



Critical Incident Crisis Debriefing Guidelines

Critical Incident Stress

An acute stress reaction that produces considerable distress for staff member(s) involved following a **critical incident**.

Examples: (not an exhaustive list)

- Suicide/homicide
- Death of a client (child or adult)
- Egregious incidents
- Physical violence or assault against a worker
- Employee death
- Community-wide tragedy

Critical Incident Stress Debriefing is a formal and confidential process provided by trained facilitators in a group format to mitigate the impact of a critical incident and to accelerate the recovery process. The average length of a session is 2-3 hours held between 24 hours to 2 weeks after the incident. It is designed to achieve psychological closure. It is not therapy nor is it a long term process. Additional forms of support are often needed after a critical incident de-briefing to keep individuals engaged in a recovery process.

Characteristics of Debriefers

- Don't need to be mental health professionals
- People who are trusted and respected
- People who are warm, affirming and non-judgmental
- They are competent and adequately trained
- Good communicators—have good listening skills
- Comfortable with people who have strong emotions
- Self-aware—recognize their own limitations and are willing to refer people on for further help
- Understand the work of human services professionals
- Ability to maintain confidentiality
- May be internal or external to the agency, but if internal they are not the immediate supervisor of the person(s) being de-briefed
- Strong value around self-care



These other types of stress require agency support or referral for professional help rather than a formal critical incident de-briefing. Supervisor support is critical in addressing these types of stress.

Other types of stress (related to day-to-day experiences)

- Secondary Traumatic Stress—the stress from helping or wanting to help a traumatized person
- General Stress—stress that everyone experiences that is resolved within a short period of time
- Cumulative stress—stress that builds up over time and can lead to mental and/or physical problems
- Continued Acute Stress or Post-traumatic Stress—severe distress caused by severe psychological trauma produced by critical incident stress and generally needs professional assistance

Examples are:

- Hearing about clients being victimized
- Visually seeing clients with bruises and other injuries
- Hearing about or witnessing self-mutilating behaviors
- Death of a family member or a friend
- Dealing with angry clients or colleagues

Who can request a Debriefing?

Because anyone might request a de-briefing, the agency needs to consider having a point person to initiate the referral. That point person would then identify de-briefers either internally or externally and work with the identified de-briefer(s) to determine:

- Whether the situation meets the definition of a critical incident
- How many and who is impacted by the incident
- Who will be involved in the de-briefing—will it be just those involved directly or will there also be debriefing for people from other units?
- How the agency needs to support the process—create a safe atmosphere, coverage for workers, communication with staff about the de-briefing
- Where people will go for ongoing support
- Whether the de-briefing will be voluntary or mandatory

Characteristics of Agency Point Person

- Trusted by their peers and superiors
- Knowledgeable about critical incident de-briefing
- Knowledgeable about resources for ongoing support (following the de-briefing or in lieu of de-briefing)
- Decisive
- Good communication skills
- Ability to maintain confidentiality