SPRINT: The Navy's Response to Disasters

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The Navy, like the other branches of military service, has established a team of specially trained individuals who provide assistance in response to disasters, or what are often called "critical incidents." The need for some form of intervention became evident after it was observed that individuals who had been exposed to some type of trauma or were involved in the rescue and/or recovery operations such as shipboard accidents, aircraft mishaps, and combat casualties experienced an increase in alcohol abuse, depression, and anxiety, as well as psychosomatic complaints that included headaches, stomach problems, and various bodily aches and pains. The formation of this critical incident response team came to be called the Special Psychiatric Rapid Intervention Team, or SPRINT.

SPRINT's main purpose is to assist personnel in coping with stress and help facilitate the normal recovery process so that people can return to their previous levels of personal functioning. More specifically, it helps *normal* people cope with *normal* reactions to an *abnormal* event. Studies have shown that individuals exposed to traumatic situations are more susceptible to developing difficulties later on if they are not provided with assistance and support in coping with the trauma. The most common side effect from exposure to these events include those mentioned above, as well as marital problems, suicidal thoughts and/or behaviors, and aggressive behavior towards others.

These problems became widely known following the post-Vietnam era when the term Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD was used to describe an array of symptoms that included reexperiencing the event in the form of upsetting dreams or recollections including thoughts, images, or perceptions; avoiding situations or things that would remind the person of the event, which might include conversations with others or avoiding people and places that would remind them of the event; and physical symptoms such as insomnia, concentration problems, increased startle response and being overly attentive and vigilant of their surroundings. It is important to know that not everyone develops symptoms, but that it seems to be related to such factors as the length of exposure to the traumatic incident, the intensity of the situation, and the individuals overall psychological well-being prior to the event.

For example, someone exposed to intense fighting over an extended period of time, who was experiencing stress and anxiety symptoms prior to deployment, is more at risk of experiencing post-traumatic symptoms than one who spent a brief period of time in combat, saw little fighting, and was doing well emotionally prior to deployment. The Sigonella SPRINT provides services to the European theatre on a rotating call schedule, as well as services to local commands that have experienced or been exposed to a critical

incident. The services that SPRINT provide follow a structured approach which is not therapy but rather a formal group discussion that helps people to talk about the troubling events and images and provides education and teaching on expected symptoms and coping skills to aid in the recovery process. Additional information can be gained by calling the Mental Health Department at 624-4840.