SUPPORTING PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE IN MOUNTAIN PROFESSIONALS: EARLY PEER SUPPORT FOLLOWING CRITICAL INCIDENTS

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ABSTRACT: Mountain professionals, including avalanche forecasters, ski patrollers, mountain guides and helicopter and cat ski operators amongst others work in environments where exposure to traumatic incidents is an unavoidable occupational hazard. While the mountain industries have made advances in technical risk management, avalanche forecasting, rescue capability, and operational decision-making, comparatively little attention has been given to structured post-incident psychological support.

The Mountain Professional Critical Incident Stress Management (Mountain CISM) Association was established to provide early peer support for mountain professionals following critical incidents. The program adapts internationally recognized Critical Incident Stress Management principles to the unique operational realities of mountain workplaces, emphasizing confidential peer support delivered by experienced mountain professionals rather than therapy or clinical treatment. Peers are trained to International Critical Incident Stress Foundation (ICISF) standards.

Since beginning operations in 2023, Mountain CISM has responded to 99 callouts supporting more than 580 mountain professionals from a broad range of organizations. The objective is to provide emotional first aid, assist teams in returning to effective functioning, identify individuals who may require professional mental health care, and strengthen organizational resilience.

This paper describes the rationale for establishing Mountain CISM, outlines the program structure and operational model, summarizes experience from the first three years of operation, and discusses lessons learned. It argues that psychological recovery following critical incidents should be considered an essential component of risk management within mountain operations, alongside rescue, investigation, and operational debriefing.

KEYWORDS: Critical Incident Stress Management, Peer Support, Mountain Operations, Psychological Resilience, Critical Incident Response

1. INTRODUCTION

The mountain industry has developed sophisticated systems for managing physical hazards. Avalanche forecasting, terrain management, rescue capability, and operational decision-making have advanced significantly over recent decades. These developments have reduced operational risk and improved outcomes following accidents.

Despite these advances, one important aspect of post-incident management often receives comparatively little attention: the psychological wellbeing of the people involved.

Mountain professionals routinely experience fatalities, severe injuries, avalanche involvements, aircraft accidents, failed rescues, and incidents involving colleagues, guests, or members of the public. Even when individuals perform exceptionally well, these events can produce significant psychological stress that affects decision-making, interpersonal relationships, operational performance, and long-term wellbeing.

Historically, support following these events has often depended upon informal conversations with coworkers or friends. While these discussions are valuable, they are not always structured, confidential, or available when needed.

Mountain CISM was established to address this gap.

2. WHY EARLY PEER SUPPORT MATTERS

Critical Incident Stress Management is not counselling or psychotherapy.

Rather, it is an organized process that provides early psychological support during the period immediately following a traumatic event. The goal is to help individuals understand common stress reactions, normalize those reactions, identify practical coping strategies, strengthen social support, and identify people who may benefit from professional mental health care.

Mountain professionals frequently report that they are most comfortable speaking with peers who understand their operational environment. The credibility that comes from shared experience such as guiding, avalanche forecasting, ski patrolling, helicopter operations, etc. creates trust that can be difficult to establish with individuals unfamiliar with mountain work.

Early intervention is intended to complement, rather than replace, professional mental health services.

3. THE MOUNTAIN CISM MODEL

Mountain CISM uses established CISM principles adapted for mountain operations.

Several characteristics distinguish mountain workplaces from many other emergency response organizations:

- remote operational environments;
- small, tightly connected teams;
- seasonal employment;
- possibly repeated exposure to traumatic events;
- close relationships between coworkers;
- rapid return to operational duties following incidents.

To address these realities, Mountain CISM provides:

- rapid confidential peer support;
- structured group discussions when appropriate;
- one-on-one support;
- referral pathways to mental health professionals;
- follow-up support when required.

The program focuses on the period immediately following a critical incident, typically from the time of the event until approximately ten days afterward, as dictated by ICISF standards, in a time frame when it is most effective and before longer-term supports become available.

4. PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

Mountain CISM is activated following requests from participating organizations.

Responders are experienced mountain professionals with operational backgrounds within the mountain industry and who have received specialized Critical Incident Stress Management (ICISF) training.

Following activation, a Mountain CISM dispatcher and intervention team lead work collaboratively with organizational leadership to determine the most appropriate intervention. Depending on circumstances, this may include:

- individual conversations;
- small-group discussions;
- larger team sessions;
- education regarding common stress reactions and self-care strategies;
- recommendations for additional support.

Confidentiality is fundamental to maintaining trust throughout the process.

5. EARLY EXPERIENCE

Since becoming operational in 2023, Mountain CISM has:

- completed **99 operational responses**;
- supported **more than 580 mountain professionals**;
- responded to incidents across multiple sectors of the mountain industry.

Although formal research into program effectiveness remains ongoing, several consistent observations have emerged.

Organizations value rapid access to experienced peers.

Participants frequently report that speaking with someone who understands mountain operations reduces isolation and facilitates healthy discussion of difficult experiences.

Managers report that structured peer support assists teams in returning to effective functioning while helping identify individuals requiring additional care.

Importantly, Mountain CISM is not intended to determine operational causes of incidents, assign responsibility, or replace organizational investigations. Instead, it complements these processes by focusing on the people involved. Indeed, if participants stray into operational matters during a CISM debrief, peers are trained to quickly direct away from those conversations and back to matters important to emotional well-being.

6. LESSONS LEARNED

Several lessons have emerged during implementation.

First, organizations increasingly recognize psychological health as an operational issue rather than solely an individual issue.

Second, peer credibility is central to program success. Responders who understand the culture, language, and operational realities of mountain work establish trust rapidly.

Third, timing matters. Early support appears to reduce uncertainty, normalize stress responses, and improve awareness of available resources.

Finally, organizations benefit when psychological support becomes part of routine emergency response planning rather than an improvised response after major events. Thus MP-CISM emphasizes to organisations that they include MP-CISM in their emergency response plans.

7. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As the program evolves, several priorities have emerged:

- increasing the number and geographic distribution of trained peer supporters;
- strengthening partnerships with professional mental health providers;
- developing outcome measures that evaluate organizational and individual benefits;
- increasing awareness throughout the international mountain community.
- Continuing to explore funding opportunities to ensure meeting of community needs long term.

Future collaboration with researchers may also allow more formal evaluation of peer support interventions within mountain operations.

8. CONCLUSIONS

The mountain industry has long recognized that effective emergency response extends beyond rescue itself. The period following a critical incident also deserves structured attention.

Mountain CISM demonstrates that trained peer supporters drawn from within the mountain community can provide timely, confidential, and credible assistance that complements professional mental health care.

As psychological health becomes increasingly recognized as an essential component of operational safety, integrating structured peer support into emergency response planning offers a practical means of strengthening both individual wellbeing and organizational resilience.

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