

# "IT WON'T HAPPEN TO ME"

A Primer For SAFE One-On-One Work With Inmates

by

Rev. W. Carl Wake, Chaplain  
Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre

April 1996

## **Background**

After five and half years of uneventful one-on-one work with inmates, I was lulled into believing that nothing would ever happen to me. That all changed on November 1, 1995.

During my fifth visit with an inmate, he lost control. I had fully expected that this visit would be the same as the previous four: calm and controlled. But when I turned the conversation to his impending court appearance, the inmate began an angry tirade against "The System," which he felt had so unfairly kept him confined. This soon escalated to a point where I finally had to run from the room. I was that convinced that his wrath was putting me in physical danger.

I do not know when I have ever been so afraid for my life. My heart has never pumped faster, nor have I ever felt such an absolute cold sweat. I went back to my office and found myself shaking uncontrollably and crying my eyes out. I knew I needed help.

I prayed a lot. I talked with a countless number of family, friends, and colleagues. They helped me to carefully dissect the incident and draw invaluable lessons from it. I resolved in my heart that, out of a love for God, and for the professionals with whom I work, I would not keep this to myself. I do not want others to make the same errors I made.

I invited all those doing one-on-one work with inmates in the Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre to attend a workshop entitled, "It Won't Happen to Me," on April 15, 1996. The twelve participants and myself brainstormed around the following subjects: 1. The prevention of critical incidents; 2. Getting out of an incident in which we find ourselves; and, 3. Debriefing critical incidents.

I audiotaped the session, as well as a similar workshop with government chaplains two days later, on April 17, 1996. This paper is a collection of the combined thoughts expressed during the two workshops. Without their contributions, this paper would not have been possible.

## Prevention

### A. Before the Request

Even before you receive that request to meet with an inmate, it is important to remember some of these basics:

#### *Healthy Lifestyle*

Ensure that you are living a healthy lifestyle, which includes proper nutrition, exercise, and rest. Arriving at work well rested and mentally alert will enable you to effectively deal with the pressures of the day.

#### *Get Help for Personal Problems*

Seek immediate competent help for any physical, mental, or spiritual problems present in your life. Avoid putting yourself at risk until you have dealt with these.

#### *Dress Safely*

Avoiding clothing and accessories which could be used against you (e.g. neck ties, scarfs).

#### *Educate Yourself*

Learn as much as possible from the experience of others concerning how to handle potentially dangerous situations, including work with disturbed inmates. Learn physical and verbal control techniques, as well as self-protection skills.

#### *Know Yourself*

Recognize and pay attention to what your body, soul and spirit are telling you in any given situation. Their input could save your life in a critical incident.

Be aware of the fears, prejudices, and assumptions that you bring into your work with different types of inmates. You tend to treat others as you expect them to be. Sometimes the person is totally the opposite.

#### *Network*

Create an environment at work where you can feel free to share your feelings with your colleagues. Be there for one another. You just do not know when you will be the person in need.

### B. Responding to the Request

When responding to an inmate request, here are some ways to reduce risk to you:

#### *Get the Facts*

**Inmate File** - Read the client's file beforehand. Look for any indication of potential risk to you (e.g. charges, diagnosis).

**OMS** - If you have access to the Offender Management System (OMS), determine where the client is living in the institution and whether there are any supervision concerns. A person in Super-Max is of more potential risk than one in Minimum.

**Staff** - Consult with correctional officers and other staff. Inform them that you are responding to an inmate request. Ask them if they have any concerns about you meeting with the inmate in question. Ask them where they would recommend that you meet with the client.

This consultation could have the spin-off effect of making the officers feel respected and consulted. There could very well be a pay-off in increased cooperation in the future. The officers

are also an excellent source of useful information on your client's behaviour and recent events in their lives (e.g. "Dear John" letters; sleeping all day; depression).

**The Inmate** - Meet with the client first at the door of his/her cell, or in a well-supervised area of the institution. Stand clear of his/her reach. Get a sense as to why s/he wishes to see you. Ask about the nature of his/her charges. Avoid shaking hands with an inmate through the bars.

#### *To Meet or Not to Meet?*

Depending on the nature of the request, sometimes the matter can be effectively handled during that first meeting at the grill.

Should further contact in a more confidential environment be considered necessary, you must now decide whether you will continue meeting with the person, or refer the matter to another staff member. Here are some things to consider:

#### Trust Your Own Judgment

Ask yourself if you felt comfortable (safe) with the person. If not, why not? What could be changed to make you more comfortable? Refer the client to another staff member if you still feel ill at ease.

Should a referral not be possible, request that a colleague sit in on any sessions you may have with the client. If this too is not possible, choose a safe location, insist on having an officer nearby at all times, and limit the length of the visit.

#### Trust Correctional Staff

It is wise (not to mention, extremely good politics) to heed the advice of the correctional officers you have just consulted. Work with the officers and determine where and when the visit should occur. They have a vested interest in assuring a safe visit.

#### Refuse To Be Pressured

Ask yourself if this is the best time for YOU to meet with the person. If for some reason you are not "into it," or "up to it," at the time, feel free to choose a more suitable time for yourself.

#### Remain Objective

There is a tendency to say to yourself that, "Nothing has happened to me before; nothing will happen to me now." Refuse to be lulled into that feeling of invincibility.

There is also a tendency to over-react when a correctional officer questions your sanity for wanting to meet with certain inmates. But the stubborn defense of your sense of duty to see any and all inmates in need could very well put you into danger.

Avoid the "Saviour Complex." The inmate and the institution will not fall apart if you cannot personally handle all requests. There is no shame in referring a client to another person, or choosing a better time for an interview.

#### Choose A Safe Location

Degree of **supervision**, **accessibility**, and **seating** are all factors in determining the physical safety of an interview room.

Make sure that the correctional officer in charge is aware of your meeting with the inmate. Negotiate with him/her beforehand how often you would like him/her to check in on you. You may also wish to arrange with a colleague to phone you should s/he hear that things are getting out of hand.

Choose a room that has a window and is closely supervised. Make sure that the door is not locked from the outside.

Sit in such a way that the inmate and/or a piece of furniture do not block your escape route. Sit in plain view of the window and near a panic button, if possible.

If your client is a member of the opposite sex, try to leave the door at least partially open. Take accurate and detailed clinical notes. Have the officer check in on you more often.

### **Getting Out of a Critical Incident**

Sooner or later you are going to find yourself in a situation over which you have had no control. No matter how many precautions you have taken, there will be times when you walk into a critical incident waiting to happen. The inmate gets out of control. What do you do?

#### *Change the Subject*

If you notice that a particular topic of conversation has inadvertently precipitated a critical incident, try to change the subject before the situation escalates further.

Change the topic of conversation, but not completely. This would create resistance in the person. A different, but related subject could help change their focus and get them past where they are stuck.

(E.g. If an inmate threatens suicide, you could say, "So you want to kill yourself. What happens afterwards? Who'll come to your funeral. Would your death hurt anyone?")

#### *Empathize with the Inmate*

It is not wise to become defensive, or antagonize and challenge an angry person, especially if s/he is psychotic. Violence is useless because they live in an environment where violence and intimidation reign supreme. Refuse to play by their rules. In a calm manner, demonstrate that you have understood their point of view and that you are there for them.

#### *Never Admit Fear*

Never, under any circumstances, tell a person that you are afraid. It is okay to say that you are angry, that they are doing inappropriate things, but never that you are afraid. This could precipitate an attack because you are transferring a tremendous sense of power and control to the inmate. Even if you're quaking in your boots, do not admit to being afraid.

Nor should you in any way give an inmate cause to be afraid. In the case of a chaplain, an inmate should feel safest with you. S/he expects the chaplain to trust him/her. So if you are afraid, it could make the person afraid and uncomfortable.

#### *Model Appropriate Behaviour*

By your voice and body language demonstrate that you are in control of the interview at all times. Model a controlled behaviour for the inmate.

#### *Set Limits*

Point out negative behaviour to the inmate. Sometimes s/he is just not aware of what s/he is doing. (E.g. "I can't understand what you are trying to say when you do that. Are you okay? Do you want to stop and take a breather?")

If the person begins to make you feel uncomfortable, say, "Stop. Your \_\_\_\_\_ (name of the inappropriate behaviour) is not appropriate. I am very much interested in what you have to say. But I cannot continue when you are doing this. What is your choice?", or, "You better not yell so loudly. The guards will be here in a moment if you continue." You are telling the person that there are consequences to his/her actions. Let the person know that s/he have crossed a limit that is not acceptable.

### *Let It Ride*

Sometimes it is best just to let the person ventilate. Give the person permission to express themselves within certain limits. Stay quiet and let them finish. Chaplains are often the only people with whom inmates (or staff for that matter) will feel safe enough to vent.

### *Remain Objective*

Recognize that it is only to be expected that inmates will be angry, bitter, and frustrated considering the environment in which they live. The person may also be suffering from a legitimate health problem that is not being adequately addressed (e.g. tooth ache, headache). Sometimes, too, an action may seem strange to us but is perfectly logical in the person's cultural milieu. Remain objective and give the person the benefit of the doubt.

(An example was given where a Muslim immigrant, who was grieving the death of a loved one, was seen by a novice chaplain. What was interpreted as out-of-control psychotic behaviour was, in fact, acceptable and expected grieving according to his culture. The chaplain just did not know and was therefore quite disturbed by the incident.)

### *Demonic Activity*

Now that I have your attention . . . yes, demonic activity. It would be so simple to stoically refuse to consider this possibility. But what if. . .? There are rational, logical people who leave this explanation open for discussion. "Be sure you know what you're dealing with," was one chaplain's challenge. Well suppose it does exist, would you know how to handle it? I would be interested in your feedback.

### *When Is Enough Enough?*

It is time to stop and take a break when you feel uncomfortable or threatened. Watch for body language. Listen for a change in tone of voice, as well as verbal cues (e.g. changes in vocabulary, including cursing and talk of killing).

### *When Do You Hit The Panic Button?*

When you have lost control of the situation, after a clear and fair warning has been given to stop, hit the button. One correctional officer urged, "Don't be afraid to push that button sooner. Officers really don't mind responding." There is no shame in not taking chances.

## **Debriefing**

There is quite a lot of good material available on "Critical Incident Stress Debriefing" these days. I wish only to report the thoughts expressed by those who attended the workshops.

### *Talk with Others*

Talk with as many people as necessary for you to feel on top of the trauma you have experienced. Find people whom you trust. With them examine the incident from all sides.

### *Be Open and Learn*

As you rehearse the matter over and over in your mind, alone and with others, be open to the lessons that arise and learn for next time. Recognize where you did not know what to do and ask questions.

### *Be Slow To Accept Guilt*

It is important to realize that sometimes there is nothing you could have said or done differently. The incident would have happened anyways.

### *Get Back In There*

When you fall off a horse or a bicycle, it is imperative that you get back on right away or you will never get over your fear. That principle is equally true here.

### *Be Patient*

This process takes time. Expect this and work through it at your own pace. You will know when you are ready to put it all behind you.

### *What Is Available?*

The best resource we have for debriefing is our network of family, friends and colleagues. The Psychology Department of your institution is another common resource available to you. Let us not forget that your chaplains are also trained in dealing with those in crisis. The Employee Assistance Program (E.A.P.) is present in many institutions as well.

It was noted that Psychology, Chaplaincy, and the E.A.P. are not readily used after an incident. There seems to be a stigma attached, which states that you are weak if you admit that an incident got to you. It is not mandatory in the correctional setting to go through debriefing.

## **Conclusion**

This has been but a brief overview of a very broad topic. I trust that it has proven helpful to you as you have made connections with your own situation.

My greatest hope is that, by my speaking out, someone would be kept from entering into a potentially fatal incident. I came too close myself. May God protect you.