

Chapter 38

Best Practice in Responding to Critical Incidents and Potentially Traumatic Experience Within an Organisational Setting

Carole Adamson
University of Auckland, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses best practice for organisational support after critical incidents and traumatic events within social work. Critical incidents are situations and incidents within workplace settings or roles, which, whilst able to be anticipated and planned for, have the potential to create a sense of emergency, crisis, and extreme stress, or have a traumatic impact on those directly or indirectly affected. Alongside the notion of critical incidents are concepts of debriefing, psychological debriefing, critical incident stress debriefing (CISD), and critical incident stress management (CISM). Debate about debriefing models has concerned their effectiveness and safety; the terms being loaded with meaning and tensions between scientific and holistic paradigms and between academic and practitioner perspectives. The chapter suggests areas of research and exploration for agency managers and senior practitioners wishing to make sense of the debates and enables the reader to consider best practice for critical incident response within organisational settings.

INTRODUCTION

Planning for Critical Incidents Within an Organisational Setting

Social work is a professional activity long recognised for its complex and at times stressful engagement with challenging human problems. A growing awareness of the impact of stress, trauma, and critical incidents has seen a concomitant rise in organisational attention to staff support, with burgeoning research and practice activity in fields such as supervision, resilience, and response to critical incidents

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(Adamson, Beddoe, & Davys, 2012; Pack, 2013; Storey & Billingham, 2001; Wendt, Tuckey, & Prosser, 2011). For this chapter, a broad working definition of a critical incident is an event or situation within workplace settings or roles which have the potential to create a sense of emergency, crisis, and extreme stress, or have a traumatic impact on those directly or indirectly affected. Attention to the impact of critical incidents within the workplace, such as violence against social workers (Koritsas, Coles, & Boyle, 2010) and the risks of secondary or vicarious trauma (Bride, 2007; Cox & Steiner, 2013), has led to the embedding of workplace strategies aimed at mitigating the effects of sudden, potentially traumatic events. Evaluations of these strategies has resulted in debate over the most effective means of protecting social workers from critical incident stress and vicarious traumatisation. The focus of this chapter is a search for best practice evidence regarding the most effective means of establishing a robust system of critical incident support within an agency, of planning for the unpredictable, and of sustaining social workers in their desire to remain committed professionals with job satisfaction and healthy engagement with service-user communities.

ESTABLISHING A SYSTEM OF CRITICAL INCIDENT SUPPORT

The outline of the chapter is as follows: using the case example of Jo, a manager of a community social work agency, objectives are established for a literature search of current research knowledge regarding the provision of critical incident support. A search strategy is outlined and principles from current research extracted, with attention paid to the strands of the debate about critical incident stress debriefing (CISD) playing a role in highlighting the key factors for the design and embedding of critical incident response within a social work setting. The chapter now introduces Jo.

Case Study

Jo is an experienced social worker with ten years' child protection practice in a large, statutory organisation. Having commenced her career in front-line risk assessment and intervention, she has progressed to being a practice supervisor for both practitioners and social work practicum students, and for the last three years she has been team leader in a multi-cultural, suburban, and semi-rural area on the fringes of a large city. She has recently been appointed as the manager of a small, non-government organisation (NGO) family support service in the same locality. Within the statutory setting, Jo encountered service-user histories of severe abuse and neglect, families struggling to stay together in the face of extreme poverty and housing crises, the threat of violence to herself and her colleagues, and the impact of sudden death by suicide of teenage clients and on one occasion, a much-loved colleague.

Jo's experience and awareness of the potential for workplace crises, which she broadly defines as "critical incidents", and the potential for trauma exposure when working with families in distress and transition are now a challenge for her in her new role. Team members in this NGO setting have a wide range of education and training backgrounds, largely from social work but also from nursing, and some have achieved their positions as a result of cultural expertise not determined by formal educational achievement. Mindful that the service-users of a family support service are families with vast experience of disruption, struggle, and crisis, Jo is now asking key questions of herself as manager and of the

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