

# Information Note



## Effective Debriefing

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### Debriefing

It has been reported that around 40% of aid workers develop a psychological disorder (such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder) either while on assignment or shortly after returning home [Lovell, 1997; Eriksson et al., 2001]. Good briefing [Gamble & Lovell-Hawker, 2004] and debriefing may significantly reduce this. An effective debriefing procedure may be key to reducing the incidence of post traumatic stress symptoms – a recent study showed that where there was no debriefing process, 24% of returning aid workers went on to develop post traumatic stress symptoms, compared to only 7% of those who received personal debriefing [Lovell-Hawker, 2002b]. This evidence is contrary to claims that debriefing after traumatic events is unhelpful [e.g. McNally et al., 2003]. However, the claims that debriefing is unhelpful are based on a handful of studies in which a very short (20 – 60 minute) session of ‘debriefing’ was offered, often by inexperienced debriefers and often in the first 24 hours after a trauma such as a fire or traffic accident. In contrast, thorough debriefing (lasting on average 2 hours) from experienced debriefers several days after an aid worker has returned from overseas appears to be highly effective at reducing symptoms [Lovell-Hawker, 2002b].

In 1992 McConnan found that 72% of aidworkers reported feeling inadequately debriefed and supported on their return, while in 2003 Foyle found that 43% reported that debriefing was inadequate. It appears that

progress has been made, but there is still room for improvement.

Debriefing is not just for expatriates, but there are cross cultural issues to take into account when debriefing locally hired staff.

So effective debriefing is essential. But what exactly is effective debriefing, and what does it include?

### What do we mean by ‘debriefing’?

- ◆ **Operational debriefing**  
Asking for information about the work performed and what was achieved.
- ◆ **Personal debriefing**  
Asking how the experience was for the individual (high points/low points/readjustment). Aims to help them integrate experience into their life as a whole, perceive the experience more meaningfully and bring a sense of closure.
- ◆ **Critical Incident Debriefing (CID)**  
Highly structured form of personal debriefing usually taking place after a traumatic experience (e.g. natural disaster, violent incident, an accident).
- ◆ **Exit interview**  
Often refers to a combination of Operational and Personal debriefing occurring at the end of the employment contract.

This information note focuses on personal debriefing.

## Specific issues to consider...

### **Timing**

1 – 3 weeks after an individual has returned home is optimal for personal debriefing. Critical incident debriefing should take place at least 24 hours after the incident. A follow up after about 3 weeks may also be helpful.

### **Venue**

A comfortable room where there will be no interruptions is all that is required.

### **Confidentiality**

Everything should be dealt with in confidence. However, if you judge them likely to seriously harm themselves or someone else or if they disclose that a child is being abused, then you are legally or morally obliged to take further action to ensure those at risk are protected.

### **Cross cultural issues**

The debriefing process may need to be modified to take into account cultural sensitivities, and to ensure gender, age and ethnicity of the debriefer are appropriate. Definitions of 'traumatic' will vary from culture to culture, and for some cultures disclosing any intimate detail outside of a family setting may be taboo, or at least considered a sign of weakness.

The challenge of working through a translator must not be underestimated and the selection of a sensitive translator is a priority. Time must be allowed for translation – a routine debriefing might take twice as long.

### **Partners/dependants (including children)**

Partners, and dependants such as children can also benefit from debriefing. A group or family session might be appropriate, and for young children the opportunity to draw or act out experiences with toys might help them share their feelings.

### **Should personal debriefing be compulsory?**

Increasingly, organisations may be considered negligent if they do not properly debrief staff;

however, forcing staff to attend debriefing may be counter-productive. One agency's approach is to expect all of their staff to attend a personal debriefing after trips overseas and to include this in their contract, but to permit staff to opt out provided they sign a disclaimer. In reality very few staff indeed forgo the opportunity to receive a thorough debriefing.

### **Who debriefs?**

The debriefer may be internal, or may be external. Care should be given to cross cultural considerations and matters of gender, age, ethnicity. Potential role conflicts should be avoided.

### **Care for the debriefer**

It is important to identify sources of support available to those who are responsible for leading the debriefing process, as this can sometimes be a traumatic experience in itself.

### **Critical Incident Debriefing (CID)**

CID is not counselling. It is a non-judgemental process that takes place at least 24 hours after the incident. Often characterised by 7 steps –

1. Introductions
2. The facts about the experience
3. The thoughts during and after the experience
4. The sensory impressions and emotions
5. Teaching about normal symptoms
6. Discussing coping strategies and future planning
7. Ending the session

### **Elements of an effective debriefing policy and procedure**

Although the personal debriefing interview can be unstructured, a structured approach ensures consistency and may be easier to manage and perceived as more helpful. It certainly ensures nothing is left out, and prevents the debriefing from becoming a counselling session.

## ***10 steps of routine personal debriefing***

1. Introductions
  - ◆ Who you are; purpose of debriefing; confidentiality; duration (usually around 2 hours). General information and overview – how was it?
2. Identifying what was most troubling
  - ◆ Identifying the 3 or 4 issues / events which were most stressful, upsetting or troubling.
3. Facts, thoughts and feelings
  - ◆ Don't rush. Take each issue or event (identified in step 2) in turn.
4. Any other aspects you want to talk about
5. Symptoms
  - ◆ Were any stress related symptoms experienced while overseas? And now? Examples include fatigue, insomnia, guilt, anger, tearfulness etc
6. Normalising and teaching
  - ◆ Symptoms are normal. Stress reduction methods. Support available now.
7. Anything that was positive?
  - ◆ Good or meaningful aspects
8. Return home
  - ◆ Reverse culture shock, and adjustment
9. The future
  - ◆ Ongoing help and support
  - ◆ Follow up
10. Closing

### ***When to refer on for further help***

It is important to recognise symptoms which would strongly indicate that additional professional help should be obtained. Such symptoms may include suicide risk, signs of psychosis, clinical depression, substance misuse, eating disorders, anxiety attacks or chronic fatigue syndrome, for example.

### **Further details**

See the 'Effective Debriefing Handbook' (Lovell-Hawker, 2002). Debriefers are advised to attend a one-day training course, and on-going training and supervision as necessary.

### **Useful resources**

[www.peopleinaid.org](http://www.peopleinaid.org) - People In Aid Publication 'Effective Debriefing'

[www.humanitarian-psy.org](http://www.humanitarian-psy.org) - free, confidential, psychological support to expatriates online and by email

[www.trauma-pages.com](http://www.trauma-pages.com) - includes principles for working with children

<http://www.antaesfoundation.org/> - guidance on managing stress

[www.headington-institute.org](http://www.headington-institute.org) - very useful papers on aspects connected to trauma, and they also offer help

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