Critical Incident Stress Debriefing and the Outdoor Industry

By Deb Ajango

In June 1997, two people died on Ptarmigan Peak outside of Anchorage, Alaska. They were students, part of a mountaineering course that had been offered through the local university. In addition to the deaths, there were a number of injured climbers, including the instructors. Within 12 hours of the fall, the top administrators at the university, its legal counsel, and I (as the outdoor program's manager) gathered behind closed doors to discuss a plan of action. As part of that plan, the advice I received was clear: "You're not to talk about what's happened. To anyone. Do you understand?"

During the confusion of those first few days, I had ideas about what should or shouldn't be done, yet I had little real-life experience upon which to base my opinion. Basically, I simply had a "gut feeling" that we should discuss and learn from the tragedy. For the most part, however, people told me that I was wrong. And for nearly a year, I lived in a shroud of silence.

Two years later, after the university had changed its course of action and began talking about the event, we published a book titled *Lessons Learned: A Guide to Accident Prevention and Crisis Response*. Much learning had taken place as a result of the experience, and it seemed worthwhile to share some of our insight with others.

In Chapter Six of that text, ethicist Jasper Hunt addressed the tendency people have to remain silent after a tragedy. While hiding behind "no-comment" responses to inquiries might be understandable, he said, it is not necessarily healthy or wise. Specifically, he wrote, "A death or an injury suffered on an outing is often treated as a dirty little secret that we dare not talk about. ... once an accident occurs, one of the first things people (who are involved) are told is to not talk about it. The advice usually comes from legal counsel concerned about potential lawsuits. But that advice, sound though it may be from a legal standpoint, can interfere with both the healing and learning processes." In hindsight, and after sharing stories with a number of other outdoor professionals, I couldn't agree more.

It took years for me to be able to effectively evaluate how I handled the incident, both personally and professionally. By taking a close look at my own behaviors, by identifying the symptoms I experienced, and by talking with others who had experienced similar crises, I was able to identify mistakes I made. I was also able to recognize how seriously I had been affected by this life-changing event.

By now, most people have at least heard of Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) – the educational and supportive group sessions in which an accident and subsequent reactions are discussed. The sessions last only a few hours. During that time, the symptoms are normalized for group members, and coping skills are reviewed. It is not an investigation; it is more about giving people the opportunity to talk about their experiences, and it provides information regarding the fairly predictable responses people tend to have following abnormal events. Research indicates that when individuals are guided through this type of sequence soon after a crisis, they are much less likely to develop any long-lasting "post-traumatic stress" problems. Although CISD is not supposed to take the place of counseling or therapy, participants are often better able to work through the negative feelings, thoughts, and reactions much sooner than they would have without any intervention.

My educational background is in clinical psychology, and I had read enough about CISD that I understood it in theory. Nonetheless, prior to the Ptarmigan Peak incident, and for no particular reason, I doubted the value of this one-shot deal. Besides, legal counsel had told me to remain silent. Consequently, I didn't take part in a CISD. Instead, I kept everything inside.

A year later, I realized that I could check off in myself nearly every symptom identified in the CISD and post traumatic stress disorder brochure: I had difficulty making decisions, lowered ability to concentrate, depression, and changes in eating or sleeping. I was withdrawing from others, and I felt overwhelmed. I had become a walking case study.

Wanting to learn more about the potential benefits CISD can offer, I enrolled in four different trainer courses across the country. I wasn't looking to be a participant. Instead, I was hoping to answer questions: Do debriefings "work," and would the process have worked for me? After watching sessions in action, hearing from people who had been through trauma and CISD, and after reading and confronting the research, I had to re-evaluate my original opinion. I decided that, while CISD isn't for everyone, it definitely has a place in the healing process. What I felt was missing was its specific application in the outdoor industry.

Following the Ptarmigan Peak accident, the students and instructors were offered a CISD by university professionals; a police officer, the dean of students, and a mental health worker. Afterwards, most of the students noted that it was not terribly helpful. When questioned for details, they said that the debriefing team did not include a single outdoor person, and it was obvious they couldn't really relate to what the group had been through. They added, had the team leaders known what an ice axe was, or had they been able to relate to what it was like to plunge step down a snowy slope, they would have been more credible facilitators. Instead, during the session, there seemed to be a gap—

between the leaders and participants—in empathy and understanding.

I have since become convinced that in order for a CISD to be most effective, the facilitators need to have a point of relativity with group members. One of the purposes of CISD is to normalize the event, and leaders who have "been there" can effectively let participants know that they are not alone. If/when the group leader cannot relate to the tragedy, this goal is nearly impossible.

In fact, CISD was initially used as a support group for and by Vietnam veterans. Soldiers who experienced overwhelming or chronic trauma were led through the seven-step sequence by trained facilitators of similar backgrounds. The empathy and understanding, combined with a controlled environment that allowed exploration of thoughts and feelings, produced positive results. It's my belief that outdoor leaders who become trained in CISD could ultimately elicit similar successes by guiding their colleagues through this formalized procedure.

Unfortunately, many people do not understand what CISD is, or what it isn't. Some believe it is therapy, and those who don't want to talk with a "shrink" refuse to attend. Others are concerned that CISD material could later be used in court. As a result, they never give it a chance.

In fact, CISD is not "treatment," and there is no existing precedent to support the notion that debriefings are legally imprudent. According to Drs. Jeff Mitchell and George Everly, the founders of the Critical Incident Stress Foundation, no court or judge has ever approved a request to reveal the confidential dialogue, regardless of whether or not a lawyer or clinical psychologist had been present. Although this does not guarantee that all sessions will remain protected, hopefully people will not make decisions based on exaggerated fears that the discussions will be used against an organization.

I do not believe that CISD is a cure all; in fact, I'll admit it's not for everyone. I also realize, in hindsight, that it was my own ignorance and perhaps stubbornness that prevented me from seeking help when I needed it most. Had I known then what I know now, I would have taken the opportunity to engage in a debriefing process. While I will never know if it would have helped, I will never forget the burden and consequences of silence.