

A Common Question: What Is the Difference Between CISM and Peer Support Programs?

Below is a brief overview that compares and contrasts these two programs.

CISM

PEER SUPPORT

WHAT IS CISM: A method of helping first responders and others who have been involved in critical incidents that leave them emotionally and/or physically affected by those incidents.	WHAT IS PEER SUPPORT: An informal, in-house program utilizing vetted and trained peers to provide care and offer hope to colleagues struggling with stress and overwhelmed by daily difficulties.
INTENDED RECIPIENTS: <ul style="list-style-type: none">Primarily aimed at first responders, emergency services, and other individuals who have been directly impacted by a traumatic event.	INTENDED RECIPIENTS: <ul style="list-style-type: none">Can serve a broad range of individuals, including first responders, military personnel, healthcare workers, or anyone in a high-stress environment.
APPROACH: <ul style="list-style-type: none">Focuses on addressing the immediate psychological and emotional needs of individuals after a critical event.CISM includes a range of interventions, such as defusing, debriefing, and follow-up support.By enabling peers to help their peers understand problems that may occur after an event.	APPROACH: <ul style="list-style-type: none">Focuses on creating a supportive environment where individuals can talk openly with someone who understands their situation.Encourages mutual empathy and emotional validation between peers.By providing colleagues a compassionate and confidential space to help identify thoughts, feelings, beliefs and behaviors that may be causing disruption, disconnection and distress.
PURPOSE: <ul style="list-style-type: none">CISM is designed to provide structured support to individuals who have experienced trauma or critical incidents (e.g., emergencies, accidents, deaths).Help people to continue to perform their services or in some cases return to a normal lifestyle.	PURPOSE: <ul style="list-style-type: none">Peer Support programs are designed to provide emotional and social support through peers who have shared similar experiences or challenges.Lower stress to increase clarity and promote healthy decision-making.

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TECHNIQUES: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structured interventions, such as one-on-one sessions, small group meetings, or larger debriefings. • Emphasizes normalizing responses to stress and trauma, providing education about stress reactions, and offering resources for further support. 	TECHNIQUES: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-on-one conversations, group meetings, and check-ins, with a focus on emotional support, stress management, and building resilience. • Encourages ongoing relationship-building to ensure continuous support over time.
PROVIDER STRUCTURE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Led by trained professionals (e.g., counselors, psychologists, crisis intervention specialists). • It often involves group interventions (e.g., Critical Incident Stress Debriefing - CISD) that may address a collective experience of trauma. • CISM teams often include trained peers, mental health professionals and chaplains. 	PROVIDER STRUCTURE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often informal, with peer supporters (usually colleagues or members of the same community) trained to offer support and listen. • Peer supporters may not be mental health professionals but are trained to offer listening, guidance, and referrals when necessary. • The vetted and trained colleague is sometimes known as a peer mentor, peer counsellor, or peer coach.
SERVICES PROVIDING: Following a critical incident, CISM teams may provide individual support, Crisis Management Briefings (CMB) or Critical Incident Stress Debriefings (CISD).	SERVICES PROVIDING: Peers provide 1-on-2 support to individuals struggling with the stress of daily difficulties.

KEY DIFFERENCES:

FEATURE	CISM	PEER SUPPORT
Focus	Immediate crisis intervention and trauma management	Ongoing emotional support and shared experience
Led By	Trained professionals	Trained peers or colleagues
Structure	Structured, often formal interventions (e.g., debriefing sessions)	Informal, less structured conversations and interactions
Intended Recipients	Individuals affected by specific traumatic events	Individuals who may benefit from peer support due to shared experience
Techniques	Structured debriefings, educational support, follow-up	Listening, emotional validation, offering advice or resources

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COMPLEMENTARY RELATIONSHIP:

- **CISM and Peer Support** can complement each other. CISM might be used in the aftermath of a critical incident to address immediate psychological needs, while Peer Support programs provide ongoing, informal support to help individuals cope and thrive long term.

By combining the structured, professional support of CISM with the peer-based, ongoing encouragement of Peer Support, organizations can offer a well-rounded approach to managing the emotional and psychological well-being of their members.