

Austrian Red Cross

Critical incident stress management and crisis intervention

Contact information

Mag. Cornel Binder-Krieglstein
 Occupational Psychology Centre
 Gesellschaft für Dienstleistungen des Wiener Roten Kreuzes GmbH
 Nottendorfergasse 21
 1031 Vienna
 Austria
 Tel.: +43 1 79 580 7300
 Fax: +43 1 79 580 9300
 E-mail: bk@w.redcross.or.at

Background/history

The Austrian Red Cross (ARC) is the largest non-profit organization in Austria, with some 30,000 staff and volunteers. The society runs a number of operations throughout the country such as ambulance, rescue, blood donor, health and social services and is present in post-disaster situations.

The ARC – at both leadership and staff/volunteer levels – felt that there was a need for a psychological support programme. In 1998, initial contact was made with the International Federation Reference Centre and since then, the ARC, in particular its Vienna branch, has become active in crisis intervention and endeavours to provide assistance to colleagues. Research was carried out to detect work-specific stress factors affecting health workers and home helpers in the course of their duties. The research findings led to the development of a training programme aimed at diminishing the problems encountered.

Some 60 staff and volunteers have attended the six-day critical incident stress management (CISM) training course for peer workers which have been held in various parts of the country. Other training activities for crisis intervention teams have also been undertaken.

Objectives

- To broaden the medical and psychological support given to victims of crisis and disaster.
- To provide training facilities and the necessary resources to prevent colleagues from developing acute stress syndrome or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- To train suitable trainers.
- To agree on a uniform method for high-quality training that corresponds sufficiently to the situations encountered in practice. The society aims at creating a training module for the crisis intervention team which can be offered throughout the Austrian Red Cross. The curriculum would include such topics as communication, crisis intervention, life events, working together in a team, etc.

Brief description of activities

Rescue workers are trained to have a good knowledge of physical first aid. But when confronted with critical situations, they need more than this. The rescue team members need a support system themselves, to relieve some of the pressures and stress they experience. It is essential for both the well-being and the performance of the teams. With the help of a group of experts in psychological support, the programme aims to provide throughout Austria:

- **Psychological first aid for victims of crisis and disaster:** included in basic training for rescue workers, psychological first aid aims at helping them take a holistic approach to the victims they seek to assist: “treating the wounded, not only the wound”.
- **Crisis intervention for relatives of victims:** this entails support to people who have experienced a shocking, exceptional event (for example, the death of a close relative, sudden child death, conveying news of a death, etc.).
- **CISM for rescue workers:** the programme is designed to provide psychological support to ARC rescue workers exposed to emergency situations and critical incidents. The aim is to reduce and eliminate work-related stress and prevent long-term effects of stress on mental health. It involves group counselling and reinforces the cohesiveness of the group: factors that contribute to the effective management of stress and trauma.

Main elements of the programme

As the psychological support systems are still being developed, it is not yet possible to speak of a fully established and functioning service. For the time being, ARC is bringing together a group of experts with experience in CISM or crisis intervention teams, who will assist in the development of uniform training in psychological support throughout the country.

In many parts of Austria, people are becoming more receptive to and aware of the importance of CISM. However, the development of crisis intervention teams will take some time and, in areas of the country where other institutions already provide mobile crisis intervention or psychosocial support, the ARC will not enter into competition with them.

Partnership and alliances

The ARC collaborates closely with its nine regional branches to make a uniform approach possible.

It also works with the professional organization of Austrian psychologists and other mental health professionals. This is essential in building up and maintaining the programme. Contacts exist with the European Commission Unit 5, the *Gesundes Österreich* foundation, the Vienna Municipal Rescue and Emergency Measures Executive, Vienna University, Innsbruck University and the German association SbE e.V. (CISM Deutschland).

Monitoring and evaluation

The research institute of the ARC's Vienna branch plans to monitor the CISM programme, assessing how satisfactory not only staff and volunteers, but also the people they have assisted, find the programme.

Evaluation measures are carried out routinely, since the Vienna branch of the ARC is subject to quality management standard ISO 9001.

The future

Work will continue on developing both training and awareness-raising activities throughout the ARC. It is hoped that within a few years, the CISM programme will be fully operational. It will then be possible to ensure the care of workers who have had particularly traumatic experiences and prevent the apparition of post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Psychological support services present new opportunities for the Red Cross, and will enable it to offer a quality service in the future. However, it is essential that the programme become an established service of the ARC so that the necessary financial resources are available.

Lessons learned

- As the programme is not fully operational, it is premature to speak of “lessons learned”.
- Based on a CISM model developed by the American Critical Incident Stress Foundation for rescue workers, firemen and police officers, the SbEe.V. (CISM Deutschland) association has produced a programme more suited to European mentalities. The ARC has further modified this to better fit specific needs in Austria. The programme has been very well received in Austria.
- ARC staff and volunteers have been instrumental in getting the CISM system and a crisis intervention team set up. However, deciding whether and to what extent such a system can really be developed and implemented in day-to-day activities will depend on the interest of people working at the grass-roots level in ARC branches.
- Positive coverage about the CISM programme in the media has raised the awareness of the general population and ARC staff and volunteers. This is important as, to be successful, the programme needs to be accepted as a Red Cross service not only at the leadership and team levels, but also by staff and volunteers and people all over Austria.
- Debriefing for relief workers reduces their level of stress and also has an important team-building effect.