

# Helping normal people get over normal reactions to abnormal events.



## Background

The Tasmanian Emergency Services Critical Incident Stress Management Program was established in 1988 and is responsible for managing the impact of critical incidents on the emergency service personnel (permanent and volunteer) of Ambulance Tasmania, the State Emergency Service, the Tasmania Fire Service, and Tasmania Police.

The Program follows an internationally respected model of intervention and provides a unique peer support service based on a co-operative approach between management of these services, unions, and members of the emergency services themselves. The Program is considered to be 'one of the most successful and widely respected CISM Programs in Australia'. (Robinson 1994).

## 'Critical' incidents

Emergency service work, by its very nature, exposes personnel to incidents not normally experienced by the general public.

These may be critical incidents in the sense that exposure to scenes, situations and events might potentially lead to critical incident stress.

It is these incidents that are abnormal, and not the individual's reaction. Nevertheless, the reactions need to be recognised and dealt with appropriately.

## What is Critical Incident Stress?

Stress is a general term used to describe a person's response to demands in their environment. Critical incident stress refers to strong emotional and/or physical reactions to abnormal incidents. These reactions are commonplace and are normal. In fact, up to 87% of all emergency service personnel are affected by critical incident stress at some time during their career.

There are many signs that indicate stress. Reactions vary with the individual but may include disturbed

sleep, irritability, upset stomach, headaches, diarrhoea, depression, grief, confusion, fatigue, inability to make decisions and poor concentration.

It has been shown that dealing with these reactions at an early stage minimises their impact.

## Confidentiality

A cornerstone to the success of the program has been our commitment to integrity in service delivery and confidentiality. Confidentiality will only be breached if there is an imminent and real threat of harm to the emergency service worker or any other person, or if there is a legal requirement to do so.

## Evaluation

The Program distributes evaluation reports to recipients of the service so that the impact of incidents on personnel can be measured and some feedback gained on the service provided. The reports are returned voluntarily and strict confidentiality is maintained.

## The Program

On a day to day basis, the Program is managed by a full-time manager with clinical advice being provided by a psychologist. The Program comprises peers and psychologists with peers acting as liaison officers within each geographic region. The peers (serving emergency service personnel) and psychologists (who are drawn from the public and private sector) are specially trained in critical incident stress management. The main motivations for people to join the Program is an interest in the wellbeing of their fellow workers.

## SERVICES PROVIDED

### Education and information sessions

Upon request, Program members are available to provide education sessions for emergency service personnel.

### Assessment

Once notified of an incident, an assessment of the level of service required is made by Program members (sometimes called a work-up). It involves collecting as much available information about the incident and determining the appropriate course of action.

### Defusing and on scene support

Defusing is a procedure which allows personnel the opportunity to acknowledge their reaction before going home or returning to duty. This may eliminate the need for a later debrief or, if one is needed, to enhance that process. On occasions it may be necessary for Program members to be 'on scene' to provide immediate

support or defusing. They may also (or alternatively) provide defusing at a demobilisation point or station.

### Group debriefing

If determined to be appropriate a group debrief would be offered to all Emergency Services personnel directly involved with the incident.

### Individual debriefing

On occasions it may be appropriate for individuals to be debriefed e.g. when only one is involved.

### Follow-up assistance

After any intervention the Program may provide a follow-up service. This may be in the form of a courtesy phone call or other contact by a Program member.

### Advice to partners, family and friends

Being aware that critical incidents may have adverse effects on partners, family and friends, the Program provides information and advice upon request.

**AIM:** Emergency service personnel are frequently exposed to critical incidents which have the potential to affect them. The purpose of the CISM Program is to avoid or minimise the impact by helping people understand and manage their own reactions.

**ACTIVATION:** Responsibility for activating the Program lies not just with managers and supervisors but also with the individuals involved and their colleagues. We welcome requests for assistance for emergency service personnel from anyone, including partners, family and friends.

**CONTACT:** The CISM Program is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There are three ways to activate the Program:

- 1 Contact your communications/control room and request the CISM Program.
- 2 Contact a Program member who is known to you.
- 3 Phone 0427 181 207