

Introduction to Debriefing: Four Ways to Manage Compassion Fatigue

By Jessica Dolce, CCFE

The other day I was talking with a friend who has been working in animal sheltering for nearly a decade. I wanted to know how she manages the impact of compassion fatigue on her life and she shared that her connection to others, specifically regular debriefing with her supervisor, has been a big part in staying healthy over the years.

She also mentioned helpful advice she took from Doug Fakkema, a pioneer in compassion fatigue education and humane euthanasia practices, who counsels shelter workers to never let more than 48 hours go by after performing a euthanasia, before talking to someone about what they've experienced.

Connection and story sharing are effective tools to help us manage compassion fatigue. As professional helpers, we're exposed to trauma, loss, and death every single day. Too many of us are carrying around the accumulated stories and emotions of our work days, without a healthy outlet to express, process, and release what we've witnessed or experienced.

This is where various kinds of debriefing come in handy. Here are four ways we can incorporate *healthy* sharing into our work and personal lives:

The Daily Debrief: The goal is immediate reflection to avoid repression of the traumatic content you've accumulated all day and to avoid getting stuck in rumination later.

As a pair: Ask someone at work to be your "debrief buddy." This might be your supervisor, a supportive work friend, or, if you do shift work, the person who is clocking in, as you clock out at the end of your shift. Meet up for ten minutes at the end of work to debrief about what happened that day, as well as what you will do to try to feel ok about it.

Do this every day. Try to use [Low Impact Disclosure](#). This means asking for consent before you share gory details.

Managers: allow them time to purge while they are still on the clock.

On your own: If you don't have anyone to talk to about your work day, use a journal to process the events and feelings of the day. Record your feelings related to the work day *before* you punch out (literally or figuratively, if you work at a home-based rescue) or as soon as you get home.

Remember that we may not be able to talk to our friends and family about what we experience at work without traumatizing them as well. So having a work buddy or a journal to do a daily debrief with is a great way to support yourself.

The Weekly Debrief: The goal is regular reflection and processing of emotionally challenging experiences you've experienced throughout the week and to consider any next steps that may be needed for healthy coping.

As a group: Once a week staff should be given the opportunity to get together for a group debrief with a skilled facilitator. This allows staff to reflect on what they've experienced in the course of caring for animals and clients.

Kathleen Ayl, author of [When Helping Hurts](#), recommends that the “facilitator help participants focus on their emotional responses to any losses or traumatic experiences that have occurred, the grief they may be experiencing, and the relationships that they have shared with other during these experiences.”

She goes on to recommend that attendees begin by describing their relationship to the animal and then the particular circumstances at the time of loss or trauma. The facilitator should guide the process by asking open ended questions such as:

- What was the most difficult part of taking care of this patient?
- What was the most satisfying part?
- What have your experiences been like since the trauma or loss occurred?
- What did you learn from working with this pet?

The facilitator is there to help normalize their feelings, discusses coping techniques, and can share resources and referral to further help, if needed.

Patricia Smith of the [Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project](#) recommends that we select a facilitator who has both education and experience in managing a group. Managing traumatized/compassion fatigued people can be a challenge. A good facilitator will be sure everyone knows the rules, everyone has a voice, and everyone is heard.

As a pair: If a group isn't possible or is not ideal, supervisors or other skilled staff members should schedule a weekly debrief session with each staff member where similar questions as above are addressed.

In the book [Trauma Stewardship](#), Deadria Boyland, manager of a domestic violence agency, shared this about her role as a supervisor, “I make myself available...but they also know I'm going to hold them accountable. I'm going to say to them, ‘This is what I notice, let me know what's going on so I can help you. It's not going to get better unless we talk about it. I can't fix it, only you can fix it, but I can support you.’...then I can help them navigate a plan that works...my thought is that if they don't have a plan on how to deal with their trauma, they can't do their work.”

If you're not sure how to conduct debriefings for your staff, a [Veterinary Social Worker](#) may be able to help you gain competence in this area or can be hired to work with your staff directly. These 20-30 minute sessions (longer if needed) should be confidential and staff should feel safe sharing with you without fear of penalty.

The Monthly Debrief: The goal is reflection and processing of emotionally challenging experiences you've experienced throughout the month and to build a network of support and accountability.

As a group: Form a support group that meets monthly. You can do this online with peers in your field or at work with coworkers. Consider bringing in a counselor to facilitate one or more sessions to help you get started. Your health insurance or Employee Assistance Program may be able to help arrange for a counselor to facilitate the groups at low or no charge or you may be able to find a mental health professional who will donate or discount their services.

Groups like this are not therapy, so you can run them with peers only, but if possible, see if you can work with a skilled facilitator who understands grief, trauma, and the challenges of the job to help get the group going.

The idea is to connect with peers who can bear witness and help you process both the details, but even more importantly, your feelings about your work. Knowing that you have a monthly meeting to connect with others and share your stories on regular basis can be a tremendous relief. In addition, this type of group offers social support and can help us stay accountable to ourselves as we work to make positive changes.

[Here's some advice on creating a peer support group.](#)

As a pair: Eric Gentry, PhD of Compassion Unlimited recommends writing down the full "narrative" of what you've experienced in the past few weeks or days, then meeting with a peer on regular basis so that you can share this narrative with them. For 20 minutes or so, you share what happened and how you feel, while they listen. Then it's their turn to share their narrative with you, so that it's a mutual support system. If you wish to get advice after you have shared, you can ask for it, but the job of the listener is just that: to listen. They can also help us stay accountable.

This is a more formal, longer "buddy session" than the quick daily debrief. Gentry recommends having a few people that you can do this with, so that if one person is not available to listen, then you have other options. He describes this process of sharing narratives as if we are a locomotive, towing many train cars behind us. As we tell our stories, we "unhook" the long line of train cars behind us and lighten our loads. In other words, we let go!

Critical Incident Debrief (as needed): The goal is provide an immediate framework for the people involved in a traumatic incident to talk about what they experienced or witnessed, decide the next steps, and then receive referrals for additional support as needed.

This is a group process immediately after a major crisis. A "critical incident" is any event that has significant emotional power to overwhelm our usual coping methods. These include a sudden death, serious injury, a physical or psychological threat to the safety or well-being of an individual or community. An example of this might be an Animal Control Officer being shot in the field or a shelter volunteer being seriously attacked by a dog in the kennels.

A critical incident can involve any situation or events that causes a distressing, dramatic or profound change or disruption in our physical (physiological) or psychological functioning. There are unusually strong emotions

attached to the event which have the potential to interfere with our ability to function either at the crisis scene or away from it. Think: PTSD.

When something this traumatic occurs, we may need outside help with Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD). CISD is a formalized, structured method where the group reviews the stressful experience. CISD was developed to assist first responders, such as fire and police personnel, and is never intended as a substitute for therapy.

It was designed to be delivered in a group format and while it never hurts to have a [crisis management](#) or mental health professional run these groups, it is possible for a skilled layperson to facilitate since the goal is not to open up and explore the trauma, as you would in therapy, but instead to provide a framework for the people involved to talk about what they experienced or witnessed, decide the next steps, and then receive referrals for additional support as needed. This allow them to process and release some of what they have absorbed in the traumatic incident, rather than allowing it to build up and potentially lead to something more serious.

Here are two resources that explain how this process takes places, what the ground rules are, which questions to ask, etc.

[Practical Suggestions for Crisis Debriefing for Schools](#)

[Critical Incident Debriefing](#)

A good question to ask yourself and your leadership team before a crisis takes place:

How do we know when we need a professional team from outside our organization to help us through at traumatic situation?

Recap - Here's how you might use these debriefings:

At the end of each day, talk with a buddy or write in your journal for 10 minutes. Once a week, get together with your staff to talk about cases that have had an impact on them. Once a month, write out a complete narrative of what you've experienced, how compassion fatigue may be impacting you, and how you feel, then share it with a buddy. Or get together with your peers for a support group. "Unhook your train cars". Finally, have a plan for when a crisis erupts. Consider how your organization will debrief if there is a critical incident.

It would be great if you could do all of these things, but doing just one of them on regular basis will help, so pick one and get started!

Remember you don't have to do this on your own. Talking with a mental health professional in on-on-one counseling is an excellent way to build your support system as well. And don't hesitate to look to the professionals – such as veterinary social workers – to help your organization facilitate regular debriefings.

Sharing our stories and processing our experiences is an important part of reducing and managing compassion fatigue and trauma. By creating safe, supportive connections that enable us to share regularly, we become more resilient to the challenges of the work that we do.