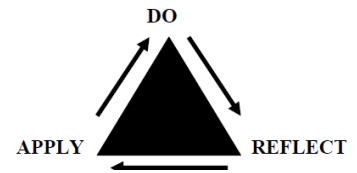


Debriefing & Reflection: Promoting balance, quality, and growth

Victim advocates play a vital role in mitigating the trauma which survivors experience in the aftermath of an assault. Advocacy work is an honor as well as a responsibility, and we are always facing new challenges. In light of our challenging profession, having opportunities to talk about our work and to tap into support for reflection in our advocacy is essential. **Debriefing may sometimes appear to be just talking, but it is much more than that!** It is a process in which advocates share important information, sharpen and hone their communication and advocacy skills, demonstrate their accountability to clients, and provide one another with validation and emotional support.

Building critical reflection into the structure of our advocacy work strengthens the quality of the advocacy we provide and our satisfaction with our work.



What is debriefing? Reflection?

Debriefing is when we supply somebody with information about a task or event after it has ended. Reflection is an invitation to think deeply about our actions so that we can note our successes and act with more insight in the future. It may include acknowledging and/or sharing of reactions, feelings, observations, and ideas about anything regarding your role as an advocate.

Debriefing is a valuable work practice because joint problem solving creates shared understandings, open communication, and better teamwork. Debriefing and reflection is especially important to sustaining quality advocacy. We work to promote survivors' self-determination, and, therefore, must look to how we showed respect, offered support, and added information as our basis for evaluating our success.

Why is debriefing so important?

1. Professional Self-Care

Debriefing enables us to be a reliable source of support and strength for our clients on a long term basis. Many people involved in direct service work find that it is the most rewarding work they have ever done, but this work can also be stressful, emotionally draining, and frustrating. Dominant North American culture teaches us that we should be strong, self-reliant, have control over our emotions, and should not need support from others. Survivors struggle with these damaging cultural beliefs – and overcome them – each time they make the choice to pick up the phone or drop by an advocacy program and seek support from a trained volunteer or advocate.

Advocates also struggle with these deeply ingrained social expectations. Learning to overcome the social mandate of silence around sexual assault and our emotions is an elemental part of our work as advocates, and as with all anti-oppression work, we must begin with ourselves. Advocates receive extensive training to deal with the large volume of crisis work we handle, but we are not robots, and we are not able to be a reliable source of support & strength for our clients on a long term basis if we don't receive support ourselves.

2) Protecting Client Confidentiality

Debriefing is an important way to protect confidentiality. Absolute confidentiality must be maintained in working with survivors of sexual and domestic violence, who need and deserve nothing less. Advocates do not discuss client issues at home or with partners, friends and family members. Not being able to talk about the emotionally charged events of our work day can feel isolating. Debriefing with other professionals in a safe setting is a way to release the emotions that build up around our work and avoid taking it home.

3) Becoming A Better Advocate

Debriefing is an essential tool to improve advocacy skills. Learning from one another through debriefing is one of the most effective ways to enhance our skills and build a strong team. During the process of debriefing:

- ♦ Advocates practice their communication and active listening skills.
- ♦ Advocates exchange ideas about resources available and beneficial skills and techniques to use when dealing with a particular issue or type of case. Clients receive better services when an entire team of skilled advocates pools their knowledge in support of the case.
- ♦ Advocates receive respectful feedback about their advocacy skills and approach and to give constructive feedback to their team members.
- ♦ Advocates become aware of and work to change any unwanted judgments and biases they may hold that create a barrier to providing effective advocacy to all survivors.
- ♦ Advocates express their feelings and are validated by others who do the same work, allowing an opportunity to release stress and reduce the effects of burnout.

By doing all of the above, advocates learn to trust and support one another and maintain a cohesive team.

When To Debrief

Advocates debrief every day. While in training, it is helpful to try to debrief each contact with more than one person. No matter how much experience you have, it is still important to debrief regularly.

How To Debrief

Debriefing one-on-one with another advocate and debriefing in supervision or as a team are all important. Ask your coworker for a set amount of time to debrief with you. In busy situations you may have only a few minutes, so the initial debrief may need to be followed up in supervision. Stick to the agreed on amount of time, but know that you can certainly ask for more time later or with another coworker.

Debriefing is not intended as a time to re-tell the horrors we have been witness to, but rather it is a purposeful time of dialogue intended as a chance to review the interaction and the process of advocacy we engaged in. Share the case details which are relevant, but try to also respect clients' privacy. If the contact was a limited or one-time contact, using the client's name can be avoided.

During debriefing, use active listening skills, provide emotional support, and respect the process and one another. Do not be judgmental of yourself or others. As long as we continue to work on our own issues, holding ourselves and each other accountable individually and as a team, there is no room for judgment.

What if I Don't Want/Need to Debrief?

You may be tempted to minimize debriefing or to only debrief when you feel you "need" to, which may be when you are already out of balance and becoming overwhelmed. Debriefing is part of a healthy routine that prevents us from getting to that place of fatigue or depletion. Some people involved in direct service work may feel the emotional need to debrief more or less frequently than others, but as a team it is part of our job and social justice values to support one another.

It's valuable to remember that advocacy staff and volunteers come together from diverse backgrounds and circumstances, experience varying degrees of privilege and oppression in their personal and professional lives and bring with them different needs for support. Remember that many advocates are survivors ourselves and each of us may experience different aspects of the work as either triggering or empowering. It's difficult to overcome the cultural mandates that tell us that seeking support means weakness. Failure to debrief brings these damaging beliefs into our workplace and perpetuates them. Take these issues into account and make it a point to **debrief regularly**.

The steps of debriefing:

What happened? What did you feel? So What? Now What?ⁱ

This is a model to assist you in debriefing and reflection activities. Using all four of these questions can provide broader insights and keep the discussion from getting stuck on only the facts or only the feelings.

What happened? (Factual)

Without judgment or interpretation, describe what happened in the client interaction. This is time to review how the interaction progressed, to pass on important client information, and to share any new information or techniques you have learned.

Potential questions include:

What happened? What did you observe? What were the client's needs, and how did you assess them? What were the results of the interaction? What resources, strategies, agencies or individuals were helpful or not helpful? What events or "critical incidents" occurred? What was of particular notice?

Ask for feedback. It may be helpful to pose a specific question and ask coworkers to discuss how they have handled a similar situation; for example, "The client's partner/friends were present and were pressuring the client to follow their wishes (e.g., report the incident, move out of her apartment). What have you found is an effective way to deal with that?" "The client is a homeless single adult with disabilities, and I referred him to the following places for shelter; are there any referrals that I missed?"

This is an opportunity to learn from the experiences of other advocates, and the client benefits through accessing the shared knowledge and resources of the whole team.

What did you feel? (Sensory)

Without judgment or interpretation, describe any strong emotions, attitudes or beliefs that came up for the advocate during an advocacy contact. Be clear about when you are moving into the emotional part of debriefing by stating that you are doing so.

Potential questions include:

Were there specific events that triggered your feelings in an especially powerful way? At what point did you become aware of the feelings? How did you cope with the feelings at the time? How did you feel after the contact was over, and how did you deal with those feelings? How might your feelings have affected your interaction with the client and others? How are you feeling now?

Ask for support. Emotional debriefing is a good time to request self-care tips, validation, empathy and encouragement.

This is a time to learn more about yourself, the way you process experiences, and the views you hold.

So What? (Critical thinking)

This step supports reflection and analysis of the events and feelings of the interaction. Through dialogue we explore the questions “What did you learn? What was significant? What impact did your efforts have?”

Potential questions include:

(Regarding the Advocate) Did you hear, observe, feel anything that surprised you during the interaction? What feelings or thoughts seem most strong about it? Were there aspects of the interaction that were different from what you expected? What struck you about that? How was that significant? What impacts the way you view the situation/experience? (What lens are you viewing from?) What aspects were the most meaningful? How did you respond to them? What did you like/dislike about the interaction?

(Regarding the Survivor) In what ways did the interaction provide opportunities to support the survivor’s self-determination? What did you learn about the client’s life circumstances? What might impact the recipient’s views or experience of the interaction? How were you able to provide validation to the survivor? What was challenging to you in negotiating truths or accepting the survivor’s priorities? What was the context of that priority? Tell me about your analysis for the potential benefits/risks of the course of action. What kinds of discussions have you had with the survivor regarding safety planning? In what ways did you and the Survivor work well together? What do you still want to know? How might you ask about that?

This is an opportunity to step back from the immediate experience and to add critical thinking into our routine practice. We benefit from our coworkers’ insights, the chance to reflect on how our actions fit with our intentions, and growing confidence in our judgment and decision-making.

Now What? (Looking forward)

At this step we consider the broader implications of the advocacy experience and apply learning. We strive to strike a balance between realistic, reachable goals and openness to spontaneity and change.

Potential questions include:

In what ways did core advocacy values inform your interaction? What barriers faced by this survivor are tied to larger structural issues? What kinds of activities are currently taking place in the community that are addressing these structural issues? What contributes to the success of advocacy interactions in general? In particular with this survivor? What hinders success? What learning occurred for you in this experience? How can you apply this learning? What would you like to learn more about, related to this situation or issue? What follow-up is needed to address any challenges or difficulties? What information can you share with your peers or the survivor? If you were in charge of the (court/ Child Welfare/ TANF) system, what would you do to improve it? If you could do the interaction again, what would you do differently? What would “complete” the advocacy interaction?

This is a time to highlight what information we need or what next steps we want to take with our client. It is also a time to remember the larger social structures that lead to the violence and difficulty in peoples’ lives and affirm the creativity and spontaneity that are important tools in adapting to complex demands.

ⁱ *Reflection Toolkit*, Northwest Service Academy, 2003. From: www.nationalserviceresources.org/filemanager/download/615/nwtoolkit.pdf