

**The Bill Blackwood
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Importance of Critical Incident Stress Debriefing

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ABSTRACT

In today's complex and fast changing world of law enforcement, one thing that must always be considered essential is Critical Incident Stress Debriefings. However, even in the modern times of today, it seems that the idea of anyone in law enforcement needing help to cope with a particular incident is often not welcoming. In a search to find out how much of an emphasis Texas law enforcement agencies place on this topic, a survey was conducted of 17 police and sheriff departments around the state of Texas that range in size from 9 to 440. The results of this survey revealed that the law enforcement community still has much work to do in this area. Of the 17 surveys that were sent out, 9 of them replied that they did in fact utilize Critical Incident Stress Debriefings. However, this means that 8 of the surveys answered that their department does not utilize Critical Incident Stress Debriefings. Upon gathering all data related to this topic, this researcher has come to the conclusion that although it is apparent that our law enforcement society has begun to recognize the need for Critical Incident Stress Debriefings. However, as important as this topic might be, it would seem necessary that one day Federal mandates may be set forth that make these debriefings mandatory. In the time of war that we live in today, our federal government certainly has these debriefings set forth for soldiers. Therefore, local soldiers in law enforcement should also have debriefings. Is society today so consumed with what is happening globally that the war within our society is being forgotten? The society of law enforcement seems to be overlooking the impact the battle field here has on local law enforcement. Perhaps society as a whole should examine how similar the jobs of soldiers and law enforcement are. A police officer may start as young as 21 and feel that they know a little about life. The first couple of years may go well, but one day that officer may

have some out of the ordinary behavior and everyone wonders why. What started as an exciting career for a young person suddenly turned into a hazy perception of life. The continual reminder of just how violent this society is sometimes a challenge and can not easily be prepared for. Just as with a soldier, no one can prepare an individual for encounters dealing with people who are breathing their last breath of life, children just murdered by their parents, and children who have been sexually assaulted. The list can go on, but how much does one person have to encounter before it is acceptable for them to need help. As mentioned previously, police officers (like soldiers) are a “special” type of person. It is not difficult to become a police officer, but perhaps remaining one is the test.

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INTRODUCTION

Many people wonder why police officers and other emergency responders seem to be socially different from the rest of the world. Most police officers are taught such things as when you are looking at a deceased person, you are to look through them and not at them. This analogy is probably the best to describe the state of mind of any police officer in a high stress critical incident. A “critical incident” is one which is emotional enough to overwhelm a person’s sense of control and ability to cope. The key word in that definition is “person” because a police officer is not just a person they are a cop and “cops’ can deal with anything. However, the difference is most people don’t go to work and get the pleasure of seeing someone that has been dead so long that they are literally melted to their chair. Also, in the early hours of a normal persons day they probably don’t watch an apartment completely engulfed in flames that contains two small innocent children inside whose parents abandoned them after setting the fire. Then have to see two dead children being carried out when the parents never mentioned they were in there. This is sometimes a police officers day at work and this is what separates police officers from most of society. Is there a need for Critical Incident Stress Debriefing in today’s law enforcement? The answer to that should be found at the conclusion of this paper.

The method of inquiry this writer intends to utilize to gather this information will first from the internet. Other sources that will be from a survey conducted amongst agencies across Texas. It is this writer’s anticipation that the data gathered throughout this project will reflect the need for Critical Incident Stress Debriefing in Law Enforcement today. The information in this project will also explain why some feel it is critical that police Departments introduce this practice. It will show that because critical Stress debriefing is so critical for the police officers

mental state of mind this not only affects the officer individually, but the department and society as well. At the conclusion of this paper, it will reveal that most police officers are not “normal people”, but for obvious reasons. It is not this writer’s intent to make police officers normal because that may not be possible. However, this project should indicate if there are other ways of dealing with stress in critical situations: the problem or issue to be examined, and its relevance to law enforcement.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Although Critical Incident Stress Debriefing would not appear to be a controversial topic it is still critiqued. In this study research was found to indicate that there is some question regarding this topic. This section will be discussing the overall review of the literature that has been gathered.

The topic of Critical Incident Stress Debriefing is not just one of modern day. It was actually introduced during the times of World War II. This originated by leaders having these types of discussions for reasons of gathering intelligence. However, as time went on it was realized that this had a “spiritually purging” effect on some (Rose & Tehrani, 2002). These studies then opened the door to this being utilized beyond the battle ground. It lead researching to begin looking into the effects this would have on natural disaster victims and from their it has seemed to mold into modern day life. However, with the spread of this psychological tool have also come some studies that reflect it may possibly do more harm than good. Ormerod (2002), expressed her concerns in regard to Critical Incident Stress Debriefing.

One of her concerns is that people should not be encouraged to avoid stress in all situations. Instead people should learn to deal with it in a positive manner. She points out that it can lead to discovery and self-reliance.

Bryant and Ehlers (2003), also state that some of their findings indicate that this process may impede natural recovery from trauma. Dr. Richard Gist expresses that this process is based on two flawed assumptions: 1) Reflecting on the traumatic incident early on is therapeutic; 2) education of symptoms is always beneficial. It is his belief that neither of the two can be beneficial (R. Gist, personal communication, June 25, 2004).

Carlier, van Uchelen, Lamberts, and Gersons (1998), conducted a study among Dutch Police Officers who responded to a plane crash. The study consisted of 105 officers of the 200 officers that responded on scene to this plane crash of which 45% were debriefed and 55% were not. The group of non-debriefed officers reportedly did not participate for “operational reasons” or because they simply chose not to participate. The non-debriefed group consisted of 59 officers. They assessed this study at both an 8 and 18 month assessment. Upon assessment at the 8 month the results reflected that there was no significant difference between the debriefed and non-debriefed group. Upon conducting assessment at the 18 month period, the same conclusion was found, which was that there was again no significant difference between the two groups.

It would appear that in this case of Critical Incident Stress Debriefing there are many practitioner type studies that reflect a positive impact from this. One such study was conducted by Smith and de Chesnay (1994), and in this case a study took place at the South Carolina Police Department to evaluate their CISD program. It was surveyed from 10 different officers that were picked from a 100 personnel department. The investigator in charge of the survey picked these officers immediately following a debriefing. All 10 were allowed the opportunity to accept or decline the participation. The result was that 9 of the 10 officers expressed that CISD to help to reduce their stress. Leonard and Alison (1999), also conducted a study amongst Australian police officers. This study involved a group of officers that did and a group that did not receive

CISD after a shooting incident. The result of this survey was that of the 60 officers that were surveyed the 30 that actually had more shots fired and more people killed appeared to be less angry than the group that did not receive Critical Incident Stress Debriefing. It was also found that a factor that may have possibly led to their anger was not being afforded the opportunity by the department to be a part of Critical Incident Stress Debriefing. To a person who has experienced a traumatic incident not affording them this opportunity would appear to be “down playing” the incident.

METHODOLOGY

This research should demonstrate (from the research gathered and the surveys conducted) that these debriefings are indeed necessary in law enforcement. The method of inquiry of this paper was first to gather all available research. In gathering this information was the intent to gather all information which would support both sides. A survey was also conducted with same intent in mind, to gather first hand opinions from practitioners in law enforcement. A survey of 17 various police agencies in Texas ranging in size from 9 to 440 sworn personnel was conducted. One of the questions to be examined was how many departments of the 17 that were surveyed do initiate Critical Incident Stress Debriefings. The outcome of this question should give insight to the amount of importance law enforcement in Texas puts on these debriefings. The above question leads into the next which is how many of these department leaders feel their department would or does benefit from debriefings. Also, how many felt this could be utilized as a learning tool. This survey also investigated of the 22 that were surveyed how many of them knew of a department in their area which held these debriefings. The time span between the time the incident occurred and when the debriefing took place was asked as well. Finally, the survey

concluded by asking for any negative feedback from personal experience of the survey under goers or any which they may have ever heard.

The purpose of this survey was to enhance the researcher's resources so as to be able to fairly answer whether or not Critical Incident Stress Debriefing is necessary for today's law enforcement personnel. The outcome of the research is based solely on the varied information gathered and the survey findings. That is why the importance was considered when this survey was conducted. The survey was personally handed to each of the participants by the researcher. Each of the participants involved was at minimum mid-level supervisors and ranged to upper-level management. Some of the participants were Chief's of Police. It was the intent of this survey to reach a broad scope of law enforcement personnel. This was done so by including the mid to low level supervisors who still have much contact with the first line officers who these debriefings would effect perhaps the most. It then ranged to the upper management who may have a more administrative opinion on the matter. The age of the participants also ranged from 30 years of age to 64. This diverse age group should reveal how little or much the opinions vary among the different generations when it comes to the subject matter of debriefings. There were also some participants who were ex-military or even active military as well as those who had no military experience at all. The outcome of this survey should give a very true and accurate reflection on the use of Critical Incident Stress Debriefings in law enforcement today.

FINDINGS

While trying to find the answer to the question of rather or not Critical Incident Stress Debriefings are necessary in today's law enforcement a survey was conducted. There were a total of 17 surveys sent to different members of agencies within the state of Texas. The completed surveys portrayed a fair image of law enforcement in Texas due to the fact that all of

the agencies ranged in size from 9 to 440. The results from these surveys revealed that 9 of the 17 Texas Law Enforcement agencies do utilize a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing. Obviously, this left 8 or almost half that advised they do not utilize this practice at their agency. However, 16 of the surveyed answered that they did personally feel that their department needs these debriefings whether or not they currently have one in place or not.

This survey also examined more closely who was involved in the Critical Incident Stress Debriefings if they did indeed utilize this. The survey revealed that of the departments that utilize this practice four of those ten do not have a board consisting of counselors. Another four of the remaining six advise they do have a counselor present during the debriefing. One of the surveys replied that their department does not have a counselor present unless in the case of “extreme trauma”. The final survey indicated that they do not always have a counselor present, but do make one available upon request. Further investigation revealed that six of those surveys indicated that they have department personnel present during the debriefing. The remaining four advised that they do not have any department personnel other than those involved present during the debriefing.

The ten that advised they do in fact utilize debriefings were then asked if their departments have a particular policy covering this issue. The findings of this question were that six of the ten departments do have a specific policy covering this issue. The remaining four advised that they do not have an actual written policy and instead rely on each situation to dictate how they will handle it.

Since this survey was conducted anonymously, the surveyed were asked to answer a question honestly based on their personal feelings. They were asked if they felt that their department would (or does) benefit from having Critical Incident Stress Debriefings. The

responses from 16 of the 17 surveys were yes, they do feel their department would benefit and for those who currently to exercise this practice they advised it is beneficial in their opinion. The only one remaining survey answered “maybe”.

Regarding the aforementioned question, the surveyed was asked if they personally felt that a debriefing of this sort could also be used as a learning tool from any mistakes that were made during the incident. Again, 16 of the 17 surveyed replied that they felt this process could also be used a learning exercise to perhaps embark on some mistakes that were made if any and discuss a better way for it to be done in the future. Only one of the surveys replied that they did not feel this could be used as a learning tool.

The participants involved who had answered that their department does not participate in these debriefings were asked if they knew of any surrounding agencies in their area that do in fact utilize this practice. The response to this question was that four of the surveyed advised they did not know of another surrounding agency in their area who did participate in this practice. The remaining three advised they were aware of other surrounding agencies that did in fact conduct debriefings.

Furthermore, another important key that this survey pointed out was in regards to negative feedback. One of the questions in the survey was whether or not the surveyed had ever heard any negative feedback in regards to the Critical Incident Stress Debriefing. This researcher received replies from all sixteen surveyed. All of them except one answered that they had never heard any negative feed back in regards to the debriefings. The one that answered they had indeed heard negative feedback went onto explain what the negative feedback was. They explained that during the course of the Critical Incident Stress Debriefing the Police and Fire departments had disagreements on how the scene of the original incident was handled.

However, as you can see it appears that this negative feedback could possibly be corrected in the future by overseeing the Debriefings differently, but not by eliminating the Debriefing all together.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this research was to answer the question of whether or not Critical Incident Stress Debriefings are necessary in today's law enforcement. It seems that some departments are still functioning without these types of briefings. Even in our modern times that we are currently living in it appears that amongst the law enforcement community admitting to need help with dealing with a particular incident is difficult for an officer to acknowledge and not having Critical Incident Stress Debriefings readily available makes it even that more difficult. There was research gathered that not only listed not only the advocates for this practice, but those who felt their research indicated that this was not the best way of dealing with stress. However, after reviewing the data gathered, it appears that even those who do not feel these debriefings are beneficial feel that way because in their opinions, this way does not encourage people to deal with the stress and instead perhaps avoid it. Perhaps if a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing is not conducted properly then it may not be beneficial; however, it seems that a debriefing handled properly would be an appropriate way of dealing with stress and not avoiding it. This research consisted of a survey that was conducted amongst 22 different agencies within the state of Texas. The results of the survey revealed that even though the law enforcement community has made some progress, it appears that there are just as many departments that do not utilize it as the one's that do. It appears that even with the departments that are utilizing this practice there are questions that arise as to whether or not they are being utilized appropriately. The findings of this research pointed out that not only does society need to place more emphasis

on the need for Critical Incident Stress Debriefings, but eventually there should be some type of guidelines established for local departments to operate by. Furthermore, the findings also revealed that when officers are asked independently and away from their peers, they are almost unanimously in support of the Critical Incident Stress Debriefings. At the beginning of the research, all information that was located seemed to gear around the military and its use of Critical Incident Stress Debriefing. It seems that there is much more data on military debriefings. As previously stated, without a doubt, especially in a time of war as the present the military needs these types of briefings; however, when is our local governments going to begin to acknowledge the local soldiers? Every evening in most major cities, any citizen watch their local news. They will often see all of the violence that the troops of our country are witnessing and having to take part in. On the same evening news, without delay, one will always get to hear about the murders, sexual assaults and similar heinous crimes that have been occurring in their area. It seems that what gets overlooked is the troops that are standing behind the cameras that was their before the camera began to roll and will be their long after the camera goes off. Law enforcement and society in general has to begin to realize the effects of seeing life through the eyes of a law enforcement officer. As previously mentioned, Critical Incident Stress Debriefings were first introduced in the times of World War II. At that point it began in the military and broadened from their. In order to answer the question of Is Critical Incident Stress Debriefing a necessity in today's law enforcement? One must ask themselves two questions. The first question is if this exercise was first created in the times of World War II has violence and crime increased since that time. Obviously, much research is not needed to prove how much more society is a much more violent one so the answer to this question is yes. However, the number question and what should be the only questioned asked is what do the people who have to face

this day in and day out think. Do police officers feel that Critical Incident Stress Debriefings are necessary in today's law enforcement? Some of the data listed previously in this research should have answered that question which yes, police officers want this. Even that small 1% that claims they do not want, probably need it. This research was intended to find whether or not this is a necessity or not. However, the paper also revealed not only is it a necessity, but it would appear that it is not a high priority amongst police departments. In today's society most police departments will do anything to recruit a good police officer. However, what are they trying to do for that veteran officer that has seemed children die, people get shot in front of them, or taking lives themselves. The answer is very little and that needs to change. The inability to deal with stress properly can spread like a disease, it does not stop with just that officer. Everyone in society in one way or another will be affected. When you call and need the police to help you in an emergency do you want your life or your family's life to be on "that" veteran officer's shoulder.

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