

So You've Been Invited To a Debriefing ...

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You get a phone call, probably from me, telling you that as a member of the SAR team that responded to 'Mission X,' your presence is desired in a post-incident debriefing. A multitude of things may run through your head: "Does she think I'm stressed? Did someone there think I'm stressed? Wait ... I feel ok, but am I *supposed* to be stressed?" None of the above, of course, is necessarily correct, so let me explain why the debriefing was called and what is going to happen.

First off, any mission has the potential to place wear and tear on the mind or body at a level that could become disruptive to daily living. Regardless of your experience or training, you may find a particular mission traumatizing; it happens to the best of us, even people like me, a trauma center RN, who do this ALL the time and daily see the kinds of things that make for popular nighttime TV.

Secondly, the debriefing isn't therapy; it is a structured discussion of the event to mitigate any possible impact. Before the memories that may be bothersome have a chance to be cemented, distorted or even over-generalized, they can be safely vented in a controlled environment with the group that shared them. Those memories may be commonly held but not yet expressed by your team members, so conversationally reconstructing the situation to express any specific trauma, fears or regrets allows them to be vented, validated, and hopefully released.

You arrive at the designated site, comfortably clad in jeans, grateful that you don't have to be in uniform (since you've probably exhausted your supply during the mission). That is appropriate, since your comfort is key, and there is no rank during the debriefing. Major Jones becomes Sherry Jones. You will see a couple of people you don't know there; the team chief, usually a mental health professional, and a peer or two from local CISM (Critical Incident Stress Management) teams. You will also see CAP people you may not recognize from the mission; yes, you know them, they just look funny in civilian clothes.

Turn off your pager and cell phone, and settle into one of the chairs placed in a circle. If you have anything with you, just put it under your chair. No one is taking notes and no one will go in or out of the room once the debriefing begins. The team members may have cards or papers with them; they are reminders of the specific steps in a debriefing. You might also see boxes of Kleenex; sometimes crash and disaster scenes are pretty intense, and people have been known to cry. Emotions can run pretty high after certain missions, and expressing them is healthy, especially when you are surrounded by people who were with you and know EXACTLY what you've experienced.

The debriefing takes about two hours. You are invited to speak or not as you desire; we may request that you be there, we will not insist that you share anything if that is your choice. Also, anything that is said in the room, STAYS in the room. If you want to tell someone (later) what YOU said or felt during the debriefing, that's fine, but don't divulge anything else. You will also be given some written information to take home with you, things to watch for in the coming days like appetite changes, sleeplessness or memories that won't go away, and what to do if that happens.

You've formed a special bond with those on the mission, and it is something you will have with no one else; they are your resource if there is more to be said, so use them. You perform an invaluable service with CAP; you invest your own time, money, energy and emotion with CAP training to do the kind of work very few are able to perform. It is admirable, and you are of tremendous worth. That is why the debriefing was called, you know ... we just want to give you a chance to think it through, talk it out, and to make sure you are ok.

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