
Regimental Chief Warrant Officer



Chief Warrant Officer Five T.L. Williams

From “Suck It Up and Drive On” to Critical Incident Peer Support

“Stress is the trash of modern life—we all generate it, but if you don’t dispose of it properly, it will pile up and overtake your life.”

—Danae Pace¹

Military police and U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command (USACIDC) (commonly referred to as “CID”) agents are tough. They have no fear. They are cynical, unemotional, and unaffected by combat or their everyday jobs—jobs that may include responding to and investigating multiple deaths.



Sadly, many Soldiers adopt this mind-set. Many believe that, to be in control, they must deny the emotional impact they feel when patrolling a war zone, investigating a crime scene, receiving bodily fluids thrown in the face, dealing with family situations, or simply handling the day-to-day work environment. This is a myth.

Stress is defined as “bodily or mental tension resulting from factors that tend to alter an existent equilibrium.”² Many demands (such as job requirements, threats, illness, or family problems) can cause stress. Distress, which is defined as an “external and usually temporary cause of great physical or mental strain and stress,”³ can occur during especially intense or prolonged periods of stress.

Stress is a uniquely individual phenomenon that is dependent upon how the body and mind respond to real or perceived internal and environmental demands. Therefore, what is stressful to one person may not be to another. Elevated stress levels can result in physical, emotional, and interpersonal problems that cannot always be resolved through normal coping mechanisms. If not adequately treated, these problems can become disabling.

Events that are outside the range of usual human experience and can result in levels of stress that might easily surpass an individual’s ability to cope are known as “critical incidents.” These incidents include, but are not limited to, murder, suicide, gruesome crime scenes, mass casualty incidents, and the sudden death of a colleague. Military police and CID agents routinely experience these types of incidents.

When I joined the Army, the only acceptable response to stress was to “suck it up and drive on.” But when I performed body recovery work at the Pentagon in the aftermath of 11 September 2001, I understood the effects of stress and ensured that members of my team were afforded the opportunity to talk with a chaplain or mental health professional every night.

Now, critical incident peer support (CIPS) teams are available to perform crisis intervention and provide critical incident debriefings to persons who have experienced critical incidents. For example, a CIPS team played an integral and valuable role during the investigation that followed the Fort Hood, Texas, massacre of 5 November 2009. The CIPS team helped the investigative team and families (yes, families) cope with the terribly horrific experience. “Old school” agents commented on the tremendous impact that the team had on troops and civilians.

The U.S. Army Military Police School offers a five-day CIPS course, which is generally taught in residence or by a mobile training team (MTT). The purpose of the course is to train law enforcement personnel—including corrections specialists, special agents, and first responders—to provide an avenue for their peers to confidentially “talk out” their personal and professional problems with fellow investigators or responders (nonprofessionals) who not only care a great deal about their well-being, but who also have a firsthand understanding of their situation.

The CIPS course covers the dynamics of critical incident stress management; recognition of types, signs, and symptoms of stress; identification of the critical incident stress debriefing process; implementation of a peer support program; functions of the peer supporter; psychological effects of critical incidents; causative impacts of critical incidents on first responders and investigators; communications skills; major crisis issues; crisis intervention and referrals (to

ensure the preservation of first responders); and investigator health, welfare, safety, and confidentiality. Critiques from Soldiers who have attended CIPS training have indicated that the course is phenomenal.

Law enforcement investigators and first responders interested in attending CIPS training should contact Mrs. Donna Ferguson at (573) 563-7868 or <donna.d.ferguson@us.army.mil>.

Take care of your Soldiers for a stronger Army!

Endnotes:

¹Danzae Pace, "Quotations About Stress," *The Quote Garden!* <<http://www.quotegarden.com/stress.html>>, accessed on 4 December 2009.

²*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Eleventh Edition, Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2004.

³*Ibid.*

Of the Troops and For the Troops!