



Death of a Co-Worker/Service User

Debriefing the Team

Purpose of Debriefing:

To debrief following a death helps bring closure to the death event and assists workers in normalizing and working through their individual grief responses. **Debriefing also provides an understanding of how the team is impacted.** It provides workers with a concrete sense that the agency is attending to their needs by offering a supportive container for processing their responses to the death itself and also by acknowledging the varied attachments and relationships workers had with the service-user who died. While debriefing can be done individually, it holds the most power /is most helpful when facilitated in a group as opportunities for team building and creating mutual support also arise.

Intent of the Debriefing Session:

To provide workers with a “safe” place to:

- a) acknowledge their connection to the service-user/co-worker who died, to tell their story of heartfelt or difficult attachment
- b) review their time with the person who died: their own highs and lows
- c) review worker impressions of the agency’s/team’s efforts in providing support to the person who died: what went well and what could have gone better
- d) focus on the specifics of the death-event, the dying process, the memorial service, etc. particularly if there were difficulties or complications
- e) bring closure to any unfinished business associated with the person who died
- f) provide workers with a safe place to express grief-related emotions if present
- g) provide workers with a context for their grief-related responses through the presentation of basic grief theory (optional) to normalize grief-related behaviours and emotions.
- h) provide a forum for reinforcing worker self-care practices and give workers information about additional supports



Setting Up a Session:

- Most useful when set up within a week of the death. However, if this is not possible then as close as possible to the time of the death is preferable
- Set aside 1.5 - 2 hours. Invite those workers who have been directly involved in the care of the person who died. It is beneficial to have supervisors present to attend to any follow-up matters.
- Provide refreshments and a comfortable space where participants can be seated in a circle and can see one another. Ask that workers not be interrupted by phone-calls for the duration of the session if at all possible.
- It is not advised to invite service-users to this type of session. A separate session can be scheduled for clients using a similar format. This enables staff to talk openly and honestly without having to be cognisant of the impact on service-users.
- Supplies: flip chart and markers, a candle and photo of the dead person if available, and a plant or flowers near the candle/photo, Kleenex. This sets up the clear message that “something different from a meeting is about to happen here”
- Facilitator will provide basic information, clearly focus the discussion through having questions written up on the flip-chart, invite people to speak when they are ready, contain cross-talk, ensure all participants have an opportunity to express themselves in the time allotted.

Structure and Content of a Debriefing Session:

1. **Introductions:** Welcome participants. Ensure that people have a basic outline of the purpose and content of the time by having an agenda up on a flip-chart. If people do not know each other, invite a round of names and agency affiliation. Participants could also be invited to then say a sentence or two about how they are doing coming into this session.
2. **Guidelines:** Ask the participants for their group requirements to ensure that they make the best use of this session. This would include their needs for confidentiality, speaking one at a time, using “I” statements, no “cross-talk” etc. These group guidelines are written up on a flip chart.
3. **Sharing:** Participants are asked to indicate how they normally respond to a death and to let their colleagues know what would be supportive to them in the workplace. This information is particularly useful for supervisors as there may be opportunities to put these supports in place.



4. **“Storytelling” – The Following topics and related questions invite a comprehensive experience of closure**
 - a) **Connection to the Person Who Died:** How did you come to know him/her? What happened in your time with this person? What were the challenges? What were the delights and learnings?
 - b) **About the Dying Process:** Did you know the person was dying? What happened for you around the death itself? How were you informed about the death? How was that for you? Do you have questions about the death-event that can be answered during this session? Have you had previous experience with death? Did you get a chance to say goodbye? If not, what would you have liked to have said?
 - c) **About the Memorial or Funeral:** Did you attend? What was your experience of this good-bye ritual?
 - d) **Regrets and Unfinished Business:** In your experience, are there things that did not go well in this client-relationship and in the dying process? Is there anything you wished you had done but didn't get a chance to? Anything you wished this agency or other service agencies had been able to do differently?
 - e) **Ghosts:** Are there any other good-byes present for you now? Any anniversary times or other deaths you are aware of? Simply mention them.
5. **Ongoing Self-Care:** This is a reminder for participants to notice and attend to their immediate physical and emotional needs. Indicate that it is “normal” following a loss for other significant losses to come up - either in memory or in dreams. This simply means those losses may require further attention. Review agency and community resources available for follow-up should that be desired.
6. **Closing Circle:** There is an aspect of “gains” or legacy inherent in loss. Invite participants to close with one “gift” or “gain” they have from this experience (with the service-user or with the death-event or with this team. It could also be an affirmation of self in a challenging situation)