

Critical Incident Stress Management: Preparing for the Aftermath

by Captain Mimi Tompkins

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An aircraft rolls upside and slams into the ground on downwind.. Landing at Dallas an aircraft touches down short of the runway then manages to successfully go around... Taking off from Phoenix, an aircraft hits and kills a man on the runway... Cruising in clear air, an aircraft hits turbulence and a flight attendant is seriously injured.

Hijackings, passenger medical emergencies, system malfunctions: as professional pilots, our jobs place us in a high-risk category. We must perform routine duties with a constant awareness that routine could turn to crisis in a split second. What is often forgotten is that stress reactions as a result of trauma are normal. In fact, the definition given for critical incident stress by Jeffrey Mitchell, Ph.D., professor at the University of Maryland and co-founder of the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation (ICISF) is that stress reactions are “a normal reaction of a normal person to an abnormal situation.” However, post-traumatic stress disorder is a more serious psychiatric diagnosis.

ALPA Established CIRP

In 1994, the Air Line Pilots Association Executive Board established the Critical Incident Response Program (CIRP) to educate members about critical incident stress, and to help prevent the onset of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among crewmembers following a critical incident or accident. The program is composed of two parts: to educate pilots on what is critical incident stress; and to provide an avenue for pilots to resolve a stress reaction.

Critical Incident Defined

A critical incident has been defined as:

- an aircraft accident;
- an aircraft incident that results in injury to a crewmember or passenger;
- an aircraft incident that results in damage to equipment;
- an on-the-job incident where there exists the real or perceived threat of death or serious injury to a crewmember or passenger; and the most recent addition to this list,
- an aircraft evacuation.

While the professional crewmember has honed risk awareness and instant appropriate responses to a razor-sharp edge, he/she often has not been as effective in learning how to handle the medical and psychological aftermath of a critical incident.

Common Stress Reactions

Stress reactions seen most often in crewmembers are sleep problems, the desire to avoid situations related to the event, an increase in risk taking behaviors both on and off the job, intense anger toward the company or the system, and anger toward fellow pilots.

Fallout from this most often contributes to family problems and the crewmember starts thinking that “real estate looks good” and it is time to get out of aviation because things “just aren’t like they used to be.” Research from the ICISF demonstrates that more than 90% of individuals involved in a traumatic event will develop some type of adverse psychological effect. ALPA’s Aeromedical Advisor, Dr. Donald Hudson stated that of those ALPA crewmembers who contacted the Aeromedical Office following a critical incident or accident, approximately 70 percent of those who received proper treatment continued their careers as pilots. Of those who did not receive treatment, however, over 70 percent left their jobs within two years of the traumatic events. Also, families suffered, marriages failed, and health declined.

A crewmember can experience substantial and long-lasting cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and physical changes that must be treated immediately to prevent additional problems. Even those who witness or participate in the rescue or investigation of an accident (like Oklahoma City) are at risk of developing PTSD. All of the crewmembers and one of the Flight Attendant accident investigators for the Aloha 243 accident, developed PTSD within two years of this event. Crewmembers have a tendency to feel that asking for support is a sign of weakness. Unfortunately, ignoring the side effects of stress can have almost irreversible effects. And proper treatment is essential to ensure complete recovery. Regardless of the degree of critical incident stress or PTSD, early intervention can greatly reduce the time and expense of the treatment.

Critical incident response teams have been operating for about eight years with firefighters, police and emergency service workers. The Association of Flight Attendants has been training their Employee Assistance Personnel committee members in critical incident stress for at least seven years.

ALPA plans to educate pilots in stress reduction and coping strategies in order to reduce the effects of psychological trauma. Also, each Master Executive Chairman (MEC) of each carrier has been tasked to establish a CIRP team or committee. Most have placed this program within the Safety Structure. Others have selected the Aeromedical Committee or Family Awareness /Assistance to implement the program.

Airlines Adopt CIRP Training

Alaska Airlines, Delta Air Lines, Northwest Airlines and TWA have held company-wide Critical Incident Stress Management training courses. Alaska Airlines’ program is employee based, where TWA’s program is company based. Delta and Northwest have not yet fully implemented the program. American, Southwest and UPS are all interested in putting together their own program. American Airlines’ Crew Development Department is working with APA to put together a program. They are in the final steps of scheduling training and soliciting for volunteers.

Several ISA members have been trained in one of the three courses sponsored over the past year by ALPA. Among the women pilots who have participated in training are:

Capt. Sandy Anderson, Assistant Chief Pilot, NWA

Capt. Charlene Sammis, American

Laurie O’Leary, HAL

Capt. Debra Bailey, SWA

Scottie Clark, UAL

Kathy Royer, UAL
Capt. Lori Adams, Alaska
Carin Octigan, America West.

Several more women are scheduled for the next Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) course in Denver on Sept. 6-10, 1995. A lot has been learned about helping people who work in occupations where they experience traumatic events.

Genesis of the ALPA CIRP

The ALPA Critical Incident Response Program grew out of the Executive Human Performance Committee under the direction of Capt. Don Smith, Delta Air Lines. Capt. Smith assigned Capt. Robert Sumwalt, USAir, to head the effort. Captains Alan Campbell, DAL and Mimi Tompkins, ALO, researched the PTSD and how to prevent it. This research led to the writings of Dr. Jeffery Mitchell. Dr. Mitchell had been a firefighter/paramedic and returned to college to research the effects of critical incidents on emergency service workers.

In September 1994 the working group met in Hawaii to attend Dr. Mitchell's Basic CISM training and to write the CIR program. The members of the group were led by Capt. Mimi Tompkins. Working group members were Jim Johnson, ALPA Senior Attorney, Joe Bracken, ALPA Staff Engineer/Accident Investigator, Capt. Alan Campbell, DAL, Capt. Bill Morn, ALA, Joe Anding, DAL representing ALPA's Accident Investigation Board. Donald Hudson, ALPA Aeromedical Advisor provided information by phone.

It was well known that immediate intervention following a trauma or critical incident would lessen the long term effects of stress and often prevent PTSD. However, emergency service workers, like pilot crewmembers were reluctant to talk to "shrinks". Dr. Mitchell developed a program where peer volunteers were trained in intervention techniques. At first these peers were trusted members of the team who had experienced and dealt with their own critical incident. Later, other interested and trained peer volunteers were just as successful. Peer volunteers receive training in implementation of the program, Basic CISM, Peer Support, Family Support, Traumatic Stress Management (advanced peer support) and an Advanced CISM course. These courses are now provided by the ICISF's trained instructors.

Intervention Methodology

Intervention involves a defusing that normalizes the reactions of a person involved in a critical incident and educates them on what reactions to expect in the next day or so. Also, ways to better deal with the reactions are suggested. This peer also helps them with their immediate needs.

The goal is to help the person cope and maintain their defenses so that they can deal with the many details that often result from a critical incident. This defusing is conducted by a peer volunteer and lasts about 20-30 minutes. It should be done within 8-24 hours of the incident after the crewmember. If face-to-face contact is impossible, it is conducted by telephone (always with a trained volunteer). In the case of more severe trauma or an accident involving injuries or death, a debriefing will be held.

Crewmembers are familiar with "operational debriefings," whose primary concern is to resolve the safety aspects of the accident or incident. The type of debriefing conducted for critical incident

stress management focuses on the effect of the event on the individual. By providing an avenue for people to talk about a particularly stressful event soon after the event occurs, they are then better able to process the event.

A debriefing is always conducted with peer volunteers and a CISM trained Mental Health Professional (MHP). No notes are taken; no rank structure is apparent. The meeting can not be used for any disciplinary action; and the information is strictly confidential. It is not unusual for a debriefing to last for several hours. In the case of an accident, this debriefing would be scheduled after the NTSB interview which usually occurs 3-4 days after the event. The Mental Health Professional and peer volunteers follow-up with the crewmembers or family and refer them to appropriate counseling if that is needed.

A crewmember who participates in the CIRP with a defusing and debriefing is allowed to talk to a Mental Health Professional for 4-6 sessions without having to list it on the FAA medical form when renewing their medical certificate.

CIRP Uses

Critical incident teams have been used for:

- crew sickness due to cabin air quality
- a passenger death in flight
- an employee who lost her home to a fire the day before Christmas
- turbulence incidents where crew and passengers were injured
- near-miss incidents resulting in crew injuries
- a senior Captain who failed a recurrent check ride
- a crew member who administered CPR to a passenger
- an aircraft evacuation on the runway
- the Simmons accident
- the recent Atlantic Southeast accident
- a crewmember who lost a child in an aircraft accident
- a crewmember involved in a near fatal automobile accident
- accident investigators and their families following the investigation of fatal accidents

The program is still evolving. Since the Simmons accident, Capt. Rick Bicknell, SAI, was added to the working group. As a result of his experience as the CIRP Coordinator for this accident, courses in Family Support have been added to the training of peer volunteers. Peer volunteers are still needed. Training programs will be scheduled in 1996. You do not have to be an ALPA member to attend. For more information, contact Capt. Mimi Tompkins, ALPA CIRP Coordinator at CompuServe: 74577,235 or 1-800-442-9007, voice box 6710.

This article has been prepared with information from the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, Baltimore, MD at 410-730-4311. It is a joint effort office of the Air Line Pilot Association's Critical Incident Response Working Group and ALPA Communications.