

**"The Business Case for Critical Incident Stress Response: A Brief Review of the Research Literature" by Mark Attridge, PhD, MA**



Critical Incident Stress Response (CISR) services are often included as part of employee assistance programs (EAPs) and thus CISR services are available now to millions of workers.<sup>1</sup> Most employers and researchers today recognize the overall business value or return on investment (ROI) for EAP services.<sup>2</sup> Many employers, however, provide access to CISR services just because it is the "right thing to do." Nonetheless, in the process of personal recovery there can also be other outcomes that benefit the organization financially. This paper reviews the research literature on the business value that can be achieved when

organizations offer CISR services.

### **Clinical Effectiveness of CISR**

Several recent reviews have critically examined the research literature on the clinical effectiveness of CISR services. The conclusions from these reviews is that CISR services, when properly delivered, are helpful in reducing the symptoms of severe stress that affect individuals who have experienced a workplace trauma or other kinds of critical incidents.<sup>3,4,5,6</sup>

### **Business Outcomes from CISR**

The business value for employers with CISR services is most likely to be found in the areas of reduced worker health care costs, reduced disability claim costs, reduced workers' compensation claim costs, reduced worker absence days, improved worker productivity, and reduced worker turnover from increasing the number of employees who can successfully return to work after being on disability for experiencing a traumatic event.<sup>7,8</sup> There is some evidence that organizations that reach out to employees at times of workplace disruption with CISR services do see business related benefits in how their employees fare over time.<sup>9,10,11,12,13</sup> Indeed, a survey of 185 employee health benefit plan administrators found that 41% agreed that EAPs at their company had "reduced workers compensation costs."<sup>14</sup> Such data suggests that many employers have a positive experience with actual cost savings from CISR programs.

### **Case Examples of Business Value from CISR Services**

Some examples of business-related outcomes from CISR services are found the following results from several studies:

- A study examined company data before and after initiating a CISR program following bank robberies in Australia.<sup>15</sup> The results showed that worker absence days were reduced by 60% and average medical benefits and workers' compensation costs

were reduced by 66%.

- When CISR services were provided after raids at post office businesses, employee sickness and absence levels were reduced by 50%.<sup>16</sup>
- A program that offered peer support and access to trained mental health professionals for staff at an Australian prison who experienced traumatic incidents had a 90% reduction in costs of assisting stressed employees and also lower sick time utilization, less turnover of personnel and fewer premature retirements.<sup>17</sup>
- In a study of 236 nurses in Canada, over two-thirds of the staff had experienced at least one critical incident per year.<sup>18</sup> Almost all of these nurses reported that the CISR program had helped them to reduce the number of sick days taken on the job and a review of three years of past data on sick time from company records confirmed the survey finding. In addition, about 1 in 4 nurses who had experienced a critical incident had contemplated leaving their jobs, but none actually did so after the CISR intervention. The estimated overall ROI for this CISR program was a \$7.09:\$1.00 benefit-to-cost ratio.
- A 3 year longitudinal study was done of CISR services for 18 firefighters who worked in a school at which 9 children were killed after a tornado.<sup>19</sup> The study found that the level of initial PTSD symptoms were reduced later on for 44% of the firefighters and that 5 of the 6 staff who had left service after the tragedy had later returned to firefighting duties.
- A more recent report describes how the standard group debriefing for police critical incidents was changed into a system of triage and individual intervention for those identified as most at risk.<sup>20</sup> The initial findings were that no workers' compensation claims were filed after adopting the customized CISR intervention.

## **Conclusion**

The financial – or business case – evidence for supporting CISR services is not as strong as the robust evidence supporting its therapeutic value. But there is some support from the analysis of business outcome variables in several studies, particularly for reducing absence days, disability and workers' compensation claims after a critical event. More research on workplace performance and claims-based financial outcomes associated with participants in CISR services is still needed.

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