

Response To The ABC Report On Debriefing, January 2011

By Carla Fotev

A report on behalf of the ABC on 17th January 2011 ([hyperlink http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2011/01/17/3114119.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2011/01/17/3114119.htm)) by Natasha Mitchell indicated that debriefing was still in question. The claim that the WHO may agree, as the article suggests, is questionable and without reference. In contrast the United Nations has endorsed CISM processes. Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) being that which incorporates a whole range of interventions including the notion of early defusing and psychological debriefing for operational staff. Previously the United Nations undertook to conduct a world-wide review of crisis intervention programs, due to the increasing emotional toll and increasing potential for illness and death among their staff. The research concluded that there were three crisis intervention systems that represented best practice world-wide. These were to be incorporated as a composite into their staff support program. The three included the French Research Institute for Education and Research on Traumatic Stress based in Paris (headed by Dr Louis Crocq), International Critical Incident Stress Foundation based in Maryland (co-founded by Mitchell), and the American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress based on Long Island (headed at the time by Dr Mark Lerner). The United Nations staff support program is termed the Critical Incident Stress Management Unit (CISMU), which incorporates all three systems.

In Ms Mitchell's report she suggests that 'rehashing the horror so soon after a crisis might do more harm than good.' This is the part of the article that can be agreed with as it has always been the case that timing is everything. There is nothing in the research to suggest that when people are still in crisis that immediate debriefing is appropriate, and most professionals would concur with this position. However simple psychological defusing such as asking people how they are, assisting them to make sense of their recall of events and impact, motivating personal self control of their current circumstance, and providing psycho-educational support in terms of care strategies has been found to be useful. Debriefing is typically indicated once the crisis is over and when normal defence mechanisms have broken down, post crisis. Richard James in his accounts of Hurricane Katrina stated it took some three weeks before any psychological intervention was appropriate. (Crisis Intervention Strategies, 6th Edition, 2008)

However, Ms Mitchell's claim that the 'technique' didn't have 'benefit in the long term, and didn't prevent PTSD' is absolutely flawed. The issue is not about the efficacy of debriefing, it is more about what intervention is appropriate in terms of timing and also best practice. Most people working in the area of crisis intervention would be hard pressed to indicate psychological debriefing as an appropriate intervention given the circumstances, and likely continuing situation with a second and large cyclone looming, as was the case in Queensland. In addition the purpose of debriefing as prevention to PTSD was never the aim of such. Any traumatic event may result in a range of possible manifestations, or none at all in some instances.

Richard Bryant's comments were essentially correct, in ensuring 'people have communications to family and friends, making sure they have food and shelter, assistance in mopping up' reflecting that physical needs are always the foremost priority prior to any psychological assistance other than psychological first aid. As reported by Mitchell, a 2007 study suggested that a 'sense of safety, calming, a sense of self- and community efficacy, connectedness, and hope' would all appear appropriate under the circumstances in terms of mitigating risk and having sound basis for assisting people to recover. In addition it can be added from past experience of ESN, having dealt with many critical incidents, that the following are useful:

- Try to get as much sleep as possible – this enables you to deal more effectively with the daily reality, people in your lives and also process what has happened.
- Look for credible information about what is happening rather than relying on what rumour or other people may think – this helps you to deal with things as they arise more effectively, rather than just going into a tail spin of what if's and if only's.
- Look at what is currently in your control and what you can reasonably predict – this gives you a sense of self determination and also how you can deal with situations.
- Engage the supports around you – it's not enough to just think you have support, you actively need to engage these people, talk about how hard it is, not just put on a brave face, share and have them share with you.
- Think positively – rather than focus on what you have lost, think forward with what you will do. How you will do it, and how well it is going to work out. Maybe the future might be a little brighter.
- Be kind and tolerant – other people are going to say, do and act in ways that you might not agree with. Think about the fact they are different from you and therefore may act in different ways to express their feelings. Try to understand that they are feeling in a certain way and be patient with their expressions of feeling.
- Healthy living – all too easy to resort to escaping the situation and your feelings. Coping is promoted when you exercise self care.

At the time of crisis it is important that we keep a balanced view of things. Rather than enter into the debate, let us instead keep our focus on what actually might help people experiencing such devastation and disaster.

For more details on the Debate and UN endorsement:
<http://www.emergencysupport.com.au/criticalincidentresponse>