

# **Managing Stress in Disaster – Critical Incident Stress Management Techniques**

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Disaster results in various kinds of stress. The individuals in stress tend to develop some physiological and emotional problems. Therefore, it is important to study stress and to know how we can cope with it or how one can manage stress. Stress Management is one of the important fields of study in the arena of disaster management. Stress can be experienced in various forms and it has to be handled with care, thoughtfulness and patience.

Microsoft Encyclopaedia (2002) includes a Catastrophe as a source of Stress and it defines a catastrophe or disaster as 'including natural disasters—such as earthquakes, tornadoes, fires, floods, and hurricanes—as well as wars, torture, automobile accidents, violent physical attacks, and sexual assaults'. Catastrophes often continue to affect their victims' mental health long after the event has ended. For example, in 1972 a dam burst and flooded the West Virginia mining town of Buffalo Creek, destroying the town. Two years after the disaster, most of the adult survivors continued to show emotional disturbances and suffered from psychological stress. Similarly, most of the survivors of concentration camps in World War II (1939-1945) continued to experience nightmares and other symptoms of severe emotional problems long after their release from the camps. The prolonged affect of the catastrophe result into Stress which disturbs individuals' ability to concentrate. One tends to correlate the happenings around him/her with the occurrence of similar activities of very less importance.

Stress is an invisible disease that disturbs individual's mental health resultantly affecting his psychosocial environment. Farnham (1991) considers stress as a dynamic condition where the outcome is perceived to be both uncertain and important. This expression of stress comes out of the pressure and the psychological conflict that undergoes in human mind. Beehr and Newman (1978) have aptly defined stress as a condition that forces the individual to deviate from his/her normal functioning. Stress could be taken as a positive reaction

as well as negative reaction. As a positive reaction, stress is called 'Eustress' whereas negative reaction is termed as 'Distress'. Basically people use stress in a negative sense and we tend to think that stress is always bad but the fact is that 'Eustress' (positive stress) works as a motivator. It can also help to work harder and to put ourselves to the proper action. It encourages us to innovate and to adapt to the changes.

Positive stress adds anticipation and excitement to life and we all thrive under a certain amount of stress. Confrontations, frustrations and sorrows add depth and enrichment to our lives. Our goal is to learn how to manage it and how to use it to help us. Stress acts as a depressant and may leave us feeling dejected; on the other hand, excessive stress may leave us feeling of 'tied up in knots'. What is required here is that we should try to understand the optimal level of stress which does not harm us rather provide the impetus of some motivation to work. Therefore, one has to establish the optimal level of stress oneself. Each individual is differently unique. Hence one has to reinvent him or her, after the disaster and then try to find this optimum level to further understand him or herself better. The optimal level is further influenced by the nature of work, timings, and environment that the individual undergoes usually after a disaster.

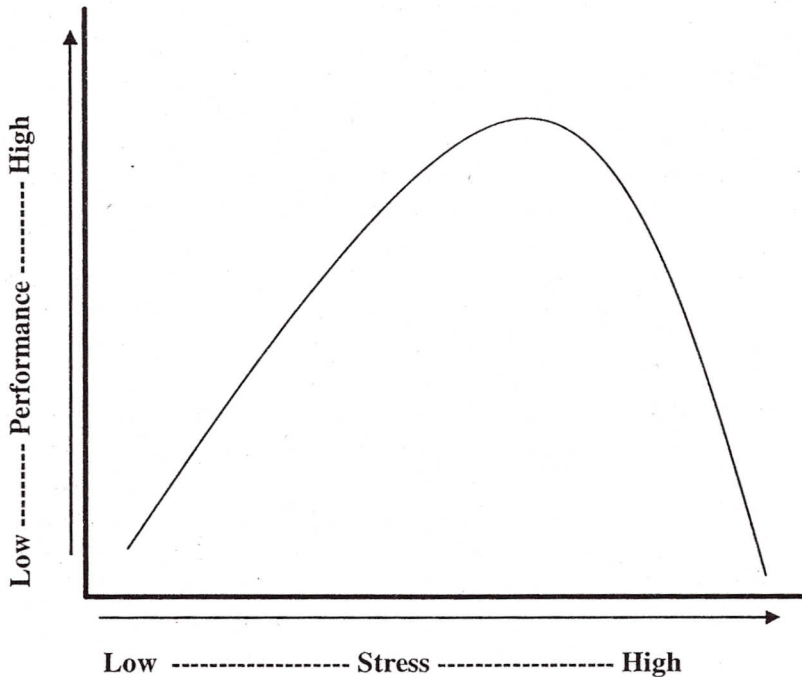
Cooper and Payne (1978) have described potential sources of Stress usually after a disaster viz. Environmental factors, Organisational factors and Individual factors. The uncertainty in the work environment after the disaster, social and economic factors, role demands, and interpersonal relationship etc. all contribute to the stress of the individual. Individual factors could be also based on the personality of the individual and his/her perception, and attitude. In that sense individual problems like family problems or economic problems also become an important source of Stress after the disaster. In a national survey conducted by the Northwestern Life Insurance Company (1992) seven in ten Americans suffer from, frequent health problems, poor health habits and stress related disorders due to stress.

### **The Consequences of Stress**

The consequences of stress are severe and one needs to know the symptoms of Stress so that it becomes easier to manage it. Stress results in the changes in metabolism, increasing heart and breathing rates, increasing blood pressure, headaches and further inducing heart

attacks. Persistent irritability, anxiety, boredom, procrastination, insomnia or sleeplessness, occasional forgetfulness and/or inability to concentrate are some of the early symptoms of stress. The feeling of stress results in the behavioural changes like absence from job, changes in food habits, increased smoking or consumption of alcohol etc. It is experienced that there are many environmental factors which result in anxiety (Miller & Hester, 1980). It is believed that many people drink to reduce tension or psychological stress (Rohsenow et al., 1985) and even after treatment, stress is thought to be an antecedent of drinking and relapse (e.g., Eliany & Rush, 1992).

Fig. 1: *Inverted U Relationship between Stress & Performance*



Source: Robbins, SP. 1996, Organizational Behaviour – Concepts, Controversies, Applications, Prentice Hall, New Delhi, p 618.

It is evident from many researches that the performance of individuals during stress goes down because of aforesaid reasons as depicted in the Figure 1. Stress needs to be managed both by the family members, significant others associated with the individual and

as well as the individual. The family need to create an atmosphere where individual do not feel much stress and respond positively to the psychological needs of the individual after the disaster. Stress is not the same for everybody and one approach will not work for all Many personal stresses are not work related and will not be improved through environmental modification or changes.

### **Coping with Stress**

The immediate environment after the disaster is one of the important stressor. The environment can be changed or modified to fit the needs of individuals so that they do not feel under stress. It would result in their performance improvement and mental satisfaction. Restoring the status quo immediately after the disaster makes the people stress free to some extent. Counselling services should be provided almost on a continuous basis after the rescue operation and also during the rehabilitation process. It is important to make an individual aware of his/her stressors and how to deal with it. The emotional and physical reaction to an activity has to be controlled and analysed so that it does not affect negatively. The stress has to be noticed and studied and not to be ignored. It should be assessed by the individual himself. The physical responses to stress like getting nervous or getting angry, temperament level etc. have to be noticed and then controlled by the individual. One should try to recognize the areas or the activities which he/she can change, which is in his/her control. It has to be dealt with one's ability to change the stressors by avoiding or eliminating them. Initially, the reduction in the intensity of stressors is important over time instead of trying to eliminate the stressors in a day or two. Goal setting, time management techniques and avoiding procrastination helps to reduce stress for an individual. The emotional reactions to stress need to be understood and then reduced. Basically the stress reaction is caused by the perception of danger which could be physical danger or emotional danger. The stressors should not be viewed in an exaggerated form. Stress should not be allowed to overpower rather coping strategies should be followed to deal with it. 'Planning for the best and preparing for the worst' should be kept in mind so that if things do not move as expected it does not give much stress.

It has to be learnt how to moderate physical reactions to stress. Slow, deep breathing brings the heart rate and respiration back to

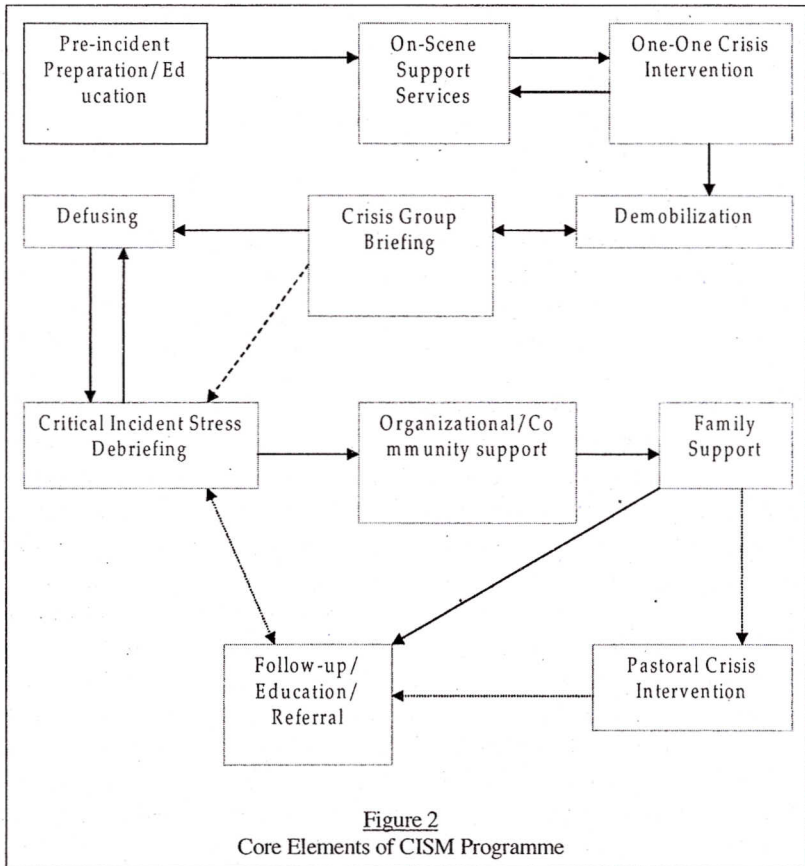
ormal. It is required to practice this when one feels at stress, when ne feels he is overreacting or stress is overpowering him. To reduce muscle tension one could follow some relaxation techniques. Electronic biofeedback helps to gain voluntary control over such things as muscle tension, heart beats and blood pressure. The physical reserves need to be build and maintained for which physical exercise like walking, swimming or jogging is ideal. Eating well-balanced and nutritious diet, maintaining ideal weight pattern, avoiding nicotine and excessive caffeine and other stimulants, mixing leisure with work, getting enough sleep with consistency also helps in maintaining physical reserves.

Like physical reserves, emotional reserves also need to be maintained so that emotional reaction can be controlled. Developing mutually supportive friendship or relationships, pursuing realistic goals which are meaningful, rather than goals others have for you that you do not share, expecting some degree of frustration, failure and sorrows, and being kind and gentle with oneself helps a lot to maintain the emotional reserves.

### **Critical Incident Stress Management**

A critical incident is defined as “ any event which has a stressful impact sufficient enough to overwhelm the usually effective coping skills of either an individual or a group are typically sudden, powerful events outside of the range of ordinary human experiences” (Mitchell & Everly, 1993). Critical Incident Stress (CIS) has been named as traumatic stress, combat fatigue and rapid-onset burnout. It is basically a situation in which people have strong emotional reactions that causes interference in the general ability to function. Normal reactions occurring in normal people who are exposed to highly abnormal events is a critical issue. It is not possible to judge the reaction on the basis of the event since the event itself is sudden and unforeseen, this what makes the reaction critical. As it is not possible to control the unforeseen events, it requires lot of preparations and precautions by the crisis management group and as well as by the individual. If the advance warnings are given, people can develop some coping strategy which can reduce the level of CIS. The level of stress is observed on the basis of the person’s role, involvement level and the proximity to the event. The more important is the person’s role, involvement and the proximity to the event the higher would be the level of stress. The individual’s ego strength just before the critical incident is also an important factor to judge the stress level.

Mitchell & Everly (1997) have identified four core mechanisms of action for CISM viz., Early Intervention, Psychological Support, Opportunity for Expression, and Crisis Education based on Cognitive Processing & Behavioral Response. The crisis management group to deal with CISM could follow these mechanisms. The core elements of CISM programs should be followed by the CISM team in the chronological order of Pre-incident Preparation/Education, On-Scene Support Services, One—One Crisis Intervention, Demobilisation, Crisis Management Briefing, Defusing, Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD), Organizational/Community support, Family Support, Pastoral Crisis Intervention, Follow-up/Education and Referral (Figure 2).



The CISM Team is “described as a partnership between professional support personnel (mental health professionals) and peer support personnel who have received training to intervene in stress reactions” (Mitchell & Everly, 1993).

Pre-Incident Preparation/Education provides general information on stress and trauma so that people are able to understand the initial symptoms of stress. Learning to deal with stress helps protect individuals against critical stress. This step sets the expectations for actual experience, physical and psychological or emotional and helps to understand acute and long-term coping techniques to deal with the stress.

On-Scene support services are provided on the place where the disaster occurred, and where they live. In this step one-to-one interactions take place without disturbing the relief and rescue operations. At times it is informal conversations and counseling. The crisis team functions within the incident command structure and its members are present in a primarily supportive and advisory role. Their activity is emotional first aid, allowing for ventilation of feelings. The next step is One-on-One Individual Crisis Intervention. This step sounds similar to the earlier step but there is a difference as in the last step there is no crisis intervention. Basically during this step only the crisis is defined to the individuals and it is done individually, one-on-one, face-to-face. During this stage the issues frequently discussed are biological needs (e.g., rest, and nutrition) The response of the community as a whole is taken into account and it consists of the risk assessment, pre and post incident planning and discussion on rehabilitation techniques. The team also prepares for demobilization of resources for the affected people.

Demobilization in the real terms is for psychological purposes and not for operational purposes. Basically it is the preparation during the transition period between the occurrences of critical incident and restoration of the status quo. There are two types of demobilization – one, through providing food and proper shelter facilities and two, through organizing large group informational meetings where relevant information is provided on stress management tactics.

Crisis Management Briefings are provided in the next stage through structured large group community meetings .The issues

discussed in these meetings include providing information about the incident, controlling rumors, educating about the symptoms of distress and telling about the resources available as a supporting system. This is very useful for the incidents specially, which occur as a response to violence or terrorism.

Defusing is one of the very important processes which help individuals to cope with the stress. Small groups are structured keeping two important things in mind, the size of the group and homogeneity of the groups. The size of the group is kept at less than 20 members and the crisis event is discussed with them. It is arranged on the same day of the incident and the duration is fixed to less than an hour. During defusing, the emergency worker receives education about recognition of stress reactions and management strategies for dealing with stress.

Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) has been discussed by Mitchell (1983, 1993, and 1997) where he explains that during the process of debriefing a structured group discussion of the crisis event for around 1 to 3 hours in length is arranged. Debriefing is one of the most intense and complex activity among all the steps and therefore the CISM team members require specialize training for debriefing. There are 7 phases of Debriefing viz., Introduction phase, Fact phase, Thought phase, Reaction phase, Symptom phase, Teaching phase, and Re-entry phase. All these phases are targeted towards mitigating the impact of the traumatic/critical incident, accelerating normal recovery processes, and identifying individuals who may need additional assistance. It is generally provided 24-72 hours after the disaster has occurred.

After Debriefing Community support is mobilized and all the participants are asked to put forth their views. This provides them an opportunity to express and to learn from others by supporting each other. The person in crisis spreads intense feelings to family members. Hence the next stage is of family support which is an important aspect of CISM. Family support is typically provided by those with special training. Pastoral Crisis Intervention is the next process before final Follow-up activities. The CISM team's responsibility does not end at just providing the information and educating on the various techniques of coping but it includes to see that proper action is taken by the people affected by the disaster.

## **Conclusion**

Miller and Hester (1986) reviewed stress management training techniques and found approaches like relaxation training, feedback and systematic desensitization i.e., focusing on environmental factors to reduce anxiety. Miller (1992) also identified aerobic training as a stress management approach. Other approaches included are meditation, muscle relaxation and transcendental meditation (Brochu & Forget, 1990; Rohsenow et al., 1985).

One wants to be happy or sad; it is in his/her own hands. People can help you but it is you who have to plan your future and follow your plan. Dealing with stress is more a problem of attitude than of anything else. One should try to develop positive attitude towards life and towards the society after the disaster. Sharing experiences and developing an attitude of coping may relieve the individual from lot of stressors. Proper medication in the time of need can keep the individuals physically fit. It can be concluded that the crisis management group to deal with the Stress arising out of disaster can follow the CISM techniques.