

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. Managers, allow staff time to debrief while they are still on the clock.

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 Debriefing (LID) to reduce secondary trauma exposure for the listener (more details on LID on the last page).

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 Group Debrief: *The goal is regular reflection and processing of emotionally challenging experiences experienced at work and to consider any next steps that may be needed for healthy coping.*

On a regular basis - weekly or monthly - 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 others 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 (such as no giving advice, using Low Impact Debriefing, etc.), 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 laughing?
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?" This is not the time to give advice on the technical aspects of the work.

After some practice, expect to give each person 10-15 minutes to share. Consider scheduling sessions at the end of the day or whenever staff have time to shift gears emotionally.

Groups like this are not therapy and may be run by peers, but to get the group established, consider investing in a skilled facilitator who understands grief, trauma, and the challenges of the job.

Not sure where to get help? Your health insurance or Employee Assistance Program may be able to help arrange support at low or no charge or you may be able to find a mental health professional or social work intern who will donate or discount their services.

Weekly Individual Reflective Supervision: *The goal is to provide regular, real time support to staff, get to know each staff member's baseline functioning, and bridge to care, if needed.*

Supervisors should schedule a brief weekly and as-needed meeting that allows staff to check-in, discuss the impact of their work, and receive support, including relevant referrals, if needed. Listen so they feel heard and understood, but don't critique their work (save that for another meeting).

In the book *Trauma Stewardship*, Deadria Boyland, manager of a domestic violence agency, shared: *"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.

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* and as-needed meet with staff 1-on-1 to provide reflective supervision. *Monthly* and as-needed provide the opportunity for staff to debrief about events that have had an impact. 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 empathic strain and trauma exposure. By creating supportive, safe connections that enable us to share regularly, we become more resilient to the challenges of the work!

Low Impact Debriefing: 4 Steps

Self Check: Hit pause and check-in with yourself, before you slime your coworkers, family, and friends with the gory details of what you've experienced on the job. Slow down and bring awareness to what you're about to share, so that you don't accidentally spread vicarious trauma.

Heads Up: Give them fair warning about the type of experience that you want to debrief about: *"I'd like to talk with you about a hard experience I had with a cruelty case involving a puppy."*

Get Consent (Before You Vent): Once they know what you want to talk about, they can make an informed choice. Ask, *"Can I talk to you about it? Is now a good time?"* The listener has the right to decline, give you limits about what they are able or ready to hear, or consent to hold space for a conversation with traumatic content.

Limited Disclosure: After you've received consent, start with the dial turned down on the details. Share the least traumatic information first and, if necessary, gradually turn up the dial on details. Do you need to share all the details in order to feel supported? Try to keep your focus on sharing how you're feeling, thinking, and reacting to the situation, rather than a play-by-play recounting of the graphic details.