

**PEER SUPPORT AND**  
**CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS MANAGEMENT**

**CHAPTER 18.2**

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**Approved By: Chief of Fire Rescue**

**PURPOSE**

Besides physical stresses on firefighters, there are also mental and emotional stresses that affect firefighter's health and performance. Peer Support and Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) are available to assist fire rescue employees who are suffering from, or are subject to suffer from, this type of stress. Peer Support or CISM will be used when needed to provide support for those employees in need. Fire department officers are trained to recognize the signs, symptoms and risk factors in order to help with early detection and prevention.

**DEFINITION**

A Critical Incident is an event outside the range of usual human experience, (whether related to a call or of a personal nature), which has the potential to easily overcome a person's normal ability to cope with the stress. It may produce a negative psychological response in a person who was involved in or witnessed such an incident.

**RESPONSIBILITY**

ACFR recognizes the importance of Peer Support and CISM, and will offer the services as outlined below.

1. It is the responsibility of the Incident Commander and/or a Chief Officer to ensure that these guidelines are followed.
2. Peer Support will provide an organized approach to the management of stress responses for employees who were exposed to, or are showing signs of traumatic stress experienced in the line of duty, or of a personal nature that is not related to a specific work related incident.
3. ACFR personnel shall be alert to recognize and promptly report any incident or changes in behavior which may affect personnel.
4. Company Officers shall be responsible for immediately reporting any event, situation, or behavior which may require Peer Support or Critical Incident Management to a Chief Officer or the Peer Support Coordinator.

**PROCEDURES**

Peer support shall be initiated, after contact with the Peer Support Coordinator, when a specific incident is identified as a critical stress related incident. Such incidents may include, but are not limited to the following:

1. Serious injury or death of emergency workers in the line of duty
2. Mass casualty incidents
3. Suicide or death of a coworker
4. Death of a child or violence to a child
5. Loss of life of a patient following extraordinary and prolonged expenditure of physical and emotional energy during rescue efforts
6. Incidents that attract extremely unusual and critical news media coverage
7. Any incidents that is charged with profound emotions
8. Any incident in which the circumstances were so unusual or the sights and Sounds were so distressing as to produce a high level of immediate or delayed emotional reaction.
9. Death or serious injury of a civilian resulting from emergency service operations.
10. Traumatic Arrest

When an incident occurs, the Incident Commander or Company Officer will notify the Department Chaplain and on duty District Chief(s) of the incident. The Incident Commander of Company Officer should remove the unit from service and advise the crew to return to station to await the arrival of the Department Chaplain or the designated Peer support member. No Peer support/CISM should be done by the Incident Commander/District Chief. In extreme situations, the Department Chaplain or Peer Support member may remove a unit from service, if deemed necessary, without prior District Chief notification. If this is done the on-duty District Chief(s) will be notified as soon as possible by the Department Chaplain.

## **TYPES OF STRESS MANAGEMENT**

On scene or near scene debriefing

- a. On site evaluation and the counseling by another member. Watch for acute reactions, provide support, and consultation, and be available to help resting personnel deal with stress reactions.
- b. Initial defusing shall be conducted shortly after the incident. Purpose is primarily informational. If needed, a more intense Peer support meeting shall be organized by the Incident Commander/District Chief, Department Chaplain, or Peer Support member.

Formal Peer Support meeting or CISM

- a. Conducted within 24 to 48 hours of the incident.
- b. Confidential non-evaluative discussion of involvement. Discussion of possible stress related symptoms.

Follow-up debriefing

- a. Conducted weeks or months after the incident.
- b. Concerned with delaying or prolonged stress symptoms.

#### Individual consults

- a. One on one counseling for any concerns related to the incident. May require a referral to a mental health professional if deemed necessary by the Peer Support Coordinator.

### **DEBRIEFING PROCESS**

1. Emergency service personnel are responsible for identifying and recognizing significant incidents that may require debriefing. When an occurrence is identified as a “critical incident”, a request for debriefing will be made as soon as possible.
2. Peer Support Meetings are optimally conducted within 24-72hours of the incident, and should not generally extend beyond one week. A 24 hour normalizing period following the incident is recommended. If large numbers of individuals are involved, debriefing begins with those most involved with the incident.
3. **Process considerations**
  - a. A location should be selected for the debriefing that is free of distractions and represents a neutral environment, i.e. school, church or other meeting facility as opposed to a fire station.
  - b. All members present at the incident will be required to attend the debriefing to act as peer support for other members.

The meeting will be limited to those personnel involved in the actual incident (including dispatchers, police officers, ambulance personnel, and hospital personnel), the peer counselors, and a mental health professional. No media will be allowed.

All items relating to the activities of the debriefing will be kept strictly confidential.

Personnel may also use the Employee Assistance Program, the Crisis Center, or have a one on one with a Peer Support member. All Personnel will be given information on how to access this resource during the meeting.

### **Contact Numbers**

Alachua County Employee Assistance Program	352-265-5493
Alachua County Crisis Management	352-264-6789
Fire/EMS Helpline	1-888-731-FIRE (3473)
Safe Call Now	1-206-459-3020

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

1-800-273-8255