

Frequently Asked Questions re: Peer Debriefing

What is a debriefing?

- An intentional, scheduled and structured time with a caring, trained friend when we can “tell our story” after a traumatic, stressful or significant incident.
- A chance to recount the facts of our story and how we feel about what happened.
- An opportunity to learn about common reactions to trauma which then helps us understand that our stress symptoms and feelings are normal.
- An opportunity to learn self-care strategies
- An opportunity to reflect on how we are doing and then connect with other available resources.
- Sometimes a “first step” down the necessary path of grief, recovery and healing.

What is a debriefing NOT?

- It is *not* counseling or therapy.
- It is *not* something you just do when people are not handling a situation well.
- It is *not* an opportunity for the listener to satisfy their curiosity or to share their own story; it’s not a social event.
- It is *not* an opportunity for administration to gather information, evaluate or confront.

What do debriefings do for us?

- We receive support, care, understanding and acceptance.
- We get connected with others at a time when we most need and appreciate someone to share our burdens or joys. We receive feedback and encouragement.
- Debriefings assist us in processing our experience so as to gain perspective. This process helps us integrate the story into our lives.
- Debriefings provide information about the kinds of reactions we can expect to experience after a traumatic or significant event.
- Debriefings teach us how to manage potential symptoms and promote healing.
- Debriefings help us to know if follow up counseling is needed.

What happens if we don't do debriefings?

- We miss the opportunity to receive all of the above.
- We might be tempted to believe that the experience and our feelings about it are not important.
- We may go on with, and make decisions based on, misinformation or misperceptions about the experience or its impact.

Who can benefit from debriefing?

- Anyone of us who has had a traumatic, stressful or significant experience could benefit from a debriefing.
- Probably everyone at some point(s) in their life would appreciate a debriefing.

For what kinds of situations do we need a debriefing?

- Any critical incident or process, especially those involving:
 - Violence or threat of violence
 - Significant change or loss
 - Death or near death
 - Serious medical situations, accidents or physical injury
 - Intense emotions (i.e., grief, fear, anxiety)
 - Re-entry
 - Unusual and shocking experiences
- Significant positive events are also times when the support and care received through a debriefing can help us process deep feelings. For example:
 - Completion projects (Bible translation, church building, workshop, etc.)
 - End of ministry in a certain area
 - Graduation from a school or study program
 - Any significant accomplishment or victory

What if someone refuses to receive a debriefing?

- Participation in debriefings is best if it is voluntary. However, missions may want to consider making policy that makes debriefings routine or standard operating procedure for certain situations. Group debriefings (when an incident has affected more than one person) can be extremely helpful. Ethically, participation should be voluntary, and ultimately it is best to respect a person's wishes and gently continue to offer help.

When is a debriefing best done?

- Even before the debriefing, supportive contact and practical helps are what is most needed.
- After the situation has been stabilized and our immediate physical needs have been met, then a person may be ready to talk about what has happened.
- It's never really too late, offer a debriefing even if a significant amount of time has passed.

Where is a debriefing best done?

- Where we feel safe and in a place where privacy and quiet are guaranteed, with no interruptions.

Who should debrief us?

- A good listener.
- Someone we feel safe with, someone we trust.
- Preferably, someone trained in the "art of debriefing", though not necessarily a trained counselor.
- Someone who has been through and emotionally worked through a similar incident can be very helpful.

Are there times when a trained counselor should be consulted?

- Sometimes a debriefing does not provide all the help a person needs. A trained counselor may need to be consulted before or after a debriefing if the critical incident involves any of the following:
 - significant violence
 - death
 - multiple losses
 - serious assault
 - previous emotional problems
 - children

How long does a peer debriefing take?

- Half an hour, an hour, two hours, three hours, half a day...it all depends on what we've experienced. Most peer debriefings would be from 30 minutes to 3 hours.

Does anything need to happen after a debriefing?

- It is often helpful if, a few days later, we have an opportunity to talk again with the person who debriefed us, even if only for a few minutes to “check in”.
- Another time to check in or follow up is near the “anniversary” of the trauma or any other date or situation that might trigger a reminder of the event.
- Sometimes a debriefing does not fully address the issues that arise from a trauma and professional counsel may be needed.

If someone continues to have problems after a debriefing, does that mean that the debriefing was not done well?

- Not necessarily. See immediately above. Certain traumatic incidents have a higher risk rate for enduring post-traumatic symptoms and counseling or other types of follow up care may be indicated. The individual should have a handout that identifies symptoms that would indicate the need for a clinical follow up.

How about a report of some kind?

- Since debriefings are for *us*, not for our organizations, there is no report given afterwards.
- In some situations, with the person’s consent, a verbal or written report with follow up recommendations may be given to administration.
- Debriefings are confidential unless there is some risk that the person may be harmful to themselves or others or if the person gives permission for some information to be given to another.

(Portions adapted from materials by Laura Mae Gardner, Wycliffe Bible Translators/SIL and Toby Snelgrove of Easton-Snelgrove, Inc, West.) Vancouver, B.C.