

# LOW IMPACT DEBRIEFING:



Four steps to protect you from being slimed, and to help ensure you don't traumatize your colleagues friends and family.

How do you debrief when you have heard or seen hard things?

Do you grab your closest colleague and tell them all the gory details?

Do your colleagues share graphic details with you over lunch or during meetings?

Helping Professionals often hear and see extremely difficult things in the course of their work. After a hard day, a normal reaction is to want to debrief with someone, to alleviate some of the burden of carrying what they have experienced. Debriefing is a natural and important process. The problem is that if debriefing isn't done properly it becomes "sliming" and can have negative consequences.

## WHAT IS "SLIMING"?

At TEND we use the term sliming to describe the kind of debriefing that happens without warning or permission, and generally leaves the person receiving the information feeling as though they now carry the weight of this unnecessarily graphic or traumatic information. Sliming is contagious.

## CONTAGION

Without realizing it, Helping Professionals can unwittingly spread traumatic stories vicariously among their colleagues, family and friends. It is common for Helpers to feel desensitized and often admit that they don't think of the secondary trauma that they pass along to the recipients of their debriefing. Some Helpers say that sharing the "gory" details is a normal part of their work. An important part of Low Impact Debriefing is to stop the contagion effect by not adding unnecessary details and thus not adding to the cumulative exposure to traumatic information.

## TYPES OF DEBRIEFING

### 1. THE INFORMAL DEBRIEF

These happen in casual way, in a colleague's office at the end of a long day, in the staff lunchroom, the police cruiser, during the drive home or with family and friends.

Warning: Informal debriefs can evolve in a way where the listener doesn't have a choice in receiving this information. The result of these types of debriefs can be that the listener feels that they are being slimed rather than taking part in a debriefing process.

Solution: Use the 4 steps of Low Impact Debriefing

### 2. THE FORMAL DEBRIEF

A scheduled meeting, sometimes referred to as peer consultation, supervision or critical incident stress debriefing.

Warning: The challenge of formal debriefing is the lack of immediacy and limited or poor supervision. When a Helper has heard something disturbing during a clinical day, they usually need to debrief right away. Crisis work is so live and immediate that Helping Professionals rely on informal debriefing instead – grabbing the closest trusted colleague to unload on.

**"Helpers who bear witness to many stories of abuse and violence notice that their own beliefs about the world are altered and possibly damaged by being repeatedly exposed to traumatic material."**

**Karen Saakvitne and Laurie Ann Pearlman, *Trauma and the Therapist* (1995).**

### What is a "Helping Professional"?

At TEND we say that a Helping Professional is someone whose job it is to care for others, physically, psychologically, intellectually, emotionally or spiritually. These professions include (but are not limited to) medicine, nursing, psychotherapy, counseling, social work, education, life coaching, law, criminal justice, first response, ministry.

# LOW IMPACT DEBRIEFING: THE STEPS



## 1. SELF AWARENESS

Have you ever shocked or horrified friends or family with a work story that you thought was benign or even funny? Helping Professionals can become desensitized to the trauma and loss that they are exposed to daily. Be aware of the stories you tell and the level of detail you provide when telling a story. Are all the details really necessary? Can you give a "Coles notes" or abbreviated version?



## 2. FAIR WARNING

If you had to call your sister to tell her that your grandfather has passed away, you would likely start the phone call with "I have some bad news" or "You better sit down". This allows the listener to brace themselves to hear the story. Allow your listener to prepare and brace themselves by starting with "I would like to debrief a difficult situation with you and the story involves traumatic content."



## 3. CONSENT

Once you have warned the listener, then ask for consent. This can be as simple as something like: "I would like to debrief something with you, is this a good time?" or "I heard something really hard today, could I talk to you about it?"

The listener then has a chance to decline, or to qualify what they are able/ready to hear.



## 4. LIMITED DISCLOSURE

Once you have received consent from your colleague, decide how much to share, starting with the least traumatic information, and gradually progressing as needed. You may end up not needing to share the most graphic details.

**"When Helping Professionals hear and see difficult things, a normal reaction is to want to debrief with someone, the problem is that we are often debriefing ourselves all over each other..."**

*Françoise Mathieu,  
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As Helping Professionals, we have made a decision to do the work we do which can include hearing and seeing very difficult things. At TEND, we believe that it is important to understand and practice self-care techniques like Low Impact Debriefing. We also believe It is equally important to be good stewards of the stories we hear, and responsibly practice Low Impact Debriefing to protect our colleagues, friends and families.