

## Critical Incident Debriefing

### WHAT IS A CRITICAL INCIDENT?

A "critical incident" is any event that causes an unusually intense stress reaction. The distress people experience after a critical incident limits their ability to cope, impairs their ability to adjust, and negatively impacts the work environment. Failure to properly debrief the incident can lead to future employee burnout and [secondary trauma](#). Examples of traumatic events that produce such reactions include:

- A coworker's or student's death or serious illness
- Suicide or death of a client
- A violent or threatening incident in the work setting
- Natural or man-made disaster that affects the workers' ability to function in the workplace

### WHO SHOULD LEAD THE DEBRIEF?

If the critical incident involved a death, it likely impacts everyone in the workplace. A trained professional should be brought in to lead the debrief. Often Employee Assistance Programs or Human Resources can provide this service.

- If the agency is small too small to have an HR department, is there an organizational leader with some distance from the event and training in group facilitation? They can lead the debrief. Clear ground rules regarding confidentiality and time boundaries should be established.

### WHEN?

- Optimally debriefing occurs within 24-72 hours of the incident.

### HOW TO STRUCTURE THE DEBRIEF.

- Set the time limit for 30-90 minutes. Stick to the time as much as possible.
- Set ground rules for safety such as confidentiality.
- Don't let one person dominate – use go arounds if needed to get all voices heard.
- Use this simple list of questions to guide the conversation:
  1. What do you remember thinking when you heard/saw the event?
  2. What did you do?
  3. How did you feel?
  4. How has it affected you?
  5. Do you have a request of yourself or the group for support?
  6. Are there any follow up steps that need to be taken?
- Provide handouts reminding people of the warning signs of Secondary Trauma and any agency resources available.