

Sharing our stories and reflecting on the work we do is a critical, career-sustaining practice. Doug Fakkema, a pioneer in compassion fatigue education and humane euthanasia practices, counsels animal shelter workers to never let more than 48 hours go by after performing a euthanasia before talking to someone about what you've experienced.

We all need a healthy outlet to express, process, and release what we've witnessed or experienced. But we need to share skillfully, so that it doesn't amplify negative emotions. 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 process the difficult experiences from the 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, what you will do to cope when you go home, and asking for any support needed. You may wish to end by asking each other to share one positive or meaningful thing that happened that day.

Always use Low Impact Disclosure. This means asking for consent before you share gory details. Managers, allow staff time to debrief while they are still on the clock.

On your own: Alternatively, use a journal or a recording app to process the events and feelings of the day. Try to record your feelings related to the work day before you "clock-out" or as soon as you get home.

We may not be able to talk to our friends and family about what we experience at work. 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 experienced throughout the week and to consider any next steps that may be needed for healthy coping.*

As a peer group: Once a week (or once a month) staff should be given the opportunity for a group debrief with a skilled facilitator to reflect on what they've experienced in the course of caring for animals and clients.

Kathleen Ayl, author of *When Helping Hurts*, writes *"The facilitator helps 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."*

Managing groups who are traumatized or compassion fatigued can be a challenge. A good facilitator will be sure that everyone knows the discussion rules, including Low Impact Debriefing, that everyone has a voice, and everyone is heard.

Dr. Elizabeth Strand, pioneer in the veterinary social work field, shares her 6 questions structure for debriefing sessions:

1. What are the situations this week that made it hard to sleep or put aside thoughts of work when you were at home?
2. What do you wish you had done differently in that situation?
3. What did you do well in that situation?
4. What did you learn?
5. Was there anything funny about this? Maybe that you wouldn't tell anyone outside of the work, but got you giggling?
6. Is there anything you feel grateful for about this situation or your life in general?

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

They may also ask questions like, "And how did that feel?" or "Is there anything else that's important to share?" After some practice, expect to give each person 10-15 minutes to share.

In 1-on-1 Reflective Supervision: Supervisors or other skilled staff members should schedule a weekly or bi-weekly meeting that allows staff to check-in, discuss the impacts of their work, and receive support, including relevant referrals, if needed.

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."*

Reflective supervision is not therapy. You can find more information, including reflective supervision questions, [here](#) and [here](#). This is a [great video](#) on why reflective supervision is a necessary part of supporting employees in doing effective work.

These sessions should be confidential and staff should feel safe sharing with you without fear of penalty. If you're not sure how to conduct debriefings for your staff, a Veterinary Social Worker can help you gain competence in this area or can be hired to work with your staff directly.

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

As a group or as a pair: Form a peer support group or pair that meets monthly. You can do this online with colleagues in your field or at work with coworkers. This is a more in-depth, longer session than the daily debrief.

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](#).

Eric Gentry, PhD of Compassion Unlimited recommends writing down the full "narrative" of what you've experienced in the past few weeks and sharing it with your buddy or peer support group.

For 10 minutes or more (if time allows), 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. You can ask for advice or accountability, but the main job of the listener is only to listen.

Gentry 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. This helps us to let go.

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

Note: There is evidence that Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) is not an effective early intervention process. The World Health Organization has stated, "Because of the possible negative effects, it is not advised to organize forms of single-session psychological debriefing that pushes persons to share their personal experiences beyond what they would normally share."

Instead, education and **Psychological First Aid (PFA) is recommended.** The PFA model is NOT DEBRIEFING.

Instead, this approach includes the objectives to:

Listen; convey compassion; assess needs; ensure that basic physical needs are met; not force someone to talk; encourage, but not force, social support; provide information; protect from additional harm; allow ventilation of feelings as appropriate for the individual; and when appropriate, refer to a mental health specialist.

- Psychological First Aid training: access resources on PFA skills [here](#).
- Coursera offers a PFA online class [here](#).
- [Follow up](#) with Skills for Psychological Recovery.
- You can also download an Australian PFA guide [here](#).

PFA can be used any time we experience a distressing or traumatic event and may be especially useful after an event that has significant emotional power to overwhelm our coping methods and the potential to interfere with our ability to function at work or at home.

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 a traumatic situation?**

Recap:

At the end of *each day*, talk with a buddy or write in your journal for 10 minutes. *Weekly*, get together with coworkers or your staff to talk about cases that have had an impact. *Monthly*, meet with a buddy or a peer group for social support and accountability. Finally, have a plan for when a *crisis* occurs. Doing just one of these on regular basis will help, so **pick one** and get started! And remember: talking with a mental health professional, at any time, is always an excellent way to get ongoing support.

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