Debriefings for Supervisors

▪ BY SARA HIBBS, PSY.D.
▪ THE COUNSELING TEAM INTERNATIONAL (TCTI)

When contacted to conduct a critical incident stress debriefing, mental health professionals (MHP's) are faced with several various issues, one of which is to determine who should take part in the debriefing. While this is often determined by the personnel involved and the scale of the incident, it is important to not overlook those at the top of the food chain: the command staff.

Command staff is often an integral part of critical incidents, whether it is as decision makers, organizers, or delegators. Attention is often directed at the first responders, dispatchers, and forensic personnel involved. Debriefings are organized to allow a safe place to ventilate feelings, normalize experiences, and address the impact a trauma may have on the law enforcement community. Most of the time, MHP's will hesitate to include commanders in a debriefing with line staff due to the power differential. If participants perceive that they may be judged or evaluated they will shut down which hinders the debriefing process, thus commanders are excluded.

However, commanders are not immune to the effects of trauma or critical incidents. If anything, they may be more susceptible given their level of responsibility. Second-guessing is common for all in law enforcement and it would seem the degree of second-guessing increases as the duties and responsibility increases. Many commanders find themselves quarterbacking decisions and mulling over whether their choices created more distress or exacerbated an already intense situation for their troops.

In addition, commanders are sidelined from the action when involved in an incident. One of the most salient features of trauma >>

is the feeling of helplessness, one that most commanders have experienced during their career. Commanders may experience significant reactions during an incident because they are not distracted with situational tasks but are instead in an observer position. Commanders are stuck observing events unfold and unable to take action given their duties and responsibilities.

Commanders, unlike line staff, often do not have the opportunity to vent to their peers. In order to keep morale and confidence high, commanders often minimize their feelings and doubts to make dealing with everything more tolerable. Though they may be quick to encourage their own staff to utilize resources around them, commanders may hesitate to take advantage for themselves, fearing that they will be perceived as weak or incompetent.

The importance of including command staff was made apparent after a recent critical incident. Commanders initiated contact with MHP's to schedule debriefings for first responders and their spouses after the suicide of an adolescent female. Organizing debriefings for line staff and spouses were a no-brainer. However, then came the delicate matter of addressing the reactions of commanders present during the incident. This took several commanders by surprise as they had not considered themselves affected by the incident. The commanders were debriefed individually which gave them an opportunity to gauge the effect the incident had had on them in a safe place.

While the purpose for MHP's is to provide a safe and structured environment for a critical incident to be debriefed, it is imperative to adopt an inclusive approach when formulating a game plan. Exclusion of command staff reinforces the stereotype that commanders are immune to the effects of trauma and stress. Individual debriefings or group debriefings of commanders helps normalize the process and reactions for line staff, as well as provide commanders the opportunity to process their own reactions.

California State Sheriffs' Association 2011 Calendar

Month	Date	Event	Location
August	17-18	Court Security Committee Roundtable	San Luis Obispo County
	13-16	Administrative Assistants Seminar	San Diego County
September	13-16	Financial Managers Forum	San Diego County
	26-29	Correctional Facilities Seminar	Sacramento County
October	18-21	Civil Procedures Seminar	Orange County
	1-4	2nds in Command Workshop	San Diego County
November	14-18	Basic Civil School	Sacramento County
	16-17	Court Security Roundtable	San Luis Obispo County

PLEASE NOTE: Calendar items listed above are not open to thwe general public and trainings are for Law Enforcement Personnel Only. For registration forms go to the "Trainings" tab of our website: www.calsheriffs.org. **Dates are subject to change.**