

Peer to Peer Debriefing and Counselling Skills

Understanding peer to peer counselling

People who use substances often face severe trauma and emotional burden related to the illicit drug overdose crisis. Peer Workers spend a lot of time supporting people who use substances manage their life stressors and deal with grief and loss.

Working as Peer Worker can be immensely stressful and for some, emotionally exhausting. Continued exposure to trauma, cycles of abuse and death, and stigma can leave Peer Workers emotionally exhausted and have difficulties dealing with their own issues. It is important to have access to support and counselling to deal with the physical, mental and emotional exhaustion from performing their role. Peer Workers often turn to one another, to set up a support system to ensure that they have people whom they can turn to for assistance, guidance and emotional support. There is often no counsellor better than a trusted peer, that is, a colleague who sincerely cares and who has shared lived and/or living experience.

Peer to peer counselling is a **time-limited relationship** in which one Peer Worker (the supporter) helps their peer to:

- Increase their ability to deal with their feelings and challenges;
- Gain understanding of their problem.

When and where should peer to peer counselling take place?

Creating a psychologically safe setting allows peers to engage actively in discussion about their personal challenges. Check in with the peer you are supporting and ask them where they would feel comfortable talking about their feelings and concerns. Find a private and quiet space that will contribute to confidentiality.

	Debriefing	Periodic counselling
Timing	End of work day or after critical incident	Periodically scheduled check-ins e.g. Weekly or monthly
Goal	Address peer's immediate challenges	Address peer's own emotional and mental wellbeing
Duration	Short (10 – 15 min)	Long (30 min)



Core counselling skills

Rapport means having a connection with the person. Shared lived/living experience can often help in rapport building.

Focusing involves making decisions about what issues the person being supported wants to deal with.

Active listening means paying attention to the person speaking with you and not only to the story, but also how it is told, the use of language and voice, and how the other person uses his or her body. It means being aware of both verbal and non-verbal messages.

Silence gives the person who is sharing their thoughts and feelings the control of the content, pace and objectives.

Reflecting and summarizing make sure that the person being supported knows their story is being listened to. This is achieved when the supporter repeats a shorter version of the story back to the peer. This is also known as 'paraphrasing'. In some cases, a longer summary of key points can be provided by the supporter.

Questions are used to clarify the peer supporter's understanding of what the person they are supporting is feeling.

Questions occur in two forms – closed questions and open questions.

Summarizing enables you to extract the most **important** points and sum up what the person has been talking about, and thus helps the person put their facts and feelings together. Examples of effective phrases to use to reflect content, feelings or meaning are: "It sounds like....." or "It seems as though....." or "I get the sense that..."

Closed: Can be answered as a 'yes' or 'no'. Closed questions should generally be avoided in the counseling relationship, as they do not encourage deeper exploration.

Open: Is necessary to gather information. An open question is one that requires reflection or exploration by the person being supported.

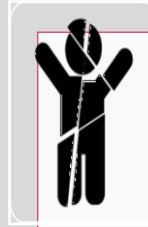
Critical incident debriefing

Critical incident debriefing is a type of counselling that has gotten more recognition and grown in practice.

A critical incident is a sudden, unexpected and powerful event outside of the range of normal experiences and outside an individual's control. In such cases, you have to suddenly deal with circumstances that are overwhelming and traumatic. They require a great deal of physical, mental and emotional energy – often way beyond your comfortable stress level.

Trauma occurs when an external threat overwhelms a person's coping resources. It can result in specific signs of psychological or emotional distress, or it can affect many aspects of the person's life over a period of time.

Typically, a debriefing session follows six phases. Some examples on the types of questions you can ask in each phase of debriefing are listed.



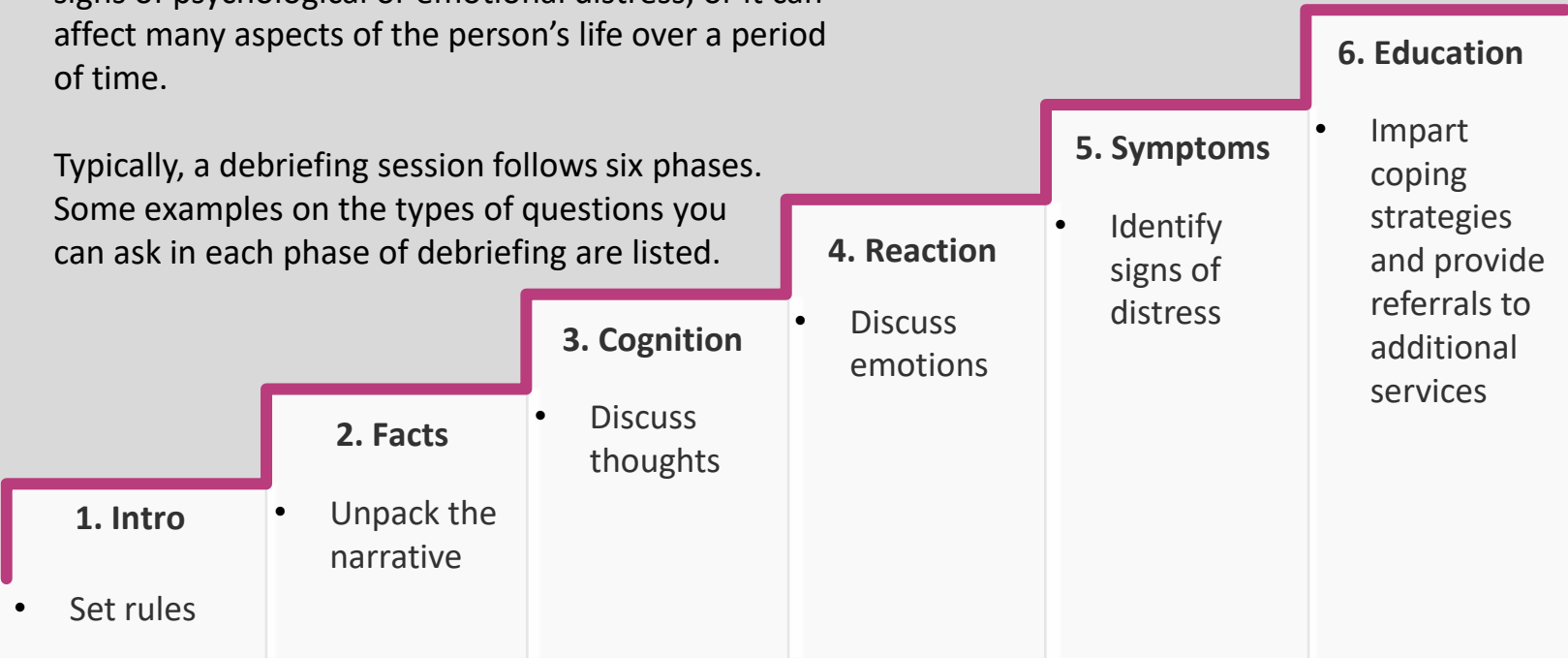
Provides a chance to talk about the critical incident and ease their stress response.



Debriefing after a critical incident can help the individual who experienced the incident to return to normal functioning more quickly than if no debriefing were available.



Encourages individuals who have undergone trauma to share their thoughts and feelings about the critical incident, with the goal of making sense of the trauma.



Phase	Example questions
Introduction	What would you like to discuss today?
Facts	What happened? How were you involved in the situation?
Cognition	What are your thoughts about what happened?
Reaction	How are you feeling right now? What is the most distressing or satisfying aspect of this case? What will you remember most about this person/ situation?
Symptoms	How has this event impacted your own emotional wellbeing?
Education	What lessons did you learn? What, if anything, would you do differently next time?

Caring for self

Working as a Peer Worker to support others can be immensely stressful. Peer Workers often come across and supports others who have experienced trauma and abuse. Continued exposure to trauma of others in addition to their own trauma can sometimes make it difficult for Peer Workers to cope and deal with their own stressors. The three most common consequences of extended exposure to trauma are vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue and moral distress. These can leave one feeling that they are unable to cope, helpless, overwhelmed, numb and/or disconnected from self and others, and distrustful. This can have many negative impacts on job performance, morale, interpersonal relationships and the individual's behavior. It can also impact one's mental health.



Vicarious Trauma

- Vicarious trauma is indirect trauma that can happen when a individual is constantly exposed and witnesses other people's trauma. Peer workers who often face the same trauma and marginalization as the individuals they support due to their shared lived/ living experience can be even more so be affected by vicarious trauma.



Compassion Fatigue

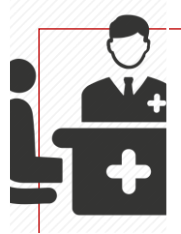
- Compassion fatigue, or burnout, is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by repeated and prolonged stress. Burnout can develop from exposure to people in emotional pain and from the strain of having to continually convey empathy to others. This is even more common among peer workers who don't only support clients, but rather friends and community members that they often consider their family.



Moral Distress

- Moral distress refers to the powerlessness felt by individuals due to their inability to act in a particular manner despite knowing the right course of action. This can be due to lack of time and capacity to provide the supports needed by the person you are supporting, or lack of the supports.

Self-awareness and self-care are critical to preventing an unhealthy build-up of the negative effects of your work. One important strategy to prevent burnout is awareness and acceptance that you cant help everyone. We are all human and naturally respond to the emotional state of others around us.



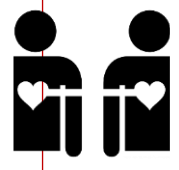
Seek medical advice, if appropriate for you.



Debrief with your team after potentially triggering events occur. Be aware of your triggers and stressors.



Develop a personal wellness plan. Activities may include meditation, exercise, art or music. Do what works for you!



Create a support system including family, friends and colleagues to whom you can turn to for assistance and emotional support.