

When Emergency Personnel Have Losses Too

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One of the most challenging situations for a crisis intervention team is to provide support services to emergency personnel who have sustained personal losses in a critical incident or a disaster. Some may have lost their homes or other property. Others from the same neighborhoods, stations or precincts may not have such losses or the damage to their homes could be more, or less, than others in their unit. The provision of support services is more seriously complicated if the losses include deaths or serious injuries to family members and friends of emergency personnel.

People may experience a feeling of “survivor guilt” (I feel bad because I did not have a loss or my losses are minor in comparison to what my colleagues experienced). “Survivor resentment” is another possible feeling (It is not fair that my losses were so great and those of my colleagues were not as bad). Losses within the ranks of an emergency services organization are rarely equally distributed throughout the unit.

Crisis teams struggle with important and sometimes complicated decisions when they are called upon to support emergency personnel who have encountered varying degrees of personal loss. The guidelines expressed in this article may be helpful in sorting out the issues and in making decisions to provide support services to operations personnel. Many individual and group-related factors influence each other. In fact, one guideline may appear, on occasion, to be in competition with another. That means that a crisis intervention team needs to carefully weigh the pros and cons of each factor and determine which course of action will be the best for the person or group involved. Decision-making in these circumstances is more challenging and needs to be addressed on a case-by-case basis. No single guideline will work equally well in all situations. Instead, make strategic plans that match both the needs of the individuals and the group to which they belong.

Guiding principle one: *“The more serious the loss, the greater is the need to be handled as an individual. Deaths and serious injuries to loved ones and close friends usually produce more intense emotions than losses of homes or property. Emotionally intense experiences may be difficult for some individuals to discuss before their fellow group members.”*

Guiding principle two: *“The more personally threatening a situation is to an individual (for example, a near death experience), the more likely it is that the person will prefer to be managed as an individual rather than in a group. There can be exceptions to this guideline as well.”*

Guiding principle three: *“Personally embarrassing events (significant mistakes occurred) are typically handled better on an individual basis.”*

Guiding principle four: *“Events that others in the group might interpret as weakness (running away from danger, ‘freezing up’ in the face of danger, or expressing excessive emotions during an event) are best handled on a one-to-one basis.”*

Guiding principle five: *“The more the individual sees his or her unit members as ‘family’, the greater is the potential that he or she will want the entire operational unit present even if the circumstances represent a deeply personal loss.”*

Guiding principle six: *“The more cohesive and closely bonded a group is, the more the group can listen to and accept the emotional distress of a colleague.”*

Guiding principle seven: *“The more close-knit and stable a group is, the better able the group members are to render support to less fortunate group members during small-group crisis support sessions like defusing and CISD.”*

Guiding principle eight: *“When crisis intervention team members are unsure which direction to go with their interventions, they would be best to ask the individuals and the group members for some suggestions before applying any crisis intervention tactics.”*

Guiding principle nine: *“When in doubt, start off with the individual who has sustained the loss. Provide one-on-one crisis intervention support (perhaps using Dr. George Everly’s SAFER-R model for individual crisis intervention). If it then appears that a group support would be helpful, it can be added into the overall support package.”*

Guiding principle ten: *“All guiding principles can have exceptions. No one should read these guidelines as hard and fast rules that cannot be broken. It is better to fully assess a situation, determine the best course of action and follow that course until alterations are necessary.”*

The following list presents the most important factors to consider in deciding to see traumatized unit members separately or with their homogeneous group. Crisis team members have to assess the circumstances carefully and then they must utilize the factors below in making a strategic plan that leads to the best possible outcomes for all who are involved in a traumatic event in which some or all of the group members have experienced a personal loss.

- Nature of the event
- History of the event
- Success or failure of the mission
- Duration of exposure
- Intensity of experience
- How one became aware of a personal loss
- Specific experiences that occurred during the event
- The length of time a person worked with knowledge of a personal loss
- Reminders of one’s personal loss while doing one’s job
- Nature of the loss

- Nature of the group
- Group cohesiveness
- Individual needs and desires
- Group needs and desires
- History of group supporting its members in the past
- Internal group leadership
- Group member dependence on one another
- Training level of the crisis team
- Skill of the crisis interveners
- Leadership of the crisis team members
- Motivation of the group
- Attitude of the group's management
- Timing of the intervention
- Rapport the team establishes with the group requesting support
- Assuring that participation within a group is voluntary and never pressured
- Respect by the crisis team toward the group members that allows people to be silent or to share minimally in a group
- The types of interventions chosen
- The themes associated with the personal loss (it could have been me; I was functioning on my own without my usual team; children were involved, etc.)
- The resources available to support the individual and the group.

This article outlines ten important interconnected general principles and many specific factors that must be considered when crisis teams are trying to determine whether individuals affected by traumatic losses should be assisted individually or as members of their unit. The combination of these principles and factors in a strategic planning approach will go far to provide the most sensible support services to emergency personnel who are coping with personal loss.