

# WHEN WE'RE IN TROUBLE, WE CALL 9-1-1. WHO DOES 9-1-1 CALL?

By **Jeff Sych, M.Sc., R.Psych**

**Fire services have been surveyed** about supports and programs in place that focus on reducing psychological injury and building resiliency against the harmful effects of stress. The results consistently find that leaders and departments report having a peer support or Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) program. When these programs are further evaluated, most do not meet the standards of peer support or CISM. This article provides an overview of “what” an effective peer support and CISM program is and “how” such a program works. This information is for leaders to evaluate the current state of their department’s program and provide access points to resources and materials for creating, improving, or sustaining a program that addresses psychological stress injuries.

To address one of the most common misconceptions: CISM is a form of peer support, thus they are synonymous. CISM is a model of peer support specifically designed to meet the unique needs of public safety personnel. CISM has a 30-year history with over 500,000 peers trained. CISM is used globally and has a shared history with established and proven crisis and stress reduction strategies that come from the areas of military psychiatry, community mental health, and suicide interventions. Of all the models of peer support for public safety personnel, CISM has the longest history and has been one of the most scrutinized programs.

CISM is based on the principles of resistance, resilience, and recovery. Resistance is building psychological immunity against the harmful effects of stress “the proactive component”, resiliency is facilitating the process of rebounding from a state of distress back to one’s regular level of functioning after a crisis “the reactive

component”, and recovery involves having resources in place for direct referrals to the most appropriate next level of care.

In terms of the use of peers to deliver such programs, there is a strong body of research and community of practice that demonstrates the power and effectiveness of the peer-to-peer relationship, including within fire services. The CISM model of peer support meets the current standard’s and best practice for peer support programs set out by experts and Mental Health Commission of Canada: this includes as proper training, maintenance of skills, clinical oversight, and ongoing program evaluation.

What CISM consists of is six “Core Components”; 1) resiliency, 2) assessment, 3) strategic planning, 4) psychological first aid and individual support, 5) information groups, and 6) interactive groups. CISM is a program that is effective when all six core components are utilized as a comprehensive program of support. The criticisms, expressed by those receiving altered forms of peer support, ones that do not deliver all six core components, are open to allegations of doing harm and having poor outcomes for their members. CISM is not just conducting a defusing or debriefing; these interventions are a subset of CISM interactive-group interventions.

The inappropriate application of CISM interventions, including defusings and debriefings are found to commonly be occurring in public safety organizations. No CISM interventions should be automatic nor is participation mandatory. A defusing or debriefing is used only when a crew that has; a) an existing relationships between each other, b) a shared history, c) spent considerable time together prior to the incident, and d) have experienced the same exposure to a traumatic event. There must be

evidence that the group has been impacted in such a degree that has caused a disruption and breakdown in group cohesion and team performance.

The focus of the defusing and debriefing is to restore the group's ability to function together, such as being dispatched to another call. The focus of the defusing and debriefing is to reconnect the group to the group's natural coping strategies in order to restore performance and group cohesion. A key factor in considering a defusing is that it has a window of effectiveness of eight hours after the impact of the call. The timing of the defusing though has more to do with the group's psychological readiness than the passage of time.

The most commonly used CISM strategies is that of assessment. CISM peers are trained to assess the impact on individuals and groups through using "the 5-T's." Based on this assessment, including themes emerging, a plan of CISM interventions is developed. This plan is specific to who needs what, and when those impacted are most likely to benefit from the specific CISM peer interventions. Reactive CISM peer support programs, those that primarily exist to responding after an incident, are least effective and can be harmful. Programs that systematically and repeatedly perform defusing and debriefings without the proper assessment risk doing harm by disrupting the emergence of the natural coping strategies in those impacted. A CISM debriefing, it is never conducted sooner than 24 hours after the impact, and most commonly it is done 72 hours or more post-impact.

The resiliency component is a vital component to any effective CISM Peer Support Program. This component is delivered in a pre-incident education program of approximately 20 power-point slides that can be reviewed in 20 minutes at an interval of every three months. Fire Services have been purchasing standalone resiliency programs separate from CISM peer support unaware that an evidence-based resiliency program, developed by The John Hopkin's University, is an integral component of the training and best practices of CISM peer support. In department survey's this is the second most commonly missed CISM component, resiliency training, after that of assessment.

With this article's thumbnail sketch of the key components of CISM peer support complete, lets shift to how a department develops and delivers such a program.

One of the make or break aspects of having a CISM peer support team is that it must be made up of peers who are trusted, respected and seen as a natural go to when someone is in need of support. One of the most effective ways of accomplishing this is through a departmental nomination process. Self-identifying is the second most common approach to finding peers. In either case having an established transparent application, interview and training process is vital for the credibility and success of any team. Selecting and working with an instructor who is approved by a recognized organization, such as the ICISF or ACIAC, with significant experience in the area of mental health and keen understanding of the work firefighters do is vital. Finally, ensuring that the international standards of training are met, including completing training in certificate courses called "Assisting Individuals in Crisis" first, followed by "Group Crisis Intervention." These two courses then qualify individuals to have met the international standards as a "CISM Basic Trained Peer."

In the assessment of current practices there is great disparity in training, with a significant number of peers trained in only "Group Crisis Intervention." This does not meet the community standards as adequate training and opens individuals and organizations to issues of liability and risk of not being effective. Other instructors might leave out other vital aspects of the six core components, such as the assessment phase, believing that the leaders are able to alert peers to the members needs based on the nature of the call.

Ensuring CISM trained peers sign a contract to operate adhering to best practice and guidelines is essential. Confidentiality agreements, a plan to ensure that peers utilize their skills, and have oversight and accountability is a vital component to ensuring CISM peer support is keeping to the principles of best practice. Another key aspect is understanding that CISM peers do not operate independently or self-deploy but are part of a team with the resources to provide ongoing training, supervision and

have a mechanism of holding peers to their contracts.

As with any program, leaders of fire services are keen on having effective programs to meet the needs of their members. One key piece of research emerging in this field is the demonstrated effectiveness of having a CISM Peer Support Program that is peer led, peer driven and peer managed. Accountability to the organization is important and must be part of the guidelines however, the effectiveness of a “leader driven” CISM Peer Support Program versus a “peer driven” CISM Peer Support Program shows that the “leader driven” program’s impact and effectiveness in addressing psychological resistance, resiliency and recovery from stress is significantly reduced. This multi-year study compared the Los Angeles fire service with the Chicago fire service with the difference being that one ascribed to a “leader driven” model while the other services delivered a “peer led” model of CISM peer support.

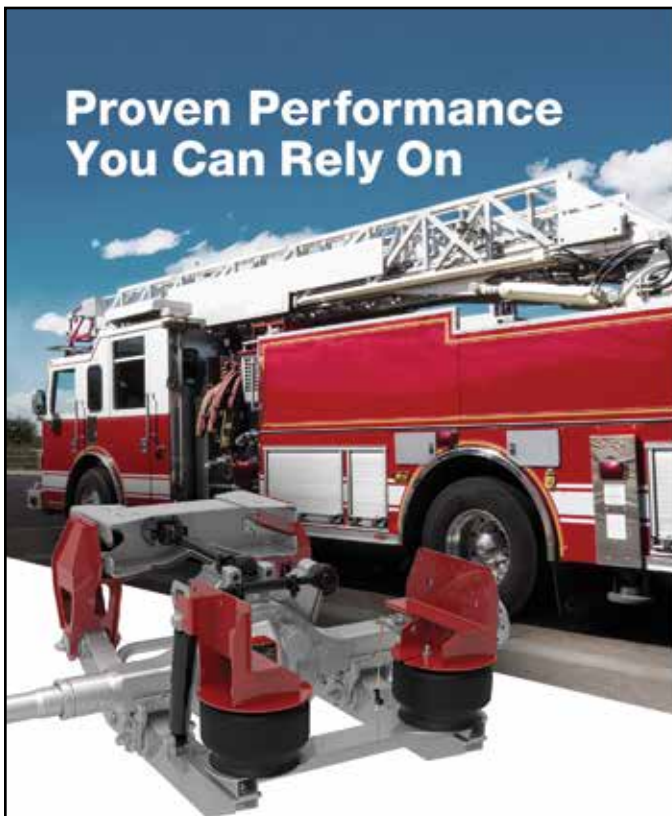
In Alberta the task of setting the standards, providing the

guidelines, templates, forms and best practice standards are available to all departments for free.

The Alberta Critical Incident Advisory Council (ACIAC) and its panel of public safety organizational leaders and front line experts developed a manual that is downloadable from their website [www.abcism.ca](http://www.abcism.ca)

This not-for-profit society has established the Alberta Critical Incident Provincial Network (ACIPN). This network of 400 trained fire service peers in Alberta are available 24/7 365 days a year to respond to individuals, crews or departments in need of peer support in real-time by calling the confidential toll-free number **1.833.894.2476**.

There is no membership fee or cost for services. The ACIPN number is answered by 911 dispatchers who have been trained to assess the call and activate the most appropriate peer.



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