



RESPONDING TO CRISES: STRATEGIES FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT WHEN ASSISTING CITIZENS IN CRISIS

Date: November 23, 2022

Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.

KEY EVENTS

On November 23, 2022, Dr. Dara Rampersad presented *Responding to Crises: Strategies for Law Enforcement When Assisting Citizens in Crisis*. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were how first responders can protect themselves and their mental health, and various de-escalation techniques to use in times of crisis.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

Dr. Rampersad's presentation discussed how first responders can protect themselves and those in need during crises, highlighting verbal and non-verbal communication and how to create an action plan. De-escalation heavily involves active listening and being empathetic to get everyone to stay calm and think rationally.

Question & Answer Period

Dr. Rampersad discussed how having someone to speak to can help not just first responders, but anyone under stress to get that stress out. The presenter also spoke about a generational divide between newer and older first responders and how that came about.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Dr. Dara Rampersad highlighted basic verbal skills as the basis for handling times of crisis but noted the importance of first examining the mindset of the individual engaging the crisis. It is important to eliminate the mindset of “dealing with” an issue, as it promotes negativity and can lead to burnout. This can wear down the mental health of first responders and carry deleterious effects on their life outside of work. Instead, there must be a shift from simply “dealing with” a crisis to fostering assistance and care. This can lead to a more flexible mindset, which allows for better de-escalation of crises and more longevity in the careers of first responders.

Dr. Rampersad put forward that when de-escalating situations in times of crises, it is crucial to understand that everyone has different ways of thinking, attachment styles and backgrounds. It is important to take these into account when considering the needs of individuals in crisis, as that can allow a first responder to tailor their approach to how they communicate.

Dr. Rampersad stated that power and control are factors that are key to minimising crises. When individuals feel as if they are losing power or control in a situation, they may lash out, causing the situation to escalate. First responders will typically have positional power when first engaging a crisis scenario, and others involved may feel as if their power is diminished.

Dr. Rampersad then discussed the phase progression of de-escalation, which represents the process that a first responder may go through when interacting with individuals in crisis. This begins with touching base with a first responder’s own cognitive state. First responders will then introduce themselves and assess the situation. They will then ask the individual personal questions, such as how they feel or how the scenario is affecting them. First responders will then attempt to direct the individual into a teachable moment. Another approach to de-escalation is the “five plays”. After the scene assessment, a first responder introduces themselves as the first play. The second play is to obtain the name of the person in need by asking them, even if the responder already knows it, which allows them to build a rapport. The third play is to thank the person for offering their name or, if they do not offer their name, the first responder moves the fourth play, which is listening to the person in crisis. Afterwards, the first responder thinks about the information received to tailor a response. It is also important to

note that the third play of thanking the person in need should be weaved throughout your conversation.

Adaptability is an essential skill in times of crisis. The speaker presented this as the “never” plan. This means that it is never too early to plan, never too late to change it, and it’s never a bad idea to assess or reassess a plan. This helps to accommodate dynamic situations and new information. After an incident, a team should do a debrief, including discussing the events, how the team members are feeling about it, what was successful, and what can be improved on.

Dr. Rampersad stated that, when planning for crises, intelligence and information is of the utmost importance. This allows first responders to set limits on what they can and cannot do, and allows for first responders to better tailor assistance, as every crisis is different. It also helps responders account for potentially dangerous weapons or tools that might be present at the scene.

When helping someone in need, it is essential to bring them into a less emotional and more rational mindset. This can be done through factual conversations, which can lead to people de-escalating the situation themselves. By directing someone into a more rational state of mind, they will go through less thinking-errors, such as over-generalizations or jumping to conclusions. It may also help to communicate to individuals in crisis that they have the time to help them, alleviating them of time pressure.

First responders must also take into account communication style when assisting individuals in crisis. For instance, an assertive communication style is often what most people strive for. On the other hand, passive people can only take so much before they hit a boiling point, which results in a crisis. Evaluating and choosing communication styles also requires one to think about the aforementioned differences in mindsets and attachment styles. Behaviours that can seem aggressive or controlling should be avoided when trying to de-escalate. This can include shouting, inflammatory language, forcing discussion, or misleading someone. In terms of physicality, crowding or touching someone can cause a crisis to escalate.

Dr. Rampersad suggested that non-verbal communication can be even more important than verbal communication. This includes the manner in which first responders conduct themselves, ensuring they are giving non-verbal cues indicating their care for the individual in crisis. It is also key to listen, not only to the individual in need of assistance, but to oneself and what a first responder’s own thoughts, experiences and instincts tell them. MOREPIES is a model of

active listening skills that should be utilised throughout the five plays. MOREPIES represents the use of minimal encouragers, open-ended questions, reflecting and mirroring, emotional labelling, paraphrasing, “I” messages, effective pauses, and summarising. These active listening techniques are best used when there are no third-party intermediaries present, unless the first responder wishes to bring one in. When listening, it is also key not to take actions personally, as this maintains rationality and control. First responders should also keep an exit plan in mind, meaning a physical exit but also being prepared to disengage from the conversation when needed. A four- to six -feet space between the first responder and person in need will prove effective when applying these active listening techniques.

Question & Answer Period

Discussing how to best approach a situation in which both parties are under insecure and stressful conditions, Dr. Rampersad suggested that, for first responders, it would be incredibly helpful to have someone you can confide in. This can be a spouse, a family member, a friend, anyone you can speak to in confidence.

Regarding generational differences in mindsets towards mental health and job performance, Dr. Rampersad noted a very strong divide, as newer first responders take mental health more seriously. There is also an issue in job retention, as newer recruits may see positions in law enforcement and first response as jobs, rather than callings. This can lead to an issue in communication between those who have been in the job for a long time and newcomers, making it a greater effort to mentor and teach the new generation.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- Verbal and non-verbal communication is the basis for de-escalating a situation. Effective communication takes into account differing mindset, attachment styles, and communication styles.
- Having a plan is key to helping those in crisis. That plan should remain flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances.
- Active listening techniques are used to garner information and also build rapport with a person in need.

- Empathy is crucial when trying to de-escalate a crisis and get someone to think more rationally. Conversely, abrasive or aggressive behaviour will cause a situation to escalate.

Question & Answer Period

- For first responders, taking care of your mental health is paramount to continue working the stressful conditions you are exposed to. One way to relieve some of the stress is to have someone you can talk to in confidence.
- In law enforcement and first response, a generational divide has emerged due to a difference in how working in the field is seen as just a job by new recruits, but older workers see it as a calling. This requires more effort to mentor the newcomers.



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