing should be mandatory after being involved in a critical incident?” Twenty-five of the 51 deputy sheriffs surveyed answered “yes” while 26 answered “no.” The response from the deputy sheriffs was split nearly 50% (49% and 51% respectively), the response from the surveyed detention deputies was much more diverse with 32 of the surveyed detention deputies answering “yes” compared to 7 answering “no.”

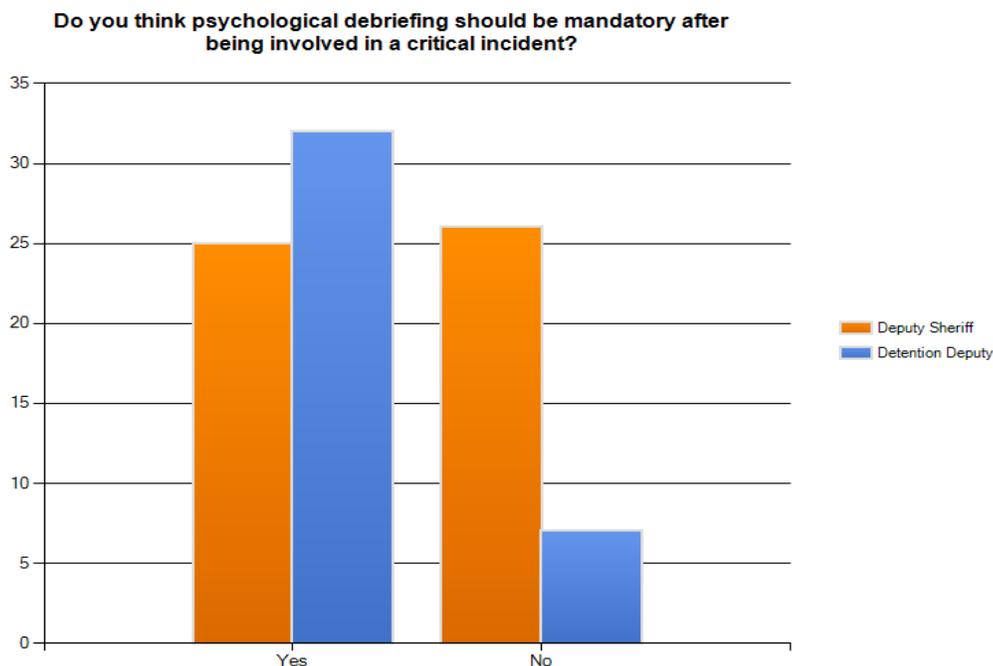


Figure 2

The main focus of the survey was to determine if the members of the Polk County Sheriff’s Office involved in a critical incident would rather be debriefed by, “a peer member who has received training in CISM, a professional psychologist, or another source. Results showed that 71% of the deputy sheriffs surveyed indicated they would want to be debriefed by a peer member trained in CISM, 16% would request to be debriefed by a psychologist, and 14% would want to be debriefed by another source. Responses from the 39 detention deputies surveyed indicated 72% would want to be debriefed by a peer member trained in CISM compared to 28% wishing to be debriefed by a psychologist.

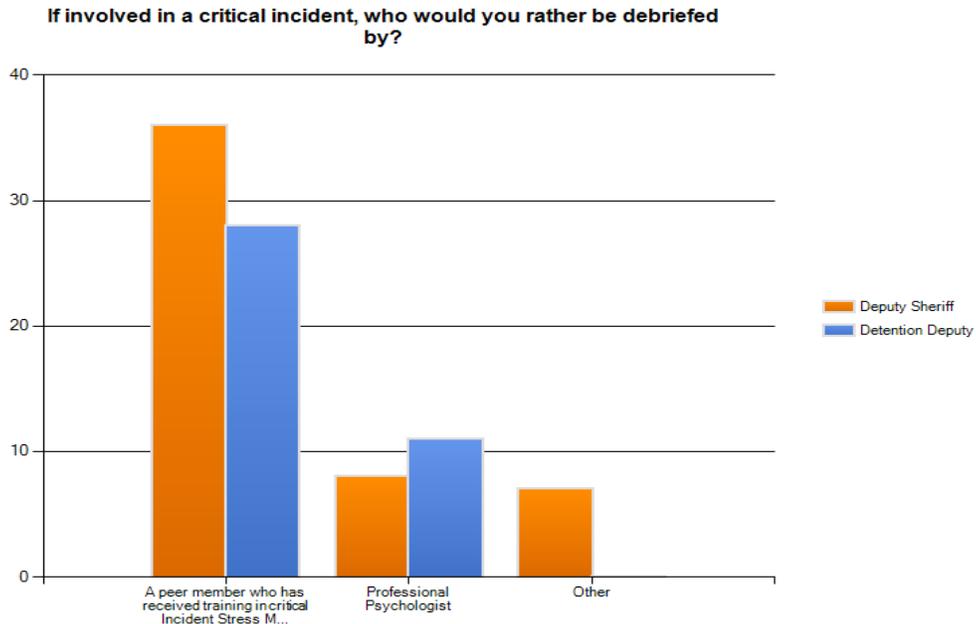


Figure 3

The final survey question was “Have you observed another deputy sheriff/detention deputy benefit from CISM?” Twenty-nine percent of deputy sheriffs answered “yes” compared to 71% who answered “no.” Fifteen percent of detention deputies answered “yes” compared to 85% who answered “no.”

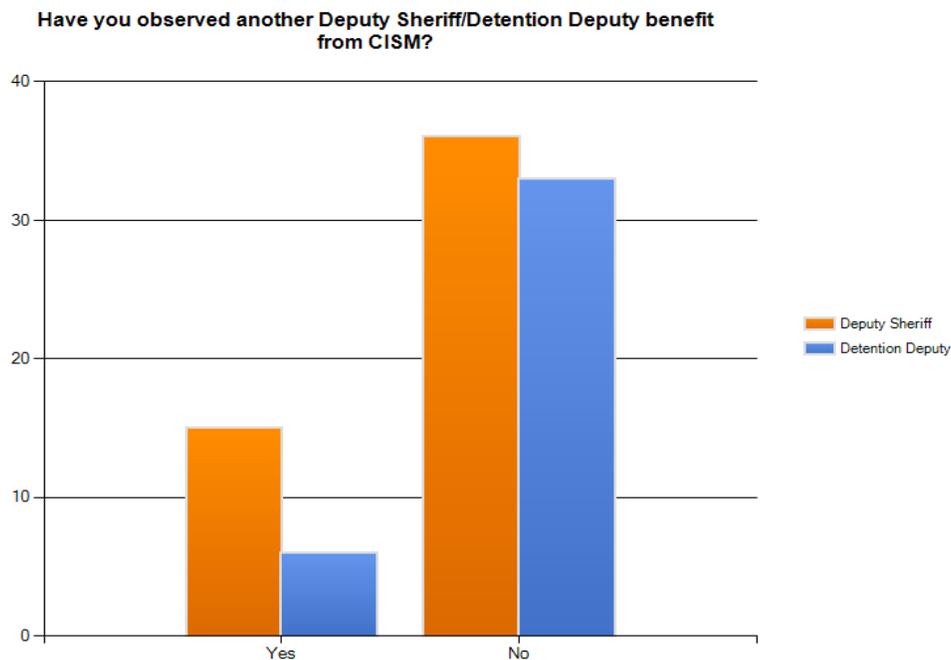


Figure 4

Discussion

After reviewing the results of the survey, it was quite surprising to see the difference in responses from the deputy sheriffs compared to the responses from detention deputies. While both groups are employed by the same agency and are guided by the same general orders, it appears the job tasks for each group may have varied their responses in reference to their feelings towards CISM and their involvement with a critical incident. A much larger percent (72) of the deputy sheriffs surveyed have been involved in a critical incident compared to only 28% of detention deputies surveyed, however, a much smaller percent (49) of deputy sheriffs surveyed feel psychological debriefing should be mandatory compared to 82% of detention deputies surveyed.

Deputy Sheriffs routinely place themselves in harm's way and experience critical incidents. Many are subjected to violence and experience traumatic events daily, whether it be towards them or a victim of a heinous crime. Seventy-two percent of deputy sheriffs surveyed reported being involved in a critical incident yet less than half of them believe psychological debriefing should be mandatory.

Deputy Sheriffs in their very nature, as with most law enforcement officers, are very close-knit and protective of each other. This is very evident when an overwhelming 71% of deputy sheriffs surveyed preferred to be debriefed by a peer trained in CISM. According to the survey 14% (7 of 51) would rather be debriefed by "other." Upon choosing "other", the participants were asked to specify who the other would be. The Six of the seven wrote in that they would prefer to be debriefed by their supervisor, further indicating the trust in another deputy sheriff. The other participant indicated "my pastor."

Detention deputies share many of the same dangers deputy sheriffs experience in their jobs. While detention deputies do not make the headlines that deputy sheriffs do, their jobs are also high in critical incidents. Only 28% of detention deputies surveyed reported being involved in a critical incident, yet a higher percentage (82%) of them believes psychological debriefing should be mandatory.

While the literature review of this topic did not reveal any studies that would suggest that law enforcement officers believe that psychological debriefing should be mandatory, it did show findings of "macho" attitudes toward CISM by law enforcement officers. This was evident in this survey, as a majority of deputy sheriffs surveyed stated a psychological debriefing should not be mandatory.

The survey results show that the Polk County Sheriff's Office is experiencing the same attitudes and beliefs about CISM that the Tampa Police Department experienced in the late 1980's. Many officers are dealing with stress on their own and not accepting the help that is offered to them through CISM. The Tampa Police Department was able to change the culture of their agency and for CISM to be successful at the Polk County Sheriff's Office the same cultural change must take place.

Recommendations

After analyzing the survey conducted on 90 members of Polk County Sheriff's Office, the following are recommended to assist in creating an agency culture that would be more accepting of stress management debriefing:

1. Every member of the agency should be trained in CISM. If the members of the agency are taught the benefits of stress debriefing, they are more likely to participate in a debriefing following involvement in a critical incident.
2. Supervisors and training officers should receive advanced training in CISM. The goal is to avoid what the United States Military has experienced with supervisors telling young soldiers to be "hard." Training officers usually set the example young deputies follow and it is key that these training officers teach young officers the benefits of stress management.

The agency's culture and attitude towards CISM must change in order for it to be successful. Once the supervisors and training officers have been introduced to the program, the new recruits will begin accepting stress management as a "way of doing business," thus changing the culture of the agency.

Lieutenant Ken Hall has served the Polk County Sheriff's Office since 1995. During his career he has been assigned to patrol, community policing, traffic homicide, general crimes, patrol supervisor, street crimes supervisor, and general crimes supervisor. He is currently assigned as a platoon commander in the Southwest District.

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Appendix A
Survey of PCSO Members

The Polk County Sheriff's Office has a Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) team whose mission is to use a designed psychological and educational process to reduce and control the impact of critical incidents on members of the agency. A critical incident is defined as "any situation faced by a deputy sheriff, detention officer, emergency services worker, or civilian member that may cause unusually strong emotional reactions which have the potential to interfere with the ability to function, whether at the scene or later."

The attached survey is being used for a research paper on CISM and the privacy of those surveyed will be respected. Please take a few moments to complete the survey and return them to Lieutenant Ken Hall at the Southwest District Command.

1. What is your Age?

- 18-29
- 30-39
- 40-50
- Over 50

2. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

3. What is your job title?

- Deputy Sheriff
- Detention Deputy

4. How long have you been a member of the Polk County Sheriff's Office?

- Less than 1 year to 10 years
- 11 years to 20 years
- 21 years to 30 years
- Over 30 years

5. Have you ever been involved in a critical incident in your position?

- Yes
- No

6. Do you think psychological debriefing should be mandatory after being involved in a critical incident?

- Yes
- No

7. If involved in a critical incident, which would you rather be debriefed by?

- A peer member who has received training in Critical Incident Stress Management
- Professional Psychologist
- Other _____ (*Please specify*)

8. Have you observed another Deputy Sheriff/Detention Deputy benefit from CISM?

- Yes
- No