Conducting a Debriefing  
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Personnel  

There are often three roles for people facilitating debriefings:  

*Lead Facilitator:* This person leads the debriefing and is responsible for facilitating most of the process. She/he opens the debriefing, explaining what a debriefing is (see chapter six, page 15), ensures that participants are there voluntarily and know what they are getting into, develops groundrules, answers questions and guides the group process through asking questions and validating responses.  

*Assist Facilitator* – This person takes responsibility for the teaching phase of the debriefing.  

*Support Facilitator*– This person is available to spend time with anyone who wants or requires one-on-one support. Often it is made clear that if anyone leaves the room during a debriefing, the support facilitator will accompany them to check and see how they are doing. The Support Facilitator often takes responsibility for distributing self-care and normal reaction handouts after the debriefing.  

When conducting debriefings for uniformed personnel (e.g. police, fire, EMT) it is usually helpful to have a trained peer as the Lead Facilitator and a clinically trained person as the Assist Facilitator. The support person is often a trained peer. However, roles can be flexible as long as the facilitators have a plan of action and a rationale for conducting the debriefing in a certain way.  

Space and Materials  

It is helpful to conduct the debriefing in a room that offers privacy and to seat people in a circle, with or without a table in the middle. It can be helpful to have a flipchart or blackboard for the Assist Facilitator to use for the teaching phase. Coffee or snacks can help people to feel at ease although it is important to not overdo this as it can become a distraction. It can be helpful to have tissues available. Some teams make up note cards for facilitators to use that have the phases of the debriefing and appropriate questions written out to help facilitators to stay on track in a coordinated fashion.  

Groundrules  

These are shared at the beginning of the debriefing and the Lead Facilitator usually suggests some while also asking the group if there are any others that would be helpful for their process. Examples of typical groundrules:  

- Confidentiality – Personal information shared during the debriefing will not be shared outside of the room.
• No writing – This is to support confidentiality and to help participants to focus on one another and the process in the moment.
• No cell phones, pagers or radios
• No media – This also supports confidentiality and protects participants from violations of privacy or exploitation.
• Speaking for oneself – Participants are encouraged to talk about their own experiences, not to speculate about what happened to others or to intellectualize about what happened.
• Right to pass – If a question is asked and someone wants to pass, they are able to do this without needing to put forward an explanation.
• Sharing the airspace – It is very helpful to put this out before the debriefing begins to encourage everyone to participate but to also encourage participants to not take up too much group space at the expense of others. It is much easier to monitor this as a facilitator if it has been agreed on as a groundrule before the debriefing begins.
• The debriefing is not an operational critique – It helps to clarify this before the debriefing.

**Asking Questions** (See the questions listed in Appendix 6:2)

It usually helps to begin a debriefing by asking questions that go in a circle, often choosing the person on the Lead Facilitator’s left to start the process. This may be the best way to proceed for the next two or three questions. This has the effect of including everyone and ensuring that there all voices are heard. Once people are participating, it is helpful to loosen the facilitation reigns and to let people respond to questions spontaneously (‘popcorn style’). If this leads to monopolizing by a few participants, the facilitator can always return to going around the room in a more structured fashion.

**Time and Size of the Group**

A debriefing usually takes between 1 and 2 ½ hours, depending on the number of participants, the cohesion and culture of the group and the nature of the critical incident being debriefed. Sufficient time should be allocated so that there is not a feeling of being rushed or pressured. Conversely, some debriefings accomplish their goals in a relatively brief amount of time and there is nothing to be gained by trying to keep them going for longer than is necessary. It is also important to ensure that a debriefing ends with a focus on self-care and empowerment. The ‘wave pattern’ of a debriefing means that questions lead to deeper revelations and explorations but it is important to resurface again, not leaving participants in an emotionally open or vulnerable state.

I have conducted debriefings for as few as three people and as many as 20. I do not believe that there is an optimal size for a debriefing. What is more important is the natural work-group configuration and to try and support this, as it makes it more likely that the social support and mutual aid generated in the group will continue after the debriefing. If there are a small number of people, it makes sense to cut down on the number of facilitators from three to two. With large groups of more than twenty, it may make sense to break into smaller groups to have debriefings, which will necessitate more facilitators. When doing this, it is important to be mindful of mapping out natural work group configurations.
Who Should Participate?

Participation should always be voluntary. It is sometimes a fine line between ‘encouraging’ people to participate without ‘pressuring’ them to take part. With uniformed responders, I have found that people who have been in previous debriefings found them to be helpful and may enthusiastically encourage others to participate in the process. This is helpful for many people but can also create a social climate that makes it difficult for people to decline to participate.

A usual way of thinking about who should participate is to include those who had direct participation in a disaster or critical incident. This usually includes those who responded to an event or incident as well as those who may have stayed in the office but were gathering or relaying information. For example, police dispatchers are often included in a debriefing when they took the initial call for help or sent out a response team.

For some groups, others who were not directly involved in the incident wish to participate and/or those directly involved want them to participate. For example in a small fire department, someone may have had the day off but wishes to be part of the debriefing in order to offer social support. Decisions about this should be made by the participants, those who requested the debriefing and those facilitating the debriefing. It is important to remind participants that they may feel worse by talking about what happened than before the debriefing and for those who were not present, that they may feel stirred up by listening to accounts of the disaster.

Another thing to consider is the hierarchy and rank of participants. I have done debriefings at schools where principals did not participate because they did not want to inhibit teachers and guidance counselors from being open. The same has been true for police and fire chiefs. The rule of thumb is usually to have people participate who are at the same level of rank or authority. However, with small schools, workgroups or departments, the importance of team solidarity outweighs concerns about inhibiting discussion. Flexibility about this and engaging in a process of mutual, collaborative assessment before deciding who will and will not attend a debriefing is more responsive to the needs of a particular group rather than having a rigid rule about who should and should not attend.


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