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Why Do Critical Incident Debriefings?

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A critical incident is any situation faced by emergency service personnel that causes them to experience a variety of reactions, such as, excessive fatigue, sleep disturbances, anxiety, irritability, moodiness, powerlessness, guilt, distress, depression, anger, nightmares, difficulties concentrating and muscle tremors. Peer supporters know that regardless of the type of incident, these strong emotions need to be debriefed in a safe environment. Most of you reading this believe in the debriefing process because you have experienced it first hand as a participant or as a co-facilitator. So do you ever wonder why they work? The following information hopefully will explain the reasons behind providing them to impacted emergency personnel.

There are four commonly cited reasons for why this particular intervention works. The first one has to do with promptness. It is important to apply them early. This prevents the participants from feeling isolated and it helps prevent withdrawal that is maladaptive. The second is it provides a safe environment for emotional catharsis. When the participants are given the opportunity to share their emotions, it takes those emotions from the internal to the external, which provides relief. This usually feels better than stuffing those emotions. The third has to do with cognitive factors. They begin to put the pieces of the puzzle together and begin to make sense out of what happened. Trying to figure out what happened, without any resolve, causes distress in our psyche. The fourth is the one I like the most. It provides peer support and group acceptance. This can also be seen as a social ritual. This ritual, which provides the greatest of peer support, not just from the designated peer support team members co-facilitating with the mental health professional, but also from those who experienced the critical incident. Rituals are healing (as debriefings are) because they provide the participants with a sense of closure about the event. This debriefing support group is now culturally sanctioned within the emergency service professions, which validates the need to provide them. It is a form of peer support derived from crisis theory. It is assumed that those in the debriefing were free of psychological disturbances (I sure hope so) before the critical incident and that their symptoms are temporary. Debriefings are directed towards alleviation of present symptoms, prevention of future symptoms and restoration of an earlier level of functioning. They are beneficial and show those involved that there are managers, supervisors, co-workers, peer supporters, chaplains and mental health professionals that care about them.