

Frequently Asked Questions about Peer Crisis Debriefing

What is a debriefing?

- An intentional, scheduled and structured time with a caring, trained person 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 invitation to talk about an incident without pressure and with full choice about how detailed or how deeply we want to share our story.
- An opportunity to learn about common reactions to trauma which then helps us understand that our stress reactions 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 that’s done only 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.
- It is *not* the only response that people need after crisis events.

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 reactions 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 a 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 might we ask for 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
- Unusual and shocking experiences

What if someone refuses to receive a debriefing?

- Participation in debriefings should always be voluntary. However, organizations may want to consider making policy that offers debriefings as a routine or standard operating procedure for certain situations so as to reduce the stigma of wanting or needing help.
- 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. There may be issues with the group that prevent some group members from feeling safe with the group; they may be best served with an individual debriefing.
- Peer Responders are encouraged to respect someone's decision, abide with them in the ways they are comfortable and continue to offer help (offer, respect, abide).

When is a debriefing best done?

- Before the debriefing, supportive contact and practical helps are usually what is most needed.
- After the situation has been stabilized and our immediate physical needs have been met, then we may be ready to talk about what has happened.
- It's never really too late to receive 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 skill 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 counseling may be needed.
- Ongoing practical care is almost always needed and appreciated.

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

Not necessarily. Certain traumatic incidents have a higher risk rate for enduring post-traumatic reactions and counseling or other types of follow up care may be indicated. The person who is debriefed should be given a handout that identifies reactions that, if they persist, 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.
- Sometimes the person asks for a report to be given to another family member, team member, pastor or leader. In that case a brief report, sharing how the person is doing and any recommendations concerning coping, can be shared verbally or in written form. The content of a verbal report should always be discussed with the person before it is shared. Any written report should be reviewed for accuracy by the one who was debriefed before it is passed on to anyone else.
- Debriefings are confidential unless there is some risk that the person may be harmful to themselves or others.

Additional Resources/Supporting Documents:

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