



National Interagency Wildland Fire and Aviation Critical Incident Stress Management Program

Agency Administrator's Briefing

Critical Incident Stress Management

Definition of a Critical Incident

Definition of a Critical Incident: *The incident itself does not define a critical incident. It is the individuals and or an organization's reaction to what occurred that defines an event as a critical incident.*

A critical incident is any unexpected, traumatic event that affects an individual's feelings of personal safety, ability to perform daily activities, and their ability to concentrate on their regular job duties.

Critical Incident Stress

Psychological intervention is based on the recognition of need, not strictly the occurrence of an event. It is vital to get advice on what post-incident support would be appropriate as soon as possible. One of the challenges is intervening only where and when needed using the most appropriate intervention for the situation.

The Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) Program is designed for individuals affected by potentially traumatic events that are outside their typical work experience. We need to respond to these in a qualitative way that is different from that in typical work situations.

Psychological Trauma: This is a person's emotional response to a critical incident such as suffering life-threatening danger, injury, or abuse, witnessing the death of others, or losing a colleague in the line of duty.

Experiencing a traumatic incident does not mean someone is impaired or will develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Such experience suggests that the event occurred, is now part of a person's sensory memory, and needs to be processed and integrated.

Individuals experience critical incidents in different ways and vary in their reaction to similar events. What may be traumatic for one may not be for others. It is not possible to make rigid recommendations for all situations and employees.

The slight differences in how a person experiences a particular event, such as how close they were to the victims, or how long they were at the scene, can influence the intensity of their responses.

Even with identical exposure to a traumatic event, responses will differ based on factors like how different individuals cope with stress, the availability of social support, prior traumatic experiences, and the overall

Psychological Intervention

Crisis intervention intends to mitigate the impact of an event, accelerate the recovery process, and assess the need for additional or alternative services. Peer support is the established *Standard of Care* for crisis intervention for most of the wildland fire agencies. Trained and certified by the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation (ICISF), peer supporters deliver crisis intervention services to those impacted by an event. This model includes the use of a licensed Mental Health Professionals (often referred to as "clinicians" and carefully selected peer supporters based on their background, training, and experience.

Peer Support – CISM Standard of Care

Peer relationships are effective because they build upon mutual understanding, respect, and trust, which is the foundation of the CISM program. These commonalities contribute to the credibility necessary for developing relationships in which individuals are willing to open up and discuss their problems despite concerns about stigma. Peer-to-peer programs facilitate opportunities for individuals to talk with trained peer supporters who serve as a "bridge" to connect with Mental Health Professionals (MHP).

Properly trained and clinically supervised Critical Incident Peer Support Groups provide many services that include situational assessment for agency administrators, managers, and others to help determine the appropriate response. A methodical evaluation ensures that tactics are applied at the right time, in the right place, and under the right circumstances. We provide the leadership to organize uncertainty into ultimate order. We offer a licensed Mental Health Professional (Clinician) experienced in trauma and meet our screening and experience criteria.



We provide Peer Supporters who can travel to the fire line, spike camp, and other remote locations.



CIPS Groups

Most Geographic Areas do not maintain "CISM Teams"

Assembled at the time of the request, [Critical Incident Peer Support \(CIPS\) Groups](#) consist of trained and certified CIPS personnel selected to match the backgrounds and experience of those involved in the critical incident. For example, helitack, crews, aviation personnel, engines, dispatchers, smokejumpers, and other disciplines.

Comprehensive Peer Support Programs select only the best and most qualified for each assignment, including trainees. Those selected must be credible, experienced in fire and aviation, trusted, and held in high esteem. They must be sensitive to diversity and multi-cultural components within the agencies.



Placing a Request for Peer Support

CISM intervention generally starts no sooner than 72

hours after an incident up to ten days or longer, depending on the incident. Crisis intervention is not an emergency; however, it is essential to request assistance as soon as possible. Peer Support services are often helpful when provided within a few weeks or longer, depending on the incident. It is vital to allow time for affected individuals to disengage operationally and to reconnect with family or friends. Once this occurs, individuals are typically emotionally ready to benefit from peer support.

Fire Related Incidents and Requests

The Agency Administrator or their designee should contact their designated CISM Coordinator. Although various agencies have specific guidelines, the dispatch/coordination system generally mobilizes CIPS Groups.

The Geographic Area Coordination Center should have contact information for the CISM Coordinators so the requesting unit can discuss the need for CISM intervention and determine the appropriate support.

For detailed information go to:

<https://gacc.nifc.gov/cism/cism/ordering.html>

Non-Fire Related Incidents and Requests

Most CISM programs primarily support individuals and groups who work in the area of fire and aviation but may assist other disciplines as needed.

Most wildland fire agencies have specific protocols for supporting non-fire related incidents along with reimbursable billing agreements.

Many Geographic Areas do not use the dispatch coordination system to mobilize CIPS groups for non-fire incidents. Contact the local dispatch center for direction.

Working With Incident Management Teams...



While most critical incidents occur during initial attack or pre-suppression activities, they also happen when an Incident Management Team (IMT) is assigned. The Incident Commander (IC) is responsible for making the request through the Agency Administrator when support is required.

CISM personnel report directly to the Agency Administrator or designee. It is essential since "incidents within an incident" affect many other groups and not just the IMT and the resources assigned the fire. A separate CIPS group may be required to respond to the home unit of those assigned to the fire and involved in the incident. The CISM Coordinator facilitates ordering additional CIPS personnel based on a strategic assessment of the incident and its impact levels.

Coordination of CISM activities between a CISM Liaison and an IMT member at the Command and General Staff level has proven to be the most appropriate. The CISM Coordinator may assign a Liaison to coordinate directly with the CIPS Leader, the Agency Administrator, and ask the IC to identify someone from Command and General Staff to function as the point of contact. CISM support usually includes sharing of information such as a Crisis Management Briefing. When an IMT is still operationally engaged, crisis intervention processes are limited and carefully evaluated.

Coordination With Investigations

Coordination between CISM personnel, managers, investigative groups, and employees is vital after a critical incident. The timing of various interviews and crisis intervention activities may compete with each other, and it is essential to coordinate dates and times based on need, policy and protocols, and the welfare of those involved.

Investigative interviews for learning analysis questioning should never happen on the same day that CISM intervention occurs. When crisis intervention occurs after the investigative process, individuals and groups receive information about moving forward; anxiety may be relieved or lessened, and overall healing can begin. However, each situation is different.

The CISM Coordinator is available to provide assistance and coordination with the respective investigative authorities and assign a "Liaison" who can provide on-scene coordination and communication between CISM and investigative personnel. CIPS Groups do not work for investigative teams; however, the Liaison may report directly to investigative authority, depending on specific agency policy.

Agency Administrators should meet with the investigation team and CISM personnel independently. These meetings are done separately due to confidentiality expectations, and so roles of investigative groups and CISM stay within their respective boundaries.

Working with Other CISM Resources

Not all CISM programs look the same or have established standards and professional oversight. If an agency chooses to acquire CISM services outside of their formal programs (such as using a local fire department or other resources), careful considerations are required. Not everyone who offers assistance is the best resource or the most qualified to assist individuals and organizations who need help.

It is not uncommon for individuals to "self-dispatch" or self-appoint" themselves as "CISM experts," especially during catastrophic incidents and expansive media coverage. They may check in with employees or managers at the incident and identify themselves as being with "CISM." Just because someone has taken a class or has some crisis intervention experience, does not make them the right resource or ensure they are qualified. These individuals tend to make emotionally charged decisions, operate outside boundaries of competence, or assigned duties.

The CISM Coordinator will provide the requesting unit with a roster of the formally approved and requested CISM personnel. CIPS Groups do not co-mingle or integrate with other CISM personnel operating outside channels.