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The purpose of the Event-Oriented Debriefing brochure is to provide basic information about debriefing leaders. Debriefing is a factual review of events, including individual and unit reactions to those events, is important in helping soldiers adjust to their deployment experiences in a healthy and positive way. The pamphlet's focus is on debriefing after deployment but the overview can apply to other situations as well. The pamphlet describes what a debriefing is and is not, the goals of a debriefing, who conducts the debriefing, who it is intended for, and when it should occur. There is also a step-by-step description of how a debriefing is conducted and typical myths about how debriefings are addressed.

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Event-Oriented Debriefing: What Every Leader Should Know

Who should read this?

•Leaders who introduce a debriefing team to their units

•Non-commissioned officers who may deal with a debriefing team

•Any unit personnel who may lead a debriefing session

•Anyone interested in knowing what debriefing is all about

Why read this?

•To obtain basic information about what to expect from a debriefing team

•To understand the purpose and rationale behind debriefing

•To learn about some of the myths associated with debriefing

Background

Just as it is important to protect troops from infection and diseases like malaria, it is also important to help them adjust to their deployment experiences in a healthy and positive way. A simple but very powerful tool for leaders to accomplish this is the Event-Oriented After Action Debriefing. Under the operational demands and pressures of a real world mission, there is frequently little time for this kind of review. But when the action slows, or at the successful conclusion of the mission, it is important and useful to take some time to review events, clarify details, and put things in positive perspective.

What is Debriefing?

The Event-Oriented After Action Debriefing is a factual review of events, and individual and unit reactions to those events. It is an opportunity to sit down with fellow soldiers, reconsider what occurred, and draw lessons for the future. In the process of reviewing events, feelings may be expressed and problems may be defused. The main point of the Debriefing is to review the chronology of events, to give soldiers an opportunity to clear up any confusion, and to facilitate a healthy cognitive reframing and integration of their experiences.

Research indicates that small unit debriefings with a historical, event-oriented focus can speed the process of healthy adjustment to stressful events, and significantly reduce related ill-effects. The techniques for conducting Event-Oriented Debriefings are fairly simple, and can often be learned by key unit personnel.

Debriefing Goals

- Identify lessons learned for future operations
- Resolve misperceptions/misunderstandings of events
- Prevent short and long-term problems by helping troops put the experience into a positive perspective
- Provide context in which to emphasize positive accomplishments
- Educate troops on physical and psychological symptoms
- Reduce sense of isolation
- Enhance unit cohesion

Debriefing is NOT:

- NOT a stress-management session or individual psychotherapy
- NOT a search to focus on negative emotions or stress
- NOT an evaluation or critique, though lessons may be learned
- NOT a search for scapegoats or for individuals to blame

Who conducts the Debriefing?

•The techniques for conducting an Event-Oriented Debriefing are not difficult, and can be learned by unit leaders, behavioral specialists, chaplains, medics, physician assistants, nurses, or mental health workers, such as social workers.

•The best debriefers are trained in debriefing, knowledgeable about community resources (in order to make any necessary referrals) and familiar with the stress and coping field.

•A unit may want to identify a liaison to work with the debriefer who can make introductions, provide background knowledge on the unit, event, and key people involved, coordinate appropriate space and facilities, and encourage soldiers to be receptive to the debriefing.

Who is the Debriefing for?

•All troops involved in an event and/or deployment, regardless of rank.
•Usually best when done with small units, such as squads or work sections.
•If there is a large group, the introductory meeting and remarks can include the entire group which can then be broken down into co-worker groups of 8 to 10 people. As a rule of thumb, groups should not be larger than twenty or so persons.

When should the Debriefing occur?

•It is strongly recommended that there be a formal debriefing at the end of an operation.
•Timing is critical. Troops should have the chance to rest and shower first, but the debriefing should occur before they are caught up in the day-to-day life of post-deployment ideally, within one week following the operation.
•Midpoint and short "defuse" debriefings can often be done in-theater while troops are awaiting transportation.
•The longer, follow-up debriefing (1-3 hours) can occur at the home station 2-7 days after redeployment.

What is the actual approach?

CONFIDENTIALITY

The first step is to emphasize confidentiality. That means that what is said in the debriefing session stays there. It will not come back to haunt a soldier later, and that the information is not designed to identify a scapegoat. Information discussed in the debriefing will not be relayed to the chain-of-command.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the debriefing session should be made clear. The purpose is to review events and experiences in order to identify useful lessons and record what has happened.

INTRODUCTIONS

Some form of "ice-breaker" is a good idea. Each soldier may be asked to give his/her name, marital status, where they're from, how long they've been in the unit, or other such introductory information.

CONSTRUCTING A TIME-LINE

A time-line is then constructed. The goal is to develop an historical time-line or narrative of events through soldiers' descriptions. In the case of a deployment, the first part of the time-line may involve the pre-deployment phase, proceed to the deployment or mission phase, and conclude with the re-deployment phase. The issues may be addressed through direct questions.

Pre-deployment Phase

•How and when notified of this mission/deployment
•Pre-deployment processing and related experiences
•Medical processing (e.g., immunizations)
•Reactions of family/friends
•Experiences at unit
•Understanding the mission, expectations

Deployment or Mission Phase

•Deployment/arrival
•Initial activities and impressions on arriving in-country
•Work activities, where and what
•Off-duty activities
•Living arrangements and conditions
•Describe a typical day
•Communication with home (e.g., mail, news)
•Impression of local people, other international forces
•Equipment/supply issues
•Rules-of-engagement
•Any unaddressed critical incidents (e.g., disciplinary issues)

Mission Completion and Preparation for Return

•Activities involved in preparing to return
•Transition activities required
•Expectations

Re-deployment Experiences

•Reunion with family/friends
•Reintegration with home unit
•Saying goodbye to fellow soldiers (especially for special units assembled for deployment)

VENTILATION & NORMALIZING

A key component of debriefing is to "normalize" symptoms that soldiers might encounter:

•Troubling memories and mental images
•Sleep difficulties like bad, troubling dreams, insomnia
•Eating difficulties like loss of appetite, distaste for certain foods, upset stomach
•Jumpiness, irritability, trouble concentrating
•Physical symptoms like headaches, tight muscles

The leader of the debriefing should emphasize that if some of these symptoms occur it is normal and expected, and they will clear up over time. If the symptoms persist or disrupt day-to-day activities and functioning, then help is available and appropriate referrals should be made. Such resources include medical services, psychological services, and chaplains.

SUMMING UP\CLOSING REMARKS

The debriefer should attempt to summarize what was discussed in the debriefing. As a matter of courtesy, it is also important to thank the soldiers for their time, their participation, and for honestly describing their experiences.

FOLLOW-UP OR POST-DEBRIEFING REFERRALS

As was mentioned earlier, appropriate referrals may be needed for some members. Individual soldiers can be given information, but a list of resources should also be left with the commander and debriefing liaison. The commander may also need additional consultation regarding leave policies and cohesion-building activities.

What can commanders do to help soldiers adjust?

•Emphasize importance and value of what was accomplished

•Give positive recognition (awards, time off, praise)

•Make use of the media to emphasize accomplishments (AFN, Stars & Stripes)

•Help troops normalize responses by revealing the leader's own reaction, by showing the leader's "human" side

•Recognize that the soldiers may have witnessed some troubling sights; this openness will increase credibility on the part of the leader and speed any needed recovery

•Emphasize the value of unit debriefings to identify lessons and diffuse tension

•Ensure that the command is not ambivalent or disapproves debriefing; soldiers will perceive this and also tend not to cooperate

A Word to Debriefers

The procedures set forth in this pamphlet describe the ideal way that a debriefing should occur. The reality is that the ideal never happens. So the key is to be ready for the unexpected and not to be thrown off by it. Problems such as not having enough time to work with command before the debriefing is scheduled, finding space, and conflicts about or in the debriefing are just some examples of challenges that debriefing teams have faced in the past. Each situation is unique and the sets of problems and opportunities will also be unique. Remember that debriefers themselves need to be debriefed and having an outside consultant can help the debriefers maintain objectivity.

Some Common Myths about Debriefing

MYTH # 1
Nothing unusual happened, so there's nothing to debrief about: "There was no trauma, no crisis. What's there to talk about, anyway?"

FACT: What one person experiences as stress may not be the same for someone else. What may appear to be upsetting to you may not be difficult for someone else. Also, debriefing can be useful after a regular deployment because even though it wasn't a crisis, it certainly involves significant stressors (such as separation and uncertainty).

MYTH # 2
Not good to admit mistakes: "Why dredge up bad memories? Why broadcast to everyone what mistakes were made?"

FACT: If mistakes were made, then lessons from them need to be learned. Also, it is likely that people from the unit will not know the whole story and the rumors and misperceptions of an event can be more damaging to morale than the truth.

MYTH # 3
Activities like debriefing create a "self-fulfilling prophecy": "Why should we let it all hang out? The best thing is to just suck it up. This is the military, after all. It's all part of the job."

FACT: This is a legitimate concern, and certain kinds of "debriefings" may indeed make matters worse rather than better. This is precisely why an Event-Oriented Debriefing, rather than for example an emotion-focused critical incident debriefing, is preferable with military groups. By staying focused on events and facts, there is little chance of "creating" responses or stress that is not really there. Research has found that when people are given the opportunity to describe their experiences around a difficult event, they adjust faster and can even be physically healthier than people who don't. "Sucking it up" may be OK in the short run, or during a crisis, but afterward it could actually be dangerous to one's health!

MYTH # 4

Merely a griping session: "It'll just turn into a griping session (or pity party). They're all a bunch of whiners."

FACT: The point of the debriefing is to create a time-line and talk through the events (hence the term "event-oriented" debriefing). The facilitator's job is to prevent the debriefing from degenerating into a griping session.

MYTH # 5

After action, soldiers just need rest: "It's a waste of time. The soldiers will resent the time taken away from sleep, recreation, and families."

FACT: Before the debriefing, soldiers should have an opportunity to shower, rest and eat. These basic comforts need to be addressed first. As for seeing the debriefing as a barrier to family or comforts, the command needs to make clear that the debriefing is a part of any mission. The mission or deployment is not considered complete until the debriefing occurs. This perspective will help soldiers have more patience and enhance their sense of completing the operation once the debriefing does occur.

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USAMRU-E

US Army Medical Research Unit-Europe

"Research for the Soldier"

A Special Foreign Activity of the
Walter Reed Army Institute of Research

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