

Advanced Debriefing – a holistic approach

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Psychological debriefing is broadly defined as a set of procedures including counselling and the giving of information aimed at preventing psychological morbidity and aiding recovery after a traumatic event. Debriefing is generally applied within the first few days after a traumatic event, lasts one to three hours, and usually includes procedures that encourage and normalize emotional expression.

Some evidence about the ineffectiveness of debriefing has come from randomized trials that have used broad definitions of debriefing; thus, it might be that these findings have arisen because an inappropriate form of debriefing was used. There is little evidence to support current debriefing practices, and little is known about why debriefing might adversely affect recovery. There does, however, continue to be a great need for an early intervention that is demonstrably effective after a trauma.

There are various ways of approaching the debriefing process all trying to achieve the same goal. However, today we are going to approach it by looking at different areas in the person's life and allowing them to guide the process with what they feel comfortable in sharing and taking on. The counsellor's role is to guide this process and make sure that all the areas are covered, but also to make sure that the process is not forced beyond what the patient is comfortable with or what might further- or re-traumatize them.

Trauma

What is trauma?

The American Psychological Association defines trauma as:

“an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, crime, natural disaster, physical or emotional abuse, neglect, experiencing or witnessing violence, death of a loved one, war, and more. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea.”

Trauma in its most basic form can be seen as chaos and affects every part of our lives. Although there are different types and forms of trauma, we are going to focus mainly on the areas in our lives that are affected by the trauma and try and address those areas specifically. The end goal is to have a unique goal for each patient we see where their life is the focus and trying to get some kind of control back after a traumatic event.

Physical

Everything starts on a physical level. Before we even react, there are chemical reactions happening in our bodies. When we experience trauma, this is the first area we are affected by. We might experience a lot of emotions and thoughts in this time, but that is not actually where it

started. Trauma is one of the most exhausting things that we can put our bodies through, not just emotionally, but especially physically! Even more so, when our lives are in danger, whether directly or indirectly, survival becomes our focus. You can just think about the fight or flight responses (freeze, fawn and flop also) that we experience. This, however, does not mean that we don't experience emotions. Trauma survivors know firsthand that it can trigger a cascade of emotions, many of which can feel unpredictable and beyond our control.

Studies has suggested that engaging in physical activity is associated with significant improvements in both physical and mental health, highlighting the positive relationship between physical activity and overall wellness. This creates a positive cycle: improved physical and mental health fosters increased physical activity, which in turn reinforces better mental and physical health. What that might mean for us is that in order to effectively start working on our emotions (and other areas) we need to start with our physical wellbeing and stand still there, sometimes for a couple of days, until we are physically strong and well enough to be able to deal with the rest.

Some debriefings might be provided directly after a traumatic event and others as a delayed debriefing (after 48 hours). However, it is usually ideal to wait with emotional debriefing and not start within the first 48 hours. Where in this process would give the time and space for someone to rest and heal physically first. This means that a patient needs to take the time to rest as much as they can, eat healthy foods and drink enough water. As we have seen, trauma causes structure to break, and this is the first and most important thing to focus on getting control back.

Emotional

There are various forms of emotional processing and can vary significantly based on the model or approach we as counsellors prefer. But emotional processing at the minimum involved 3 things, and these are especially:

- What happened in the event?
- What is the event making me think of or feel?
- Do I want to feel this way?

What happened in the event?

As simple as this question might sound, its an important place to start. A lot of times we are affected by a series of events that lead to something and only once we can pinpoint where the trauma is coming from can we start processing that event. This question might also change significantly in the first couple of days after the trauma and is therefore good to recap on this to see where the patient places their focus on. A lot of times this focus also influences the rest of the emotional processing.

What is the event making me think of or feel?

This is the part where a lot of times we spent the most of our time with patients. It is also the part where we need to take the most caution as we can cause further harm. It is not always necessary to dig but rather get a quick summary of what the trauma is doing to the patient. We don't want them to be retraumatised, we simply want them to acknowledge their feelings. When someone can acknowledge their feelings, they can decide if they want to keep feeling that way or if they really feel that they can't deal with those emotions. When someone is not ready to deal with the

emotions, sometimes it is important to take a step back and make sure that physically they are coping or even sometimes take a step forward and make sure the other areas of their lives are functional. There will be ample time to come back to this step and recap on feelings going forward.

Do I want to feel this way?

I'm sure most of you are already thinking why would anyone want to feel any kind of negative feelings? And the simple answer is that our emotions prepare us for behaviour. Our emotions guide us into action and help us to make certain decisions. These decisions are not always good though, and therefore this is an important question to ask.

If we look at the example of someone that has lost a loved one. They feel sad about it. Do they want to feel happy about it? Probably not! They might prefer having the person they have lost with them, but the emotion of feeling sad is very valid and needed. Through this process our emotions guide us into a certain behaviour.

Sometimes there really is a time where we don't want to feel certain feelings and we can therefore only do something about it or try and change it if we know how we have been feeling.

An example can be of someone being harmed by someone else and they are feeling angry about the event. It's important to acknowledge this emotion as ignoring it might lead to frustration later. But if this person is not someone who has anger issues, they would recognise that the anger they have been feeling (maybe for the last week) are not what they want to be feeling and then they can try and find an outlet for those emotions and do something about it.

If we can recap on emotions preparing us for behaviour it might be more important to accept a time and place for anger in ourselves and being able to do something about it later, rather than ignoring that emotion and it causing frustration where a lot of times we don't even know the source of it.

Social

When we talk about social wellbeing in this context, we talk about our social setting and environment, rather than socialising. Our social setting is extremely important when we process trauma as we usually find ourselves in some kind of social setting while processing trauma. All our previous traumas we were probably in one of our social settings. Whether it was at work, school, with family or friends or alone at home. The thing about trauma is that a lot of times things in our social settings do change as a direct result of the trauma. And sometimes that is OK. What we want to prevent, however, is that good things in our social settings change as an unrelated result of the chaos.

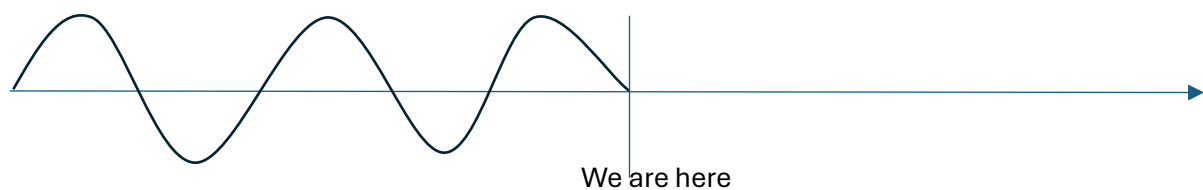
If the trauma is for instance caused by a specific person in our social setting, it makes sense that the relationship with that person will be affected by this event and therefore that part of our social setting will be compromised. But we don't want our other relationships to be influenced in the same way because of a possible bias created by the trauma.

It may be necessary for the patient to set a goal for themselves in the near future where they make a time and effort in maintaining their social setting. The goal is to ensure they still have access to the good social structures that are not directly related to the traumatic event. It may also be necessary to reevaluate the social setting that has been directly affected by the traumatic event

to ensure they are safe and are able to make necessary changes in this setting. This however would only be done at a later stage when the physical and emotional setting has been through some processing.

Spiritual

Spirituality is one of the most unique settings that we can discuss as it will differ significantly for each person. Spirituality in trauma can almost be seen as the glue to the physical, emotional and social settings. Spirituality is about what defines us and what gives our lives meaning. Although religion makes out the biggest part of our spirituality, we need to understand a bit about the wider context of finding meaning in our trauma. Perhaps the easiest way is to envision this is on a timeline:



Looking at this timeline we can see that there were ups and downs in the past. We can't go back and change these events, but we find ourselves in a certain place and time now all because of and in spite of these events happening. Therefore, these events have shaped us in a way; things might've been very different if even a small event would've had a different outcome. We are who we are all because of certain events. Now that timeline goes on until it ends, the day we die. We can try and predict that time, but we have no certainty of it. The only certainty we have is the moment we find ourselves in right at this moment. When we look at the future we try and prepare ourselves and even plan for certain events. Looking at trauma we have that same plan, sometimes unknowingly, of how we want to see ourselves in light of the trauma. Maybe even thinking that we want to think and feel different about the trauma within a specific period of time. But the only way we can process it is by looking at the exact moment we find ourselves and looking at our specific needs in these areas.

- Physically – do I need to take time to rest before I take a further step
- Emotionally – do I need to talk to someone about my emotions and the effects of it
- Socially – am I spending enough time on my social setting and enjoying life with family and friends

Religion

Touching on religion as a part of our spirituality is simply not enough for us to understand the importance of processing trauma in each and every sector of our lives. Let's take a look at some of the examples given in the Bible:

- The Lord is near the brokenhearted; he saves those crushed in spirit. -- *Psalms 34:18 (CSB)*
- This is my comfort in my affliction: Your promise has given me life. -- *Psalms 119:50 (CSB)*
- Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. 4 He comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any kind of affliction, through the comfort we ourselves receive from

God. 5 For just as the sufferings of Christ overflow to us, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. -- 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 (CSB)

- Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? 36 As it is written: Because of you we are being put to death all day long; we are counted as sheep to be slaughtered. 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. -- *Romans 8:35-39 (CSB)*
- keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 For consider him who endured such hostility from sinners against himself, so that you won't grow weary and give up. -- Hebrews 12:2-3 (CSB)

These are but a few examples of what we learn about trauma in the Bible. Although there are many examples of how we can overcome trauma (*and other afflictions) physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually, there is a message that echoes: **this is not the end**. Through our faith we can endure, we can keep on hoping and we can trust that He will triumph.

Conclusions

Patients won't always be with their counsellor when processing these areas and they need to understand what to work on on their own and how to work on those areas. That's why it is important to discuss these areas with patients in depth so they can understand the function of it and how each area is affected by the trauma.

The patient needs to look out for any changes in these areas. If there are any unwanted physical changes, emotional changes or social changes that are completely out of control it is important for them to take note of that and to start working on those areas in follow up sessions. Remember in trauma we are not trying to go back, we can never go back, we are simply trying to take back control.

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