Although first introduced more than 15 years ago, Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) has not been frequently utilized within the correctional community. As a structured protocol designed to prevent or mitigate traumatic stress, CISD has two main goals: (1) to lessen the impact of distressing critical incidents on the personnel exposed to them; (2) to accelerate recovery from those events before harmful stress reactions have a chance to damage the performance, careers, health, and families of personnel responding to emergencies.

The need for debriefing remains acute. Whenever I conduct a jail-suicide prevention training seminar and explain the importance of the CISD process, correctional officers invariably approach me at the end of the workshop and begin to explain their experience with an inmate's suicide. Their voices are always characterized by frustration. This is one officer’s story.

This is probably the most difficult article I will write. It is for me a very emotional subject. I work in a jail. My time spent here consists of 48 or more hours a week. I treat this place as a second home. For four days in a row I live and eat with the people I work with and the people that are housed in this jail. During the four days away from here, my life is with my family. So I guess in a way I have two separate lives, both equally fulfilling. I get a great feeling of satisfaction when I can talk to my 15-year-old and she says, “Thanks.” I also get a great feeling of satisfaction when I am at work and inmates personally ask for me because they want to talk or want information on different ways to make their lives better when they get out. Most times, I need only to listen, allowing them to figure out what they want to do.

I was fairly new at this job when I met an inmate I will call “Tee.” I had been working nights for about a month when Tee came up to the bars in his cell and asked if he could talk to me in private. He was quiet that night, and because of the way he hugged the bars and spoke so desperately, I tried to finish quickly what I was doing and get back to his cell. I took him to the library, which would give us the privacy he seemed to need. He sat down in one of the chairs and I turned down the television to lessen the distraction. I sat in the chair next to him and said, “What’s up?” He immediately started crying, hard. He wanted to talk and began to choke out that a visit that morning with his wife had hurt him. She told him that his best friend had moved into the house and she wanted a divorce. He cried and cried. I eventually got him to talk about something more positive. He talked about what his plans were when he got out of jail. He even laughed at times and remembered the good times he had had with his little boys. Then he would cry again wishing he could see them. Before he went back to his cell he had some fruit and made a phone call. But the call only upset him and he cried again. I wished I could have done more but what could I do? Give him encouragement? Tell him everything would be okay? I did. When he stopped crying and seemed to have settled down, I put him back in his cell.

I found Tee dead in his cell at 5:00 am. He was hanging from the bars with a sheet tied tightly around his neck. He was wearing only his underpants. He was white and blue and purple and red. His eyes were open. His mouth was closed. His feet were touching the ground. He was holding onto the bars. WHY DIDN’T HE JUST STAND UP?

When I looked at my partner I felt like I would explode. I felt like I had killed this man. My partner’s eyes were so big, everything went in slow motion. “What, please tell me.” Tell me what? Tell me, tell me. My mind was racing, my heart was...
beating hard. We touched him. He was looking at us. Oh, God.
After that first shock had passed, things started happening.
Notifications, documentation. It seemed like people were coming
everywhere. I probably held together for about 30 minutes. Then
I lost it. I cried and cried. All I could think about was what exactly I had
done that night. Why did I miss it? I killed this man. It was all my fault. I ru
ined not only my life and career, but also the lives of my co-workers.
I was taken home and left in the care of a friend. My head was pounding.
I had to tell my story over and over. Every time I got to the part of seeing Tee hanging there, I cried. Every
dream I had was of finding him and trying to save him, but he always
died.
I cried for days. I had nightmares for weeks. And forever will I have the memories.
I have learned a lot. The hard way. I am back to work now, still learning, and along the way I am trying to pass on what I have learned. If there were only a way to sensitize people to the importance of “knowing” when somebody needs help. But just try to imagine as you walk through your jail how and where a suicide could take place. Take the time to picture in your mind every possible area
where you might find somebody. How would you get to them? What would you do first? What are the dangers? Where is your backup? Run through every scenario you can possibly imagine. This is not just a tedious task. It is your job. It is your life. Think about it.
So now that I have written my thoughts down, how do I really feel? The anger, the hurt, the guilt, the shame—every emotion all piled on top of one another. The feeling of not being able to face anybody. Re-living it now and then because it just does not go away. The look on everybody’s face when it first happened. The dreams of trying over and over to save him and he always dies. The alienation when the shift was broken apart. Trying to say “I’m sorry.”
Looking at that cell. The depression, not sleeping, my friends and family not knowing what to say or how to act. Knowing that this will never go away. Having to answer so many questions, wishing they could understand. I killed him, it was all my fault. Everybody said don’t blame yourself. Even though you know that is true you can’t help but feel responsible. I didn’t want anybody to feel sorry for me.
I twice talked with our jail psychologist briefly. Nobody else would talk about it around me. Or talk to me, almost as if it were taboo.
For more information on critical incident stress debriefing, contact the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, 4785 Dorsey Hall Drive, Suite 102, Ellicott City, Maryland 21042 (tel. 410 730-4311, fax 410 730-4313).
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