

The Power of Peer Support

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During my 25 year career in the Fire Service, I have participated in critical incident debriefings as both a participant and a facilitator. Over the last 4 years as a Mental Health Professional, I have had the privilege of been involved in and co-facilitating, arguably the most powerful debriefing around. I am talking about a special 2 ½ day event designed by Riverside County Sheriff's Department in conjunction with POST. This peer support training is for law enforcement officers who have been involved in shootings (OIS) and occasionally, other life threatening incidents.

You may be asking, *"What makes this training so special?"* Several things....

First is the location. It is held at a conference center owned by UCLA in Lake Arrowhead, CA. Located on the banks of the lake and nestled in the trees, you feel like you are a million miles away from the stresses of daily life even though it is only about 2 hours away from the departments that send participants.

Second are the accommodations. Room and board are included in the registration and on sight. This eliminates the need to leave the campus to find food or go to a hotel, leaving time at lunch and before and after dinner for those involved in the training to spend informal time together. While the "in class" sessions are powerful, the informal peer to peer contact can be just as powerful. The freedom to "hang out" and talk is priceless.

Third is the support that is received and given from officers regardless of agency. No uniforms or badges are worn, only casual civilian clothing, making everyone equal and open to share and support each other.

The training begins the evening before with check-in at about 4 PM and dinner at about 6:30 PM. The next morning following breakfast the facilitators begin the training by providing some information about the effects of Critical Incidents. The information presented leads to the first participant telling the story of their shooting and the magic begins. The balance between the presentation of information and the relating of individual incidents continues until, on the second day of class, everyone has told their story. As officers begin to tell their stories, support begins to flow from the other members of the group as well as from the facilitators. The support is amazing and one of the most powerful healing tools I have ever seen in action.

As facilitators, the most difficult task we have is to "stay out of the groups way." We want to remember that it is "their" session, not ours. This is good advice for anyone who facilitates group de-briefings and one of the toughest lessons I had to learn. We want to get in and fix something when in actuality, the group is better at fixing things than we are. Believe in the method...it works!

I have facilitated a large number of debriefings over the years and none has seemed more powerful and healing as the OIS workshop at Lake Arrowhead, put on by Riverside County Sheriff's Department. Whether it is the location, the accommodations, or the people...It is amazing.