

Ideas and questions for critical incident work

By Wally McKenzie



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Abstract

Critical Incident Work, perhaps because of its brevity, tends at times to escape the rigorous development of conceptions of practice associated with more general counselling. Here I suggest some ideas in order to deal with this possibility in the belief that our clients are always entitled to receive the best possible counselling from us. Principles of narrative practice in critical incident work are developed through the asking of some particular questions which turn out to become fruitful lines of inquiry.

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In the context of their work, sometimes workers are exposed to traumatic events that produce challenges to their personal functioning and to their work performance. Examples of these events may be experiencing a colleague's suicide, witnessing a serious injury, seeing a train hit another vehicle at a crossing, being present during a bank hold-up, or witnessing a sudden unexpected death. These are major unexpected events where it is critical for those affected to have emotional support as quickly as possible after the event. Part of my work involves the provision of such support, funded by employers through Employee Assistance Programs. The work is called 'critical incident debriefing'.

Critical incidents, as spoken of in this discussion, are usually those incidents or events that produce for people the possibility of trauma in some way. Often they involve a death or severe injury, or the possibility of these. More usual counselling may take place later but critical incident work is often more immediate and usually occurs in the workplace rather than in a counsellor's room.

That employee assistance counselling is available without cost for employees of participating organisations and companies, and often for their families, has become of increasing importance as workplaces become more competitive. Expecting greater productivity from employees produces extra challenges and responsibilities in unusual circumstances. As much as anything else, the legitimising of workplace trauma as requiring emotional support reflects a changing social discourse around the cultural validity of counselling. Historically, many men would not willingly go to counselling, but this program has made it much easier for them.

Starting point

As a starting point, I enquire into the story of the person(s) I am meeting with and especially into the experience(s) they have been thrown into. The challenges of critical incident work are not out of the range of usual counselling, or off in a realm of their own, but the environment in which they sit demands a slightly different thoughtfulness. What I shall present here are some of the particularities of this thoughtfulness. Some of the following ideas come from my own experience and some from conversations with my colleagues who are doing the same work.

Public member's death in front of her children

Recently I met a man who had experienced a traumatic event in his work where a member of the public fell dead in front of him with her children present. After the initial telling of the story of what had happened, I asked a particular question that I often find useful to ask:

What experiences have you ever had in your life history that have proved useful to you at this time?

After a moment of thoughtfulness, he told me about a time when he was a boy and he had disobeyed his grandmother. His disobeying had carried large consequences, at least a broken

leg and arm, but it also taught him a great deal about caring in a special way. This special caring was now available to him and, of course, to others who received of it from him.

‘Tell me some examples from your life that would illustrate this for me so that I could better understand what you are saying’, I asked.

The stories he responded with seemed to suggest that he had developed a big heart from a young age and that this recent event had disturbed his big heart so much that he had cried almost non-stop.

‘I imagine that a large caring heart like this could do nothing else but cry’, I said and asked if this idea made any sense to him at all.

He responded by telling me he had ‘been considering such an idea myself and I think it is probably right’.

There seem to be a few key important questions I have found to be worth asking and the above question is one I often use. I ask it for the effect on persons’ views of themselves because it connects a person with her/his narrative resources. It also attends to the idea that a person could have/should have done more.

The usual response to this question is, ‘Nothing. I have never been in this situation before!’

So the above response stood out as all the more remarkable. If the response is that someone has once before been in a similar situation, the question is still useful as it leads to the possibility of storying the person’s responses to the situation and bringing the rememberings of history forward into the current event.

Narrative ideas for accessing knowledges

The historical knowledge accessed by the question about previous life experiences is not necessarily a professional knowledge (as in nursing or doctoring or psychiatric practice), though it may be. If it is, what is important is that it is also acknowledged as a personal knowledge. This acknowledgement becomes available at the time only by the expression of curiosity about the person and not just about the person’s professional role. Michael White quoted Edward Bruner in this regard: ‘Life experience is richer than discourse. Narrative structures organize and give meaning to experience, but there are always feelings and lived experience not fully encompassed by the dominant story’ (White, 1988, p. 4)

This important question is to assist the client in locating themselves and this traumatic experience within the rich lived experience of their lives. The strangeness of this experience thereby makes sense and can become less stressful or more normalised under the circumstances.

Michael White has also written extensively over the years about questions, particularly as his thinking developed, but never did he suggest that questions were ever random or without some purpose. I suspect that random, seemingly purposeless, questions still can have purpose, even though that purpose may be invisible to the proposer.

When working with the effects of trauma, however, it is even more important to consider questions connected to the 'landscape of action' and the 'landscape of identity or consciousness', (White, 1989, 1991, 2000, 2001, 2004, 2007). These questions tie together the person's identity and the actions taken at the time or after the event. Such actions are not as assumed to be some aberration, rather they are assumed to be consistent with who the person is and has been all along. When we consider the concept of 'agency' with all this, then establishing some sense of coherence about these actions is assumed to be important. For such narrative coherence to develop, it is useful to think about our contribution to the creation of a conversation as an exercise in which we are also engaged in speaking a person(s) into existence (Davies, 1991).

We do not assume that people have acted from some magical or whimsical impulse in a moment of adversity but with agency on their own behalf. The conversation then carries the possibility of speaking into existence persons who, in a critical situation, acted with agency in a manner consistent with their identity, and that such a response itself is not a completely new invention. It speaks to their ongoing work at developing a narrative identity.

Of course, the above question is not the only possible question or, for that matter, the question that will always be asked. It does, in my experience, however, seem to be particularly useful. I had thought my question to be a particularly good one, and finding that I alone of my immediate colleagues had asked it certainly had me rethinking its place in my useful thoughts and ideas.

Jerome Bruner (1990) in speaking of folk psychology as an instrument of culture, notes, 'Another crucial feature of narrative ... is that it specialises in the forging of links between the exceptional and the ordinary' (p. 47). I take Bruner to mean that there are links forged in a useful way by the use of narrative, between this exceptional experience and the historically ordinary experiences in the person's life. This question aims to make those links visible.

The not-too-smart bank hold up

On another occasion I met with a woman who had been a staff member in a bank that was held up. As it happened, the bank had road works surrounding it, so that the bank robber was slowed down while making a getaway and was therefore quickly caught by the police. In this conversation, a focus on agency led to a discussion of the wisdom of the robber in choosing such a bank at such a time. The culmination of the discussion was that the robber could not have been too smart choosing a bank to rob from which only a slow getaway could be made. Such a conclusion simultaneously spoke (in a comparative way) to the identity of the staff member – as being smarter and more resourceful than the robber at least — and, on reflection, affirmed a sense of agency in the situation. This identity conclusion opened up a different meaning than a focus on a 'victim of trauma' narrative might give rise to. This does not exclude a certain victimisation; rather, it offers an alternative meaning as well as or alongside the victim of trauma narrative. The process should not delete one narrative at the expense of the other. Quite often we may find that the identity narrative allows for a better and easier management of the victim narrative.

There were other knowledges that contributed to the life of this story too. For example, a knowledge of herself was embodied in responses to the dramatic event, either personally experienced or perceived by others. Such knowledges were accessed by asking questions along the following lines:

- What did you think when you first saw the person who was robbing the bank?
- What was most surprising for you when you first saw him?
- What alerted you to the seriousness of the situation?
- What was your immediate response to such an unusual situation?

Then there was a knowledge embodied in a personal experience of care for others. There were a range of knowledges that were perhaps implicit, though invisible, in the exercise of commonsense under duress. Each of these knowledges was built up and acknowledged through conversation and contributed to the storying of the identity of the person as an agent in the face of challenge. This identity ran counter to possible stories of a person as hopeless or incompetent, inadequate or inept.

Acknowledging abilities and responses to trauma

In another conversation following a traumatic event, one woman was able to say that she felt okay about a police request to identify a colleague's body after he had committed suicide. When I asked what had made it possible for her to do this, she spoke to me of the close friendship the two had built up together over time. Close friendships always require 'trust' in order to remain close, and she had decided that the death could not suddenly delete this 'trust' between them. Again a story of personal agency and faithfulness to a friend overrode the story of the traumatic effects of viewing the dead body.

So, what rationale do I have for what I do or say? My thinking is that the person I am talking with has just been faced with 'something' quite traumatic and is now faced with the task of developing a story of her/his response. In the process, very likely, a person is faced with wonderings about what might have led to a story of a deficient response.

'Did I do the right thing? What else should I have done? Could I have saved this person's life?'

Quite often these questions of self-doubt (which may have a particularly Western modernist cultural origin) plague the person and their experience of themselves in a totally unfamiliar situation.

My question, 'What experiences have you ever had in your life that could have prepared you for this event?', also aims to enable the person to deconstruct the evaluative discourse and to cut themselves a break. If nothing in life has prepared someone for such a traumatic event, then is it not the more remarkable that he or she was able to respond as they did? And if there was something that prepared the person, then this preparation deserves to be storied as a resource that has hitherto been implicit but now can be articulated.

As the effect of the plaguing (self-doubt) questions on their identity is deconstructed, and as we begin to engage in developing a new more affirming identity, the possibility of expressing a preference for one of these identities arises. The most frequent reply that, 'Nothing has prepared me for this', allows for curious questioning to explore what skills and abilities were needed for the response given. If the opposite response is given, then the same curiosity is still apposite. These questions are often of the 'absent but implicit' kind. Here are some further examples of questions I have used that open up these stories:

- Being first on the scene, what personal abilities did you use, even without thinking, that were important for the occasion?
- When you were asked to identify the body, what did you know about yourself that assured you that you could perform such a grizzly task without emotions rendering you not up to the task?
- How were you able to remain calm and reassuring to the victim, when, if you had thought about it, you may have been anything but calm yourself?
- What of your own abilities did you use to advantage in the situation even if you surprised yourself?

Of course there need to be other questions that map the effects of the event or that connect the person(s) with narrative resources that can be of use:

- How has the stress of all this begun to show itself in your life?
- Do you have any sure-fire way of knowing what is normal under these stress circumstances?
- Because this is so far out of the ordinary, who do you know well enough who would be interested in talking it through on at least a day-to-day basis, even if it didn't seem that important?

For some people it may be:

- What has been the most useful thing so far that anyone has said or done for you?
- What do you suspect will be the most useful thing for you in the coming weeks?
- How will you get the space required for your mind to replenish itself adequately through this time, considering the shock it has had to sustain itself through?
- How will you recognise unhelpful questions that well-intentioned people may ask you?
- When others do have unhelpful questions or suggestions for you, do you have some ideas about how to respond without offending them?

These questions build further on the first ones by reflecting on the effects of the event as quite extraordinary, rather than assuming that it is reasonable to expect unreasonable and extraordinary responses to such an event.

A work environment affected by a traumatic event calls for an evaluation by the person, with our help, of the demanding nature of their work and what is normally expected of the person. With this event now to factor in, the usual workload will be different. It is important to focus the conversation on some preparation for what may be needed:

- What do you imagine will be important for you at work over the next few weeks in order for your mind to get the space it needs to settle again?
- How will your mind get regular breaks away from eternal conversations about all this, while still having appropriate people to talk with when you want to?
- Who could you talk with at work who will be sufficiently understanding and at the same time has sufficient authority to give you the necessary work breaks?

These questions have a focus on mental care in the near future. They acknowledge that permission will be required in all probability and that such events often have an effect not normally visible, so drawing this visibility to the attention of management by the person experiencing the trauma may often be very important.

Speaking with the person's colleagues and others in their life

At times we will have the opportunity to speak with the person's work colleagues, or sometimes with more senior staff, or even with others in their personal life. These conversations provide opportunities to coach those others in how best to interact with the distraught person who may not behave in the usual ways that might be expected:

- Do you have some ideas about what to expect from Fred after the experience he has had?
- What might be a good and respectful way to find out the best thing to do or say?
- How could you find out how long to expect any unusual response to last? How would you be able to note the difference between unacceptable behaviour and short term behaviour that relates to this event?

These questions relate to the traumatic event alone and may not connect with general counselling. They may be viewed as inviting colleagues and family members to 'advocate' for the person who has been affected by the trauma. I am not sure that such advocacy is commonly regarded as acceptable in 'employee assistance' counselling. However, in such exceptional circumstances, I have found managers to be grateful for coaching on how to best support their staff at such times. It has to be remembered that they too have seldom been in such a position before.

Another benefit of inviting forward this advocacy function is that it marks a clear distinction between a personal counselling conversation and a conversation focused on the fostering of constructive relationships in a workplace. When a manager has not been personally referred to counselling, this latter function seems more important and worthy of support through building constructive conversational networks around the person who is receiving counselling. The questions advocate for recovery from trauma in an environment that is also person and event specific. If that is the goal, it is important to intentionally work for an environment where people are actively encouraged to consult with the traumatised person directly, rather than only to do so through experts.

Sometimes we may also be invited into an expert position through the questions asked of us. For example:

- Can you tell how much trauma there is?
- How long will it last?
- What are the reasonable limits of the effects of the trauma?

These invitations need to be resisted and this is best achieved through adopting a stance of curiosity. There are always other ways of asking questions to discover the existence of the information in the local knowledge of the persons involved, rather than in expert pronouncement.

Returning to an approximation of normal

Finally it is possible, and most often useful, for a person experiencing trauma to know and to notice when life has returned to an approximation of normal. This purpose can be explored in a more usual counselling conversation soon after the event by asking questions along the following lines:

- What changes have you or others noticed in you as a person as a result of this experience?
- Have you noticed a change in your outlook on life so that maybe you are quieter, feel flatter, have a shorter fuse, or other changes?

Then, a few sessions later, I might follow up by asking the following further questions:

- Have those same people noticed any new changes that leave them thinking the old you is back again?
- Or have you even noticed that slowly you are becoming your old self again?

I recall meeting a man who heard a colleague cry out as a saw cut his finger off. His wife told him that she really missed his old cheeky sense of humour. A few weeks later she commented to him that it was great to have him back again, cheekiness and all. He commented to me that it had been a relief to hear her say this, as he had been thinking he might never feel normal again. The purpose of these questions, then, is to invite a process of reconnection with a sense of self that is familiar, consistent and feels normal following an experience of trauma.

For further ideas about questions that can be useful in the wake of trauma, I recommend the work of Alan Wade (2007) and Angel Yuen (2009).

Conclusion

While critical incident work requires particular attention to the work being undertaken, the fundamentals of narrative thinking are still the base on which I prefer to work. Examples of this include externalising the problem, historicising the problem, deconstruction and reconstruction, and so on, all of which are done most often through various questions.

Critical incident experiences often leave people on the edge of their ability to manage life in a way where they are reasonably able to make sense of themselves as normally functioning people in an unreasonable situation. It is for this reason that such events are regarded as 'trauma'. We will probably never meet the person(s) again. Counselling in these situations requires a particular thoughtfulness and intentionality in what we do and say in developing a person's identity and the ensuing identity, story they have of themselves.

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