

Seven Steps of Crisis Debriefing

Crisis Debriefing Step One - Pre-Debriefing:

Before doing a crisis debriefing, consider the following in order to determine if a crisis debriefing is appropriate for the situation.

Assess the overall situation

- Is the situation stable and are people feeling safe?
- Have immediate needs been met?
- What was the request for and what is the actual need?

Consider organizational issues

- Is this debriefing required by the administration or by corporate policy and how has this been communicated and received?
- Or was it offered and gladly accepted or requested by the one to be debriefed?
- If the administration is involved, is it clear to them what a debriefing is and what it is not?

Gather Information

Keep in mind that information gained secondhand may not be totally accurate.

- What actually happened? What was the context?
- Who was involved (directly or not so directly) and needs debriefing?
- What is the person's history in terms of stress, trauma or loss?
- What was the person's functional and emotional status just prior to crisis?
- When and where should the debriefing take place?
- What ages, languages, and cultures are represented?

Be Aware of More Vulnerable Individuals

Certain ones impacted by the crisis may be at a higher risk for a complicated recovery and may need specialized or more intensive care. Find out if anyone impacted by the crisis falls into any of these categories:

1. Children (particularly those who have experienced separation from parents or caregivers)
2. Pregnant women
3. Parents with babies or small children
4. History of mental illness (depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder)
5. Experience of multiple losses
6. Serious physical injury sustained
7. First hand exposure to life threat or traumatic sights

Self-Assessmentⁱ

- Am I the one to do this or is there someone better suited for whatever reason?
- What would be the pros and cons of me doing this debriefing?
- Am I effective in this language and culture context?
- Could there be any reason that they would be uncomfortable with me?
- Do they respect me?
- Do they feel safe with me?
- Do we have any unresolved conflicts that might get in the way?
- Am I in a good place physically, emotionally and spiritually to do this?
- What will be the impact of this debriefing on our relationship?
- How will I manage this impact?
- Is there someone else who could do this who does not have the same type of relationship?
- Would I be available for the possible follow-up needed?

Logistical Preparation

- Send Frequently Asked Questions about Crisis Debriefing.ⁱⁱ
- If there is any possibility of misunderstanding on the part of the person(s) to be debriefed or their administrator (if they are involved) about what a debriefing is and is not, share clear information to clarify their understanding.
- Set aside up to three hours when you both will be rested and able to focus.
- Arrange for a setting that is private, quiet and free of interruptions.
- Be sure the setting is comfortable: good ventilation and temperature, chair is comfortable, something to drink, tissues available, etc.

Crisis Debriefing Step Two – Contact:

Goal

The goal of making contact is to establish rapport, to communicate respect and compassion, and to clarify your role in response to their need.

Initial Contact with someone you do not know

Introduce yourself by name and ask their name. Let them know what organization you are with and that you are offering a crisis debriefing if they are interested.

Initial Contact with someone you know

Let them know you who sent you and that you are a trained debriefer available to help them.

Expectations

Find out if they are aware you were coming and if they are expecting to receive a crisis debriefing. Show them the Frequently Asked Questions about Crisis Debriefingⁱⁱⁱ and give them opportunity to ask any questions about the process. Note, ideally this is done ahead of time.

Clarification and Confidentiality

Give them a brief overview of what debriefing is. For example, “A crisis debriefing is the opportunity for you to talk about what happened and how it affected you. I’ve been through crisis situations myself and didn’t always have somebody to talk to afterwards. It’s not an evaluation and there’s no report that comes out of it. I’m here to listen and to give you some support for this situation you’ve just been through. I also have some information for you about common reactions that many experience after crisis situations.” Ask if they have any more questions.

Permission

Ask if they would like to receive a crisis debriefing now that they understand what it is and if they are alright with you being the one to do the crisis debriefing. If they say “no” or that they are “not sure”, respect their wishes and see if they would still like to receive the handouts. Be
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available for them if they want to make further contact. Ask if there is someone else they would prefer to debrief with. If they agree to do the debriefing with you, then make sure you are in a comfortable, private place and proceed with the crisis debriefing.

Background and Context

Before asking them to tell you the story of what happened, ask them what was going on for them prior to the crisis. You might ask it this way, “Before we start talking about what happened to you, I wonder if you could tell me about anything important that was going on in your life in the weeks leading up to this event? This will help us to better understand the impact of the crisis.” As the crisis debriefer, be listening for relevant Pre-Crisis Factors^{iv} that will impact their reaction to the trauma.

Crisis Debriefing Step Three – Story:

Goal

To have the person describe the facts, senses, and thoughts they experienced during and after the crisis.

Rationale

Through reviewing the incident in the calmness of a directed conversation, they are able to vent their initial reaction, increase their awareness of how the incident has affected them, begin to gain a more rational view of the incident, and experience being heard in a non-judgmental way by at least one person.

Process

Once you have agreement, **invite** them to tell you what happened from the beginning. Let them tell the details as they choose to without probing or pressing for details. If you sense that they are rushing through the story and leaving out details that are important to them, invite them to slow down and take their time. The time period they cover is whatever is most relevant to them. Be careful to not assume that the story is finished at the point that the crisis ended.

Open-Ended Vs. Closed Questions

Ask questions that allow them to tell a detailed story. Avoid asking questions that can be answered with a “yes” or a “no”.

Open Question Examples:

1. How did it all start?
2. What happened then?
3. What else happened?
4. What went through your mind as this was happening?

Closed Question Examples (using example of an armed robbery):

1. What time did this happen?
2. How much money did they take?
3. What kind of guns did they have?
4. Did you think of what would happen next?

Sensory Focus: As you listen to the story, take note of their sensory experience – sounds, sights, and smells especially. The reason to pay attention to this is that powerful sensory experiences may later be related to post-trauma triggers.^v When you get to Step 5 – Education, you can refer back to these sensory experiences and educate them about potential triggers. If they have not referred to any sensory experiences, you might explain to them that the sensory experiences we have during a trauma are so powerful that we sometimes re-experience them later and then follow with a question like, “What sights, sounds, or smells stand out to you as you remember what happened?”

Crisis Debriefing Step Four: Impact

Goal

To give someone the opportunity to talk about the emotional impact of the event.

Rationale

Most people experience a number of emotions both during and after a crisis event. Feelings might include fear, helplessness, anger, sadness, guilt or perhaps even some positive feelings of peace, calm, or gratitude. Asking the person some open ended questions about the impact will

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give them opportunity to identify and process this range of feelings which may sometimes be conflicting and hard to understand. While it could be that someone has already shared the facts of the story to others, this may be the first time they are given opportunity to talk about their feelings and the meaning associated with the event.

Cautions

This is potentially the most emotional and difficult point of the debriefing process. **It is important to not force the person to talk about something they are not ready to discuss, but rather to gently ask the questions and respect their desire to discuss it or bypass it.** Some people are not comfortable with words like “feelings” or “emotions” and it might be better to use more a neutral word such as “reactions”. Also note your own comfort level with intense or painful emotions and be aware of the temptation to move on too quickly or shut them down based on your own discomfort. The focus should be on their needs, not yours.

Process

In previous stages we have heard the facts of the story, their sensory experiences, and thoughts they had during the event. Likely they have made reference to some feelings they have had during these stages. At this point we can refer back to words they have used and say something like:

“You mentioned that when _____ happened, you felt _____. What other feelings did you have during this event?”

If the person has not mentioned any feelings, we might say:

“People often have a variety of emotions when things like this happen. Some might feel scared or sad or angry. What feelings were you aware of?”

This can be followed with questions like:

1. *“What was the hardest part of all this for you?”*
2. *“What kind of feelings (or reactions) have you experienced since this happened?”*
3. *“What kind of feelings (or reactions) are you experiencing now?”*

These last two questions can naturally lead into Step 5 - Education.

Crisis Debriefing Step Five – Education:

Goal

To provide information about common reactions to trauma, normalize these reactions, and teach them techniques that will help them cope with these reactions.

Rationale

Educating trauma victims about common reactions to trauma helps them to understand that what they are experiencing is a normal reaction to an unusual situation. This has a calming impact on them. Education about specific coping techniques will serve to empower trauma victims, reduce their feelings of helplessness, and increase the likelihood of resilient responses to stress.

Handouts

Educational handouts can be introduced, reviewed, practiced, and then given to trauma victims with instructions about how they can be useful in the future.

1. Common Reactions to Trauma – Use the Common Reactions to Trauma handouts with adults and adolescents^{vi}. Explain that this is a list of reactions that many people experience during and after a trauma like the one they have been through. Ask them to look over the list and talk about any that they have experienced. Ask if they have any questions.

After they have finished talking about the Common Reactions, leave a copy of the handout with them. Encourage them to review it periodically to see how things are changing for them. Let them know that most people will experience gradual improvement over time. Encourage them to seek counseling if any of the reactions persist.

The Common Reactions to Trauma for Children^{vii} and Helping Children in the Midst of Crisis^{viii} can be given to parents so that they know what to expect and begin to have ways to discuss the impact of the trauma with their children

2. Post-Trauma Triggers - Use the Post-Trauma Triggers handout.^{ix} Refer back to any sensory experiences they mentioned during the Story or Impact stage. Help them understand that because the brain has recorded these experiences and connected them with danger, they may

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find themselves having strong reactions to similar sensory experiences. Show them the Post-Trauma Triggers handout and leave a copy with them. Ask if they have had any experiences like this already and help them to anticipate experiences they may have in the future.

3. Grounding Techniques – The Grounding Techniques handout^x may be needed or practiced during the crisis debriefing or simply given as a tool to be used later. This handout is very useful for managing post-trauma triggers as well as responding to any post-trauma flashbacks or heightened anxiety or stress.

4. Optional Handouts – Other handouts which may be useful, depending on the person’s reactions and expressed needs include:

- Deep Breathing^{xi}
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation^{xii}
- Anger Management^{xiii}
- Cross-Cultural Stress Inventory^{xiv}
- Understanding Grief^{xv}

Crisis Debriefing Step 6 - Current Functioning and Coping Plan:

Goal

To give the person opportunity to talk about how the crisis is affecting them currently, find out how they have coped in the past, and work on a coping plan for the future.

Rationale

Oftentimes, after a crisis, people may try to go back to “life as normal” with a demanding schedule. Also, after a crisis, a person may feel some urgency to make key decisions related to their living, work, financial, or social situation. People need support in giving themselves permission to go a bit slower in the coming days and weeks and to give themselves time to recuperate before making major decisions. Taking into account how the person is currently functioning, the peer responder can then help the person to develop a plan that will facilitate healthy coping in the aftermath of the trauma.

Process

- Summarize what you have heard the person say about how they have been impacted and how they are coping. Ask them if your summary is accurate and if they have anything to add.
- Ask some additional questions about how the person is doing in order to better identify how they are functioning and what their short term and long term needs might be.^{xvi}
- Summarize what you have heard them say about their short term and long term needs and ask them what else comes to mind.
- Ask the person a question like, *“What things do you normally do to cope after you’ve been through something difficult?”* By doing this you are affirming their ability to cope well.
- Use the handout entitled *Ways to Cope after a Trauma*.^{xvii} Give it to the person and allow them time to read it over. Ask them what they see on the list that they are already doing. Then ask what they see that they would like to do more of from the Possible Things to Do list and less of from Things to Avoid list.
- Help them to come up with an action plan of what they will do in the coming days and weeks to lower their overall stress and get the support they need. Ask who else in their life can be involved to help give them support.

Crisis Debriefing Step 7 - Follow-Up:

Goal

To make appropriate referrals for follow up care and to set up a time for future contact so that you can see how they are doing.

Rationale

The debriefing is just one part of a broad range of care that the person will need following the crisis. What you have provided to them is a vital service but wholistic care means accessing a variety of services from within the community to continue to support their recovery.

Additionally a follow up call, visit, or email from the debriefer to ask how one is doing demonstrates ongoing care and concern and also gives opportunity to see if other issues have come up related to the crisis.

Process

- Summarize what you have heard them say about any ongoing needs including physical, emotional, medical, relational, and spiritual issues.

- Make recommendations for them to speak with resource people who can help them to address these issues.
- Make referrals to specialized care when appropriate.^{xviii} If you have contact information, leave it with them. Otherwise make a plan to provide them with this information afterwards.
- Let the person know that you would like to follow up with them. Depending on how they respond, you might set up another time to meet or plan to contact them the following week.

After the Crisis Debriefing

Documentation – Make notes about the debriefing including details that will be important to remember as you make referrals or follow-up.^{xix}

Self-Care – You will be impacted by doing this crisis debriefing and so it is important to also have a plan for yourself to rest, recover, process the experience, and lower your own stress.^{xx}

Follow-up Contact – If you have promised to follow-up with the debriefee, make sure you follow through on your commitment. When you contact them, you can ask questions like:

“How have things been going for you since we last talked?” or “What other thoughts or feelings have you had since we talked?” or “How has it gone for you as you’ve implemented some of the coping plan we discussed?”

Summary of Seven Steps of Crisis Debriefing:

Step 1: Pre-Debriefing

Gather relevant information regarding the critical incident and the needs of the organization and individuals before beginning the debriefing process. Do a self-assessment to determine your effectiveness. Set up logistics of time and location. Send FAQ about Crisis Debriefing.

Step 2: Contact

Introduce yourself. Help the person understand your role and explain the crisis debriefing process. Answer any questions they may have. Establish rapport. Discover pre-crisis factors.

Step 3: Story

Invite the person to describe what happened just before, during, and after the critical incident. Ask open-ended questions that help them explore the facts, thoughts, and sensory experience related to the event. Examples of questions are:

- So, what happened next?
- What were you thinking at that time?
- What did that look like?

Step 4: Impact

Invite, but do not pressure the person to share the emotional impact of the event. For some people it is helpful to avoid asking directly about feelings but rather to ask questions like:

- What was the hardest part of all this for you?
- What kind of reactions were you experiencing then?

Step 5: Education

Help the person understand that the reactions they are experiencing are common or typical reactions to traumatic events. You can explain to the person why they are experiencing some of these reactions. Using handouts with lists of common reactions, help them to identify the ones they are experiencing, and normalize this experience for them. Help them anticipate triggers they might experience in the future. Use other specific handouts relevant to the person.

Step 6: Current Functioning and Coping

Find out how they have coped in the past. Explore further (assess) how they are doing now. Help them create a current coping plan.

Step 7: Follow-Up

Ask them if there is anything else they would like to talk about or ask before you end. Set up follow up time if needed or just informally check on them within the week.

Additional Resources/Supporting Documents:

- ⁱ Peer Responder Self-Assessment (5.2)
- ⁱⁱ FAQ about Crisis Debriefing (10.2)
- ⁱⁱⁱ Frequently Asked Questions about Crisis Debriefing (10.2)
- ^{iv} Pre-Crisis Factors Checklist (6.5)
- ^v Post-trauma triggers (8.13)
- ^{vi} Common Reactions to Trauma (Adults - 6.6, Adolescents - 6.7)
- ^{vii} Common Reactions to Trauma – Children (6.8)
- ^{viii} Helping Children in the Midst of Crisis (7.8)
- ^{ix} Post-Trauma Triggers (8.13)
- ^x Grounding Techniques (8.9)
- ^{xi} Deep Breathing (8.10)
- ^{xii} Progressive Muscle Relaxation (8.11)
- ^{xiii} Help with Anger (7.6)
- ^{xiv} Cross-Cultural Stress Inventory (4.5)
- ^{xv} Understanding Grief (7.2)
- ^{xvi} See Crisis Assessment - BASICS Model (6.4) for examples of questions that may be appropriate to ask in order to further determine their needs.
- ^{xvii} Ways to Cope After a Trauma (7.7)
- ^{xviii} Guidelines for Referral (8.14)
- ^{xix} Crisis Response Documentation (9.4)
- ^{xx} Care for the Caregiver (Section 11)