

DEBRIEFING IN MISSIONS SETTINGS

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Debriefing is a biblical idea, practiced by Paul and the Antioch church (Acts 14:27), Peter (Acts 11:4ff), Tychicus (from Paul, Ephesians 6:21) and Timothy (from Paul, I Thessalonians 3:1-6), among others.

It is an experience we have seen practiced with great benefit in Wycliffe and SIL International, e.g., processing following a Field Training Course experience and sharing experiences after time in a village. Such debriefing has been done with a work group, with an individual who had supervisory responsibility, or with interested friends. We have all seen and probably experienced the negative results of not debriefing, e.g., feeling uncared for, feeling like we and our ministry are unimportant, and failure to obtain perspective from others' points of view.

Debriefing is more than giving a report. It is telling our story, complete with experiences and feelings, from our point of view. It is a verbal processing of past events. It differs from a report which is a factual sharing of details as objectively, accurately and free from emotion as possible. Debriefing, on the other hand, includes both the facts and emotional responses, and invites feedback, including appraisal.

Some elements necessary for good debriefing include relationship, responsibility, love, respect, concern, trust, and time. It is better if it is not hurried.

Debriefing has the following beneficial outcomes:

- It promotes processing of events plus feelings.
- It informs interested persons.
- It permits evaluation and other feedback.
- It ends isolation.
- It enhances cohesion, connectedness and team spirit.
- It encourages accountability.
- It facilitates change.
- It provides opportunity for growth through reporting and being heard.
- It stimulates renewed commitment.
- It brings rejoicing and glory to God through shared victories.
- It communicates a powerful message of love, respect, and value.
- It is usually a valuable learning experience for the listener(s) also.

Who Needs to Be Debriefed?

Since it is both subjective and objective, and one can be both actor and receiver, we can actively debrief ourselves with others, or we can promote others' debriefing us. We can invite others to serve us in this fashion. And we can take initiative to invite others. Here are a few ideas of who needs debriefing:

1. Those who are grieving. Much grief work can be done by the simple process of debriefing. It doesn't need to be a professional counselor to provide such debriefing to a grieving person.
2. Leaders and administrators. They often need someone to debrief them—but they may tend to keep their account to the factual. The debriefer may have to probe for emotional content—feelings of joy and fulfillment, excitement, encouragement, regret, sadness, guilt, etc. Leaders who travel especially need debriefing after trips.
3. Missionaries coming home from the field. Every missionary just home from overseas is carrying a very heavy “backpack” filled with experiences, feelings, hopes, griefs, uncertainties and questions. It is very important that their backpack be “unloaded” early after their arrival.
4. Others. Almost anyone with a story could be debriefed—a translator who has just experienced the dedication of his New Testament, the support worker who built a building just in time to turn the center over to the government, the hostage who was kidnaped and held for ransom.

With Whom Do We Debrief?

1. Counselors. A counselor may be most helpful for debriefing when unresolved emotional and/or relational issues are present, or when major trauma has been experienced.
2. Friends. We need to build friendships in which we debrief each other often, especially after important experiences in which feelings are involved. Ideally, a small group of supportive friends could meet regularly to share with and pray for each other, and debriefing activities could be part of this.
3. Family members. Husbands, wives, children, parents and other family members can have a significant ministry through debriefing. Let's take the initiative to offer to draw out others in our family.
4. Coworkers and colleagues. They can minister through debriefing in formal and informal settings. Formal times in the work setting can be set aside after trips, traumatic events, completed projects, exciting events, etc. to debrief those involved. Just inviting a colleague to lunch to debrief can be a powerful way of caring. This may be done on a regular basis, or after a significant experience. Supervisors can serve a very powerful function by debriefing those who report to them. Workers can do the same by debriefing their supervisors.

5. Supporting partners. Partners are usually greatly blessed when they debrief those they support, but often they aren't aware of the need. We may help them by sharing our need to debrief with them our time on the field or other experiences. But we also need to realize that many fine Christians in the U.S. find it extremely difficult to identify with a world they have never personally experienced. We must not place unrealistic expectations on them.
6. Home office staff. Workers in the home office are often the best persons to debrief missionaries just home from furlough. They normally share the same vision, commitment and dedication, and often have field experience themselves. Missions may do well to see this as a valid and valued part of the work for those home office staff who are gifted and skilled in debriefing.

How Is Debriefing Done?

1. Take initiative. Debriefing is almost a lost art. If we invite others to come and debrief with us, we will have to let them know what that means, and that we have time to listen to them. They may feel awkward at first, but will eventually be very grateful.
2. Be intentional. Few people will ask for debriefing. We need not only to ask for it for ourselves, but to offer our ears to others. This obviously means that we must be good listeners, good observers, attenders at report meetings and prayer and share times, so we know what is going on in people's lives.
3. Be available. Debriefing cannot be done during coffee break; it needs to be scheduled, and sufficient time allotted. We need to communicate to people that we aren't too busy to spend time with them.
4. Be aware of the meaning of debriefing. It is not listening to your story so you in turn will listen to me. It is not listening for illustrations that can be used later. It is not listening in order to advise, challenge, correct, evaluate. Its primary purpose is to allow the speaker to hear himself/herself process what has happened in the presence of caring people, in a safe place, for no other reason than that the speaker is worth listening to.
5. Be aware of the costs and the dividends. It takes time, initiative, expertise, and interest. It can be exhausting to fully give ourselves to someone for more than an hour or two. But we can learn to do it, and it pays high dividends.
6. Debrief as soon as possible after the event. The facts will be remembered for some time, but the feelings are soon forgotten or buried, and it is they which especially need to be processed.

Key Skills in Debriefing

Debriefing is a complex process, and requires a number of important skills. An effective facilitator needs to be able to:

1. Build trust. Build a reputation of scrupulous commitment to confidentiality, integrity and trustworthiness.
2. Be objective and non-defensive, even if the experience being told about is very negative.
3. Be comfortable with conflict, negative feelings, pain, tears, and silence.
4. Encourage openness and vulnerability through modeling and appropriate responses.
5. Be alert to verbal and nonverbal cues, and accurately interpret them.
6. Help the person understand, accurately interpret and integrate the experience. This provides opportunity for maximum possible growth and resolution of negative feelings if necessary.
7. Identify what is important and what is spurious, and know what to do with each.
8. Draw out feelings, attitudes, and other reactions to the experience. This is accomplished not only through direct questions, but with skilled use of silence, self-disclosure, appropriate comments, empathy and/or confrontation.
9. Sensitively and appropriately bring biblical principles and insights into the process, to help the person grow in learning to apply biblical truth in practical ways.
10. Appropriately bring the Lord into the situation. This may be done through prayer, asking what the Lord may be doing in and through the person, etc.

Non-crisis Debriefing

A general framework for non-traumatic experience debriefing might include these five parts:

1. Procedure (facts). Give opportunity to share where they went, what they did and said, results, hindrances, surprises, difficulties, etc.
2. Process (feelings). Provide a safe atmosphere and relationship in which they are invited and encouraged to share feelings. All feelings are welcome, from the most joyful to the most painful, from the most uplifting to the most discouraging. No judgments are placed on feelings during this time.
3. Perspective. Provide help to look at the experience more objectively, evaluate what was good and should be practiced, what was less than good and should perhaps be changed, what was missing and might be added. And help them to move on, better and more prepared.
4. Prayer. Actively acknowledge that God is involved and in control of their lives.
5. Planning. At times they may need to talk out where they go from here. This isn't a time to finalize future plans, but to begin thinking about what God may have for them in the immediate and/or long-range future.

Crisis Debriefing

Debriefing should be a mandatory part of the follow-up care of any crisis event. Critical Incident Stress Debriefing defines debriefing in such circumstances as “a group meeting or discussion,

employing both crisis intervention and educational processes, targeted toward mitigating or resolving the psychological distress associated with a critical incident or traumatic event” (page 60).

Such technical debriefing of traumatic events should be conducted by a professional with specialized training, and the procedure should follow the guidelines promoted in Mitchell and Everly’s book noted below.

Suggested Reading

Carr, Karen F. (1993). “Trauma and Post- Traumatic Stress Disorder: Recognition, Prevention, and Treatment for Missionaries.” Paper presented at the Mental Health and Missions Conference, Angola, Indiana, Nov. 1993.

Figley, C.R. (1985). *Trauma and its Wake*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Figley, C.R. (1989). *Helping Traumatized Families*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Miersma, P. (1991). “Understanding Missionary Stress From the Perspective of a Combat-related Stress Theory.” *JPT*, Vol. 21, No. 1, people. 93_101.

Mitchell, J., & Everly, G. (1993). *Critical Incident Stress Debriefing: An operations manual for the prevention of traumatic stress among emergency services and disaster workers*. Maryland: Chevron Publishing Corporation.

Reese, J.T., Horn, J.M., Dunning, C. Eds. (1991). *Critical Incidents in Policing*. Washington, D.C.: FBI.