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**Complexity and Context:  
Staff Support Systems in Mental Health  
after Critical Incidents and Traumatic Events**

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## Abstract

This thesis presents an ecological exploration of the experiences of mental health workers faced with critical incidents and traumatic events in the course of their work. A qualitative study, it takes the experiences of twenty workers from a range of disciplines and environments, and examines their preparation for exposure to extreme stress, their passage through the incidents that they chose to relate, and the organisational response to the events.

The central research question explores the knowledge bases currently utilised within trauma and critical incident response, and the degree to which these provide adequate explanatory, practice and evaluation models for responses to workplace incidents. It is examined through the narratives of the mental health workers, who self-define and explore the nature of their preparation for, and experience of, critical incidents and traumatic events in their workplace. The question is contextualised through a review of the knowledge bases of trauma and extreme stress, and of the mental health environment in which the workers practice. A case study of the workplace support known as debriefing illustrates the tensions between current knowledge bases in the area. Informed by this, the key issues of what did or did not work for the participants are explored.

The thesis argues that the paradigm shift signalled by the latest developments within conceptualisations of trauma is not yet complete, and that the ensuing tensions have created debate and confusion in the creation of adequate responses to workplace incidents. Whilst conceptualisations that attempt to address issues of complexity and context are evolving, it is argued that an ecological framework has the potential to both explain and respond to incidents that occur within the mental health environment.

The findings of the research raise issues of complexity in the design and implementation of appropriate support systems, and lend a perspective to the critique of debriefing that has been missing from existing debates. Key principles for the development of safe and sound support systems, and their evaluation, are developed.



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# Glossary

**ACC:** The state compensation and insurance system within Aotearoa New Zealand.

**ACISA:** Australasian Critical Incident Stress Association.

**ANZAC:** The Australian and New Zealand Army Corps.

**Aotearoa New Zealand:** the bicultural term for New Zealand. Aotearoa is usually translated into English as 'land of the long white cloud'.

**ASTSS:** Australasian Society for Traumatic Stress Studies.

**Burnout:** see Appendix 4.

**CBT:** Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.

**CMHT:** Community Mental Health Team.

**Compassion Fatigue:** see Appendix 4.

**Countertransference:** see Appendix 4.

**CSW:** Community Support Worker.

**DESNOS:** Disorders of Extreme Stress Not Otherwise Specified.

**DHB:** District Health Board, a regional provider of Health Services in Aotearoa New Zealand.

**EAP:** Employee Assistance Programmes. Occupational support systems provided usually within larger organisations, and usually provided by external providers.

**ESTSS:** European Society for Traumatic Stress Studies

**Fono:** Samoan term for whanau, or extended family.

**Hapu:** Sub-tribe.

**Hinengaro:** Mind.

**ICISF:** International Critical Incident Stress Foundation.

**ISTSS:** International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies.

**Iwi:** Tribe; people.

**Karakia:** Prayer

**Karanga:** Call of welcome onto a marae.

**Kaumatua:** Elders.

**Kaupapa:** Policy; matter for discussion.

**Kaupapa Maori:** Policy and procedure from a Maori perspective.

**Kawa:** Protocols and process.

**Mana:** Authority, prestige, power.

**Marae:** The meeting place of the whanau or hapu, where decision-making and other family and community events occur.

**Pakeha:** New Zealand people of European ethnicity.

**Rangatiratanga:** Authority, control (of).

**Ritenga:** Practice, custom.

**Rongoa:** Medications, cures.

**Tangihanga:** funeral, a process of mourning.

**Tauiwi:** Peoples from elsewhere, non-Maori residents of Aotearoa New Zealand defined in relation to Maori.

**Tangata Whaiora:** Mental Health consumers, 'people moving towards wellness'.

**Tangata Whenua:** 'people of the land', the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand.

**Tangi:** cry; grieving; funeral.

**Tangihanga:** funeral; wake.

**Tapu:** sacred; prohibited.

**Taro:** a root vegetable and staple diet of many Pacific communities.

**Te Tiriti (O Waitangi)/The Treaty of Waitangi:** The founding document of Aotearoa New Zealand that lays out the terms of the relationship between Iwi Maori and the Crown.

**Tikanga:** correct procedure; method; practice.

**Tinana:** Body.

**Tohunga:** Skilled person, expert.

**Vicarious traumatisation:** see Appendix 4.

**Waiata:** Song; traditional chant.

**Waka:** Canoe.

**Whanau:** (Extended) family.

**Whanaungatanga:** The process of establishing and maintaining connection between people.

**Whare:** House; specifically at times, the wharehau, or meeting house, on a marae.

**Wairua:** Spirit.