

Crisis Response: Listening to Eyes

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Anyone who delivers Critical Incident Response Services knows about eyes and the stories they tell. We have peeked into a room where those impacted by a tragedy are gathered. Perhaps it was a robbery, the death of a colleague, a catastrophic accident, or the suicide of someone they know. Some eyes are weeping. Others riveted on the floor. A few may be hostile while others rapidly scan every inch of the room. Still others are locked into the “million-mile stare,” seemingly disconnected from anything present.

But when we open the door, every one of those eyes immediately locks upon us and pleads.

- “Did I really see what I saw?”
- “Will I ever not see it?”
- “How do I move on from this?”
- “I feel alien to myself; am I normal?”
- “Am I going to ever be OK?”
- “Do you know your stuff?”
- “Can I trust you?”
- “Am I safe with you and in this group while I feel so vulnerable?”
- “How has anyone ever recovered from something so sad, horrifying, hopeless?”

In the midst of crisis, eyes can cry but also comfort.

Even when people choose not to verbalize, their eyes convey volumes throughout the process. What those eyes communicate helps guide the pace and structure of how the group is led.

The crisis consultants' eyes gently, yet confidently, communicate as well; engaging each set of eyes with their own.

- "I care about you."
- "You will not be judged or made vulnerable in this group."
- "I know what I'm doing."
- "This will be helpful for you and those with you."

The group is made safe as people; they are invited but not coerced to talk. What they say is heard, validated, and connected to other's stories. The potentially alarming reactions to crises are explained and normalized so people are not "shocked by their shock." Eyes may still weep or flash anger, but many begin to relax their defense and connect with those of their colleagues as they acknowledge shared experiences.

When the eyes say they are ready, the consultant shifts toward a future focus. Not long-range. Now. Immediate strategies are outlined that have been helpful to others who have experienced something similar. The focus is upon self-care specific to what may be helpful to each individual. Eyes focus in recollection and understanding of what to do and not do. Increasingly confident, empowered with identified next steps.

Eyes can connect to show confidence and care.

Eyes connect with those of colleagues when asked what they need from each other. Verbalized and silent pacts are made as people commit toward group support.

As the group ends, deep sighs accompany eyes of resolve. Eyes of hope.

- "This is really hard, but we can do this."

Later that evening, the crisis consultant prepares for bed and engages one more set of eyes in the bathroom mirror. These eyes can't be fooled. They fully know the anguish of hearing stories you really don't want to hear. They know the images now seen within their mind. They also know the self-questioning that accompanies the honor and tremendous responsibility of being there for people on the worst day of their lives.

- "They will never forget this. Neither will you."
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Bob VandePol, MSW serves as Executive Director for the [Pine Rest Employee and Church Assistance Programs](#) which provides Critical Incident Response services to business, organizations, schools and universities as well as faith communities.