



**MED**

## **CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS MANAGEMENT (MODEL OF A SUGGESTED COURSE DESIGN)**

**Guidance Material for Member Associations.**

**Version 1.0 – July 2022**

## **MANUAL**

IFATCA is the recognised international organisation representing air traffic controller associations. It is a non-political, not-for-profit, professional body that has been representing air traffic controllers for more than 50 years, and has more than 50,000 members in over 120 countries.

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**International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers' Associations**

The IFATCA Office  
360 St. Jacques, Suite 2002  
Montreal (Quebec) H2Y 1P5  
Canada

Phone: +1 514 866 7040  
Fax: +1 514 866 7612  
E-mail: [office@ifatca.org](mailto:office@ifatca.org)

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### Document Change Summary

Version	Date	Changes
<b>1</b>	31 <sup>st</sup> July 2022	The material contained in the TPM MED 9.3.1 is extracted and presented as a stand-alone document, as per Resolution C66 arising from WP 80 of the 61 <sup>st</sup> IFATCA Annual Conference (2022).
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<b>18</b>		
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<b>20</b>		

# CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS MANAGEMENT (MODEL OF A SUGGESTED COURSE DESIGN)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The provision of appropriate psychological assistance for air traffic controllers has been a policy of the Federation since 1986. Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) in Air Traffic Control is a relatively new concept; and is only one, though crucial, form of psychological assistance which should be provided for air traffic controllers.

A CISM programme has its greatest chance of success when fully endorsed by the management; however, where this is not the case, ATC associations can implement and administer their own programmes.

An ATC CISM programme is a peer support programme; and the ideal situation is one in which the programme is developed by the management and controllers working together with adequately trained professionals.

Critical Incident Stress Management was developed by Dr. Jeffrey Mitchell after he observed different groups of emergency personnel suffering symptoms akin to "shell shock". Dr. Mitchell developed a successful model for treating these stress reactions. These stress reactions were termed by Dr. Mitchell as **Critical Incident Stress** and defined as **the reaction a person or a group has to a critical incident. A critical incident is any situation faced by a person or group that causes them to experience unusually strong emotional reactions which have the potential to interfere with their ability to function either on the job or later.**

Critical Incident Stress among air traffic controllers was first identified in 1988 by Anne Logie, R.N., D.O.H.N., who was then employed as the ATC Occupational Health Consultant in Vancouver, BC. Working with air traffic controllers and the Canadian Air Traffic Controllers' Association, Anne Logie developed the first programme to deal with critical incident stress among air traffic controllers.

Over the years, numerous literatures has been produced on stress in air traffic control and on Critical Incident Stress Management. The literature on stress does not recognise CIS as a separate and distinct phenomenon while that on CISM deals mainly with CIS among emergency personnel.

The experience has shown, however, that not only is critical incident stress distinct from other forms of stress but that the model for treating air traffic controllers does show some areas of divergence from that developed for emergency personnel.

Any successful CISM programme will be developed locally taking cultural concerns into consideration.

This document should, therefore, not be seen as the definitive authority on implementing a CISM programme but will focus on those areas that are crucial to any successful CISM programme.

## 2. OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

Occupational stress is now recognised as an increasingly global phenomenon, affecting all categories of workers, all work places and all countries. Several studies have revealed with scientific integrity that considerable levels of occupational stress reactions have been identified among different groups of air traffic controllers.

Occupational stress is the product of complex interaction of the task, the operational environment and the personality characteristics of the individual. Thus it is difficult to generalise to all controllers groups.

Nevertheless, some of the most common stressors have been identified as:

### **a) Demand**

number of aircraft under control - peak traffic hours - extraneous traffic - unforeseeable events - proficiency checks / examinations;

### **b) Operating procedures**

time pressure - having to bend the rules - feeling of loss of control - fear of consequences of errors;

### **c) Working time**

shift and night work - unbroken duty periods;

### **d) Working tools**

limitations and reliability of equipment - VDT, RTF and telephone quality - equipment layout;

### **e) Work environment**

lighting / optical reflections – noise / distractors - microclimate - bad posture - rest and canteen facilities;

### **f) Working organisation**

role ambiguity - relations with supervisors and colleagues - lack of trained staff or staff inadequately trained - lack of control over work process - lack of management support - salary - public opinion;

### **g) Critical Incident / Accident**

A critical incident is any situation faced by Air Traffic Controllers that causes them to experience unusually strong emotional reactions which have the potential to interfere with their ability to function either at their positions or later. Critical incident stress (CIS) is the reaction a person or a group has to a critical incident.<sup>1</sup>

(Adapted from Jeffrey Mitchell Ph. D)

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<sup>1</sup> (Extracted from IFATCA Policy MED 9.2.3 [IFATCA TPM, 2019]. See also: IFATCA WP 93 - Bournemouth 1992; IFATCA WP 160 - Taipei 1997; IFATCA WP 80 – Virtual 2022).

### 3. MANAGEMENT SUPPORT

An ATC CISM programme has its greatest chance of success if it is endorsed and fully supported by the Management.

Though it is a peer support based programme which can be administered by the controllers themselves, the importance of support from the management can not be over emphasised, especially in cases where the resources of an ATC Association are limited. With management support, resources can be provided for training and administering the programme as well as formalising the involvement of ATC personnel dedicated to the programme.

### 4. THE CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME

***Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) is a wide range of programmes and intervention strategies which have been designed to mitigate the impact of stress in personnel and to assist them in managing and recovering from significant stress. - Jeffrey Mitchell, Ph.D.***

A CISM programme should ideally offer the following:

**Trained peer support team** - Peer support is the foundation upon which CISM is based. It should be noted that a peer is effective only if perceived as such by the person seeking help. The relevant literature details the factors to be considered when choosing a team. The final composition should be reflective of the differences among the persons to be served in terms of age, sex and ATC specialty.

**Appropriately trained mental health professional** - A mental health professional who is trained in dealing with CIS should form part of the team. This person would conduct refresher training, lead formal debriefings, and be a referral in cases that are beyond the scope of the peer.

**Established Protocols** - This is a document that states clearly, in unambiguous terms, the operational procedure of the CISM programme. It states the purpose of the programme; the structure and composition of the peer support team; responsibilities and obligations of the team members; and the nature and extent of management's involvement. This document is usually the first significant advertisement of the CISM programme; it will determine the initial perception of the target group and is therefore important to the programme's success.

**Education and Information** - Air traffic controllers should be informed of the concept of Critical Incident Stress, its possible impact upon the individual, and the assistance available through the CISM programme.

**Defusings** - This refers to one-on-one interventions between a trained peer and the affected individual. This is the most used service of an ATC-CISM programme; and any programme that does not provide this service is losing the opportunity to provide significant assistance to the target group.

**Debriefings** - This refers to formal group sessions lead by a trained mental health professional and is mainly used in cases of major incidents and accidents.

**Follow-ups** - This refers to brief talks with the affected individual within a short time following an intervention.

**Referral Service** - A Defusing or Debriefing is not psychotherapy and frequently peers will encounter situations they are not equipped to deal with and there should be professionals available to whom referrals can be made.

**Peer - Peer Consultations** - These are informal talks among the peers about the incidents they have dealt with in order to provide an outlet for the peers' own cumulative stress that may be a direct result of the service they provide; this concept is also referred to as **helping the helper** or **debriefing the debriefer**.

**Refresher training** - Periodic refresher training should be scheduled so that peers can update their knowledge and practise their skills.

**Specialty Interventions** - Peer support personnel will frequently have to deal with stress reactions that result from sources other than critical incidents. The team should be prepared to deal with these issues and provide appropriate referrals. Where a CISM programme is the only psychological support service available, these specialty services will become an integral part of the programme.

**Evaluation** - To ensure that the programme achieves its goals, it is essential that there are ongoing evaluations. The methods of evaluations should be determined by the team and stated in the protocols. One essential method is the use of anonymous written questionnaires by the participants of interventions.

## 5. CISM TRAINING

ATC-CISM shows its major area of departure from CISM for emergency personnel in the relative uses of defusings and debriefings. The model developed for emergency personnel uses the formal group debriefing as the main intervention strategy with the one-on-one defusing is rarely used. The experience in air traffic control has been that because of the types of the critical incidents and the personalities of the personnel involved, the informal one-on-one defusing is the main intervention strategy used. Course content should reflect this reality.

The training must be done by certified CISM trainers. A three day course has proven to be the minimum time required for adequate training. Course material should cover the following: Stress - nature and management; CIS; CISM; CIS Interventions; Communication skills - theory and practice; CIS Debriefing and Defusing - theory and skills practice; CISM programme - design and implementation.

The experience has shown that a significant portion of the course should be dedicated to allowing participants to practise their skills. Practical demonstrations of the skills by experienced peer support personnel have proven to be very valuable in imparting confidence to trainees.

## 6. CISM PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION OVERVIEW

### Initial Phase:

- Determine the need
- Get Management approval
- Be assured of the availability of peer and mental health support
- Review existing CISM programmes

### Intermediate Phase

- Establish an organisation committee
- Decide on a lead agency
- Develop a team structure
- Solicit applications from potential team members
- Schedule training

### Final Phase

- Train
- Select team members
- Establish effective leadership
- Establish written protocols
- Maintain team operations
- Evaluate team performance

*(Source: Jeffrey Mitchell, Ph.D.)*

## 7. CONCLUSION

This document has stated what recent experience has shown to be the essential features of a successful CISM programme. CISM in ATC is still a relatively new concept and is therefore still in the development phase. As new information comes to hand, this document would need to be updated. CISM has proven to be an effective tool to combat stress affecting ATC personnel. Unrelieved stress can have disastrous consequences for an individual by reducing his ability to function effectively either in his job or life. Any attempt to assist individuals in managing stress should be encouraged. This document has been provided in an attempt to assist Member Associations in successfully implementing effective **Critical Incident Stress Management Programmes**.

## 8. AVAILABLE CISM INFORMATION RESOURCES

“Critical Incident Stress Management in ATC” by Marc Baumgartner, 2004.  
International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, Inc. Website: <http://www.icisf.org>

Produced by  
**International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers' Associations**

The IFATCA Office  
360 St. Jacques, Suite 2002  
Montreal (Quebec) H2Y 1P5, Canada

Phone: +1 514 866 7040  
Fax: +1 514 866 7612  
E-mail: [office@ifatca.org](mailto:office@ifatca.org)



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