**Self Directed Learning for Shelter Executive Directors**

**Manitoba Association of Women’s Shelters**

**Low Impact Debriefing: Preventing Retraumatization**

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 Saakvitneand Laurie Ann Pearlman, Trauma and the Therapist(1995).

***After a hard day...***

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

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

Do your workmates share graphic details of their day

with you over lunch or during meetings?

Do you and your co-workers share “dark humour” about the work you do?

When helping professionals (helpers) hear and see difficult things in the course of their work, the most normal reaction in the world is to want to debrief with someone, to alleviate a little bit of the burden that they are carrying - it is a natural and important process in dealing with trauma in the workplace.

The problem is that we are often not doing it properly - we are debriefing ourselves all over each other, with little or no awareness of the negative impact this can have on our well-being.

Helpers often admit that they don’t always think of the secondary trauma they may be unwittingly causing the recipient of their stories.

Some helpers (particularly trauma workers, police, fire and ambulance workers) can believe sharing gory details is a “normal” part of their work and that they are desensitized to it, but the data on vicarious trauma show otherwise -we are being negatively impacted by the cumulative exposure to trauma, whether we are aware of it or not.

**Two Kinds of Debriefing**

1. **The informal debrief**, which often takes place in a rather ad hoc manner, whether it be in a colleague’s office at the end of a long day, at a shift change, in the staff room, or during the drive home.
2. **The formal debrief** which is a more structured process, and is normally scheduled ahead of time and often referred to as supervision or critical incident debriefing. Part of the challenge of formal debriefing or pre-booked supervision is the lack of immediacy. When a helper has been impacted by their work, they usually need to talk about it to someone there and then or at least during the same day. Since the work is very live and immediate, waiting for a formal supervision can seem like a lifetime away.

This is one of the main reasons why helpers take part in informal debriefing instead. They grab the closest trusted colleague and unload on them.

Another issue for some helpers is the lack of satisfactory supervision. Sadly, many helpers have access to little or poor quality supervision so we may feel we have nowhere to go when we need support, and we turn to our co-workers, family or friends.

**The Low Impact Debriefing** is a simple and easy strategy to protect ourselves, our co-workers, and our loved ones unnecessary traumatic details.

Almost all helpers acknowledge that they have, in the past, knowingly and unknowingly traumatized their colleagues, friends and families with stories that were probably unnecessarily graphic. Using Low Impact Debriefing can help with this: it involves four key steps: self-awareness, fair warning, consent and the debrief, also called limited disclosure.

1. **Increased Self Awareness**

* Working in this field, we rapidly become desensitized to the trauma and loss we are exposed to daily. Try and become more aware of the amount of information you share and the level of detail you provide. Ask yourself: Were all those details really necessary?

1. **Fair Warning**

* We use fair warning in everyday life: If you had to call your sister and 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. You might also ask if this is good time to talk. Low Impact Debriefing follows the same process. If I know that you are coming to tell me a traumatic story, I will be prepared to hear this information and it will be less traumatic for me to hear.

1. **Consent**

* Once you have received consent from your co-worker or colleague, you can decide how much to share. Imagine that you are telling the story starting on the outer circle of the story (i.e. the least traumatic information) and slowly move in towards the core (the very traumatic information) at a gradual pace. You may, in the end, need to tell the graphic details, or you may not, depending on how disturbing the story has been for you.

4) **Limited Disclosure**

* How much detail is enough?
* How much is too much?
* Don't assume you need to disclose all the details right away. Is sharing the graphic details necessary to the discussion? For example, when discussing a child being removed from the home, you may need to say "the child suffered severe neglect and some physical abuse at the hands of his mother" and that may be enough, or you may in certain instances need to give more detail for the purpose of the case management discussion.
* Ask yourself: Is this too much trauma information to share?

Information was adapted from an article originally posted on the following blog: www.compassionfatigue.caFrançoise Mathieu, M.Ed., RP.Tend Academywww.tendacademy.ca.cainfo@tendacademy.ca©2016Tend Aca