

# Critical Incident Stress Debriefing Information Sheet

## Definition: Critical incident

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Critical incident is most often used to describe a potentially psychologically traumatic event experienced by public safety personnel (PSP) that evokes strong emotional reactions. This may occur when a person is overwhelmed by the scope, severity, personal connection to, or degree of exposure to an event. The term is often used interchangeably with potentially psychologically traumatic event (PPTE) / psychologically traumatic stressor (PTS) / traumatic event / traumatic injury.<sup>1</sup>

## Description: Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM)/Debriefing (CISD)

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CISM is a highly structured, professionally recognized intervention protocol implemented immediately after a critical incident as psychological first aid and may include CISD to facilitate the sharing of experiences, emotions, learning, and identification of symptoms requiring further treatment.<sup>2</sup>

## Events that may require CISD can include:

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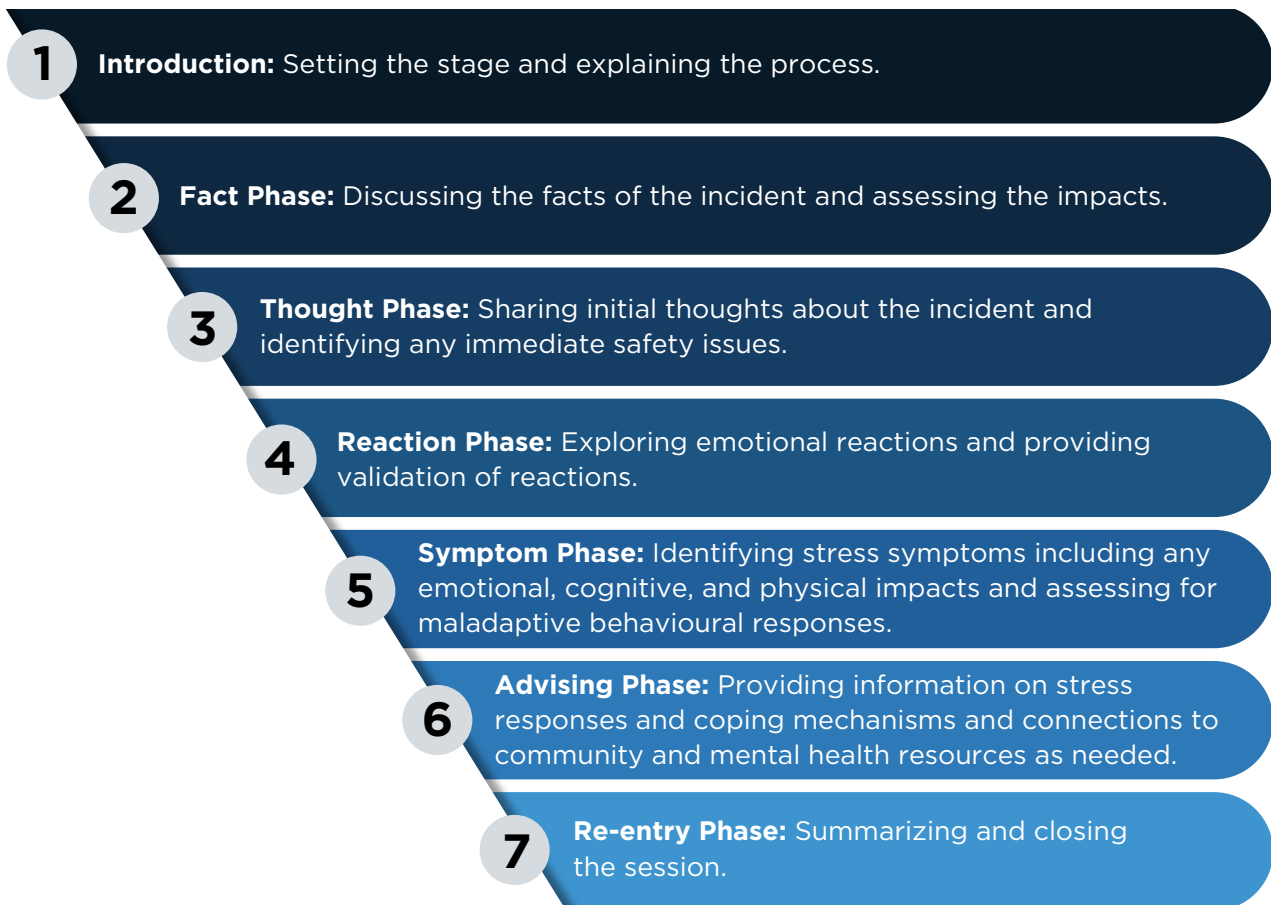
- Line of Duty Deaths
- Serious Line of Duty injuries
- Suicide
- Disasters
- Child mortality
- Significant events where the victims are relatives or friends of personnel
- Events that attract excessive media attention
- Events that seriously threaten the lives of personnel
- Any event that has significant emotional power to overwhelm usual coping mechanisms<sup>3</sup>

**Defusing** – a 3-phase, structured small group discussion provided within hours of a crisis for purposes of assessment, triaging, and acute symptom mitigation.<sup>4</sup> These phases are often active and loosely guided by a peer or mental health professional and followed by an assessment of the need for CISD.<sup>3</sup>

**Debriefing** – a very structured and active 7-phase group discussion of the critical incident, reactions, and coping strategies, guided by a trained leader or mental health professional. Followed by closure, or the assessment of individuals who might need referral for additional support. Common ground rules include voluntary participation, no note taking or recording devices, not used as an operational critique or investigation of events, and not a “blame” session.<sup>3</sup>

## CISD seven-step model <sup>3,5</sup>

### 7-Step Critical Incident Stress Debrief Process



## Summary: Current literature on CISD

- CISD protocols are common in public safety organizations and usually take place within a group setting <sup>6</sup>. Trained facilitators provide support to workers to help process stressful or traumatic events after they occur <sup>7</sup>.
- While there is supportive evidence for the effectiveness of CISD and psychological first aid, there are mixed results for CISD. Some CISD evaluations found positive outcomes <sup>8-10</sup>, while others conclude unsustained, negative or no effects <sup>6,11</sup>.
- Formalized approaches such as CISD and Trauma Risk Management (TRiM) may be more effective due to the focus on stigma reduction and embedded support from management within the program framework <sup>6</sup>.
- For some individuals, participating in CISD immediately following a critical incident has the potential to worsen psychological outcomes by increasing levels of distress and interfering with normal coping responses, as such, impeding the potential for post-traumatic growth <sup>12</sup>.
- The amount of quality outcome intervention studies examining CISD studies is too insufficient to inform decisive recommendations <sup>11,13</sup>.



**Key Recommendations:** Given the mixed data on CISD interventions, public safety organizations should be cautious or refrain from mandating employee participation, continuously evaluate CISM program effects and keep up to date with current research on CISM best practices.

## References

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