

Helpful and hurtful aspects of debrief-groups

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There are a variety of different groups to help people grow, change or heal. If the use of various support groups and other kind of crisis groups are reflective of consumer's perception

of benefit from such groups, there must be an enormous benefit. Over the last decades there has been an explosion in different self-help groups and support groups for people who share common problems. People who have suffered loss, trauma, crisis, have the same disease or children/relatives with the same disease, meet in group settings throughout the world and obviously find this to be of benefit. Broadly such groups can be categorized in self-help and mutual help groups, support groups and therapy groups. The proliferation of such groups has not been followed by an abundance of discussion of the process involved in creating a benefit for participants or the possibility of hurtful consequences.

This article will focus on groups established to help people following a critical situation with particular emphasis on what is called a debrief group, critical incident stress debrief group or a psychological debrief group. The rapid spread of such groups makes it important to consider both positive and possible negative experiences that can result from participation. It is especially relevant to focus on some of the negative effects, because this is where harm can result to participants, and where we can learn to make the group function better. When crisis and debrief-groups are conducted they are undertaken at a sensitive time when many people are highly susceptible to the influence of others. For this reason different aspects pertaining to the benefit and pitfalls of such groups will be discussed.

Groups following critical incidents

Debrief-groups are not easy to place among the three categories of groups mentioned above. It certainly does not belong among the treatment groups although it has therapeutic value. It is more a combination of a mutual help group and a support group. The members of a debrief group have to take active roles in sharing their experiences, providing information and supporting each other as is usual in support groups (Schopler & Galinsky, 1993). Unlike support groups, however debrief-groups have a restricted time-span.

While other groups continue to meet over extended periods of time, the group to be debriefed usually will meet three times at the most, including a defusing, a debriefing and a follow-up debriefing. The main event will be the debrief meeting and for this reason there are only some hours allowed to achieve the main goal for the group. This make such groups more complicated to lead as so much stands or falls on the climate that the group leaders are able to establish during the introduction phase of the debriefing.

Although debrief groups are the major form of groups used following disaster and crisis situations, there are also other support groups initiated following critical events (see Wollman, 1993). Grief groups, mini marathon groups (Terr, 1992), crisis groups and some continuing debrief groups can be initiated to support people following critical situations. Debrief groups are in use for everything from juror debriefing to meetings following downsizing and other organizational crisis. Although originally used for established work-groups within the emergency services (Mitchell, 1983), the format and structure are also in use for primary victims that do not form a preexisting group.

The purpose of debrief groups

The major purposes of debrief and other support groups are usually listed as emotional support and information (Schopler & Galinsky, 1993). It is hoped that members in the group benefit by the feeling of being accepted, by being given a chance to verbalize what happened, through the normalization of experience, the opportunity to hear different perspectives, the sense of being cared for, emotional release, feelings of hope, increased knowledge about the situation, the feeling of relief and reassurances, and hopefully an increased feeling of competence (Galinsky & Schopler, 1994).

Debrief meetings are believed to lead to a structuring of the crisis experience, tying together the different experiences and perspectives of the individual group members into a whole. At the same time it demonstrates to members the caring role of their organization or their community. In some respects it reflects how the society at large shows its concern and care. In addition, meetings are hoped to generate feelings of hope and control, allow for peer support, provide an opportunity for catharsis, and positively affect the behavioral and cognitive-affective structure (Everly, 1995). Shalev (1996) discriminated between individual and organizational goals for psychological debriefing, mentioning improved communications between group members, enhanced group cohesion, improved readiness for future exposure, and symbolization and attribution of meaning to the event as examples of organizational goals. Such goals are often forgotten in studies of debriefing, but can have far reaching consequences for the future of the group debriefed.

When participants are asked about the reasons for the helpfulness of debriefings (i.e. Burns & Harm, 1993), they mention some of the same factors mentioned above; talking about the incident, realizing not being alone, hearing others talk, being part of a group who had experienced the same, and hearing how others handled the stress.

However, with the lack of experience and proper training in handling group processes on the part of many debrief leaders, the lack of a common definition of debriefing, and the variety in how such meetings are conducted throughout the world, there is no way of knowing that the positive effects hoped for are achieved (see Dyregrov, 1998).

When the leaders are able to quickly establish a climate of trust and respect, while at the same time build the participant's motivation to invest in the process, the debrief-meeting have a high chance of being successful in helping members learn more about the event, process their thoughts and emotions, and integrate what they have been through.

Negative experiences in groups

Support groups can also have negative effects. Some support groups tend to maintain themselves and members easily become stuck in a victim position (Berle, Haver & Karterud, 1994). Although such negative effects will not result from debrief group involvement because it is not an ongoing group, there are other negative consequences that may result from involvement in such groups.

Negative experiences in debrief-groups and other groups can result from characteristics of the participants in a group, the group's leadership, aspects of the group's environment and properties that evolve within the group. In table 1 some negative outcomes that people have reported following group involvement are listed. The danger of secondary traumatization is illustrated by the following example:

I worked with a group following an explosion that killed two members of a work-group. The sensory exposure involved grotesque details. In the debrief-group that met to talk through this most participants had taken in the event in all its gory, while others were not present at the exact place where it happened. To prevent intrusive recollections it was very important that those exposed to the sensory impressions were given an opportunity to give the sensory fragments a verbal form. However, doing this

in detail within the group would pose a risk of traumatizing other members of the work group. For this reason the members not present was not exposed to the other's detailed account of sensory impressions.

The risk of contagion is present when members vividly describe their experiences. When the whole group have similar experiences, the possibility for hurt is reduced. However, with only some members describing highly distressing memories and experiences, others may be at risk for visualizing or imagining what others describe. Such fantasies can in themselves take on an intrusive nature. Tehrani (1998) concludes that one only should focus on the factual content of what has occurred and avoid engaging in emotions. Important opportunities can be lost by such a restriction. However, care must be taken in what and how much participants are allowed to describe of the horror to the group, and room must be made for individual debriefs for those who need to give word to sensory impressions. Leaders without the proper training, experience or sensitivity can easily mishandle such an event, and the use of homogeneous groups will decrease the risk of harm or hurt in this respect.

Good leadership reduces the possibility of a negative outcome. To reduce or prevent some of these negative effects, skilful intervention is needed on the part of the leader. A debrief-leader must have a thorough knowledge of crisis reactions to be able to understand reactions in individual participants and on the group level, and know how to and when to use and convey this knowledge in relation to the group.

Let another example illustrate the importance of the leader conveying information:

During and following a discotheque fire that killed 63 young people in Gothenburg last fall, survivors and bystanders strongly criticized emergency responders for coming too late and doing too little. Their anger was strong enough to lead to physical clashes with the rescuers. During meetings for groups of young people afterwards it was extremely important to convey information about how fire-rescue personnel go about their job and the difficulties in an operation such as this. But it was just as important to convey an explanation of the altered time sense that took place in the situation. This is part of the mechanism of mental mobilization that usually help us survive. In this situation it was paramount that they had an understanding of the fact that it was their subjective sense of the rescuers taking forever to get there and not the actual time the rescuers took that was at the base of their anger. A special task force within the fire-

service met the young people and information about mental reactions was conveyed as well.

As Galinsky & Schopler (1980) have described, negative experiences stem from problematic group processes that are unnecessarily stressful, and from processes related to group development which the leaders inadequately address. On the basis of interviews with 44 social workers who were group leaders, they reported cases of psychotic breakdowns requiring hospitalizations, decreased job functioning, and long-term depression necessitating medication, as examples of hurt in groups. Because of the brief group intervention offered in debrief meetings, and the lack of screening of groups members, the reliance on good leadership is crucial to prevent such hurtful effects.

Leadership in debrief groups

Debrief leaders have much to learn from reading some of Schopler and Galinsky's work. They are among the few that have tried to understand why groups sometimes may be detrimental to participant's health. Their finding that leadership is a crucial factor in creating meetings that help and don't hurt is shared by the present author. Schopler and Galinsky (1981) write: *"Although the literature on group dynamics has long attested to the power of group norms, not enough attention has been devoted to the group leader's responsibility for developing and enforcing appropriate norms and for intervening when norms are problematic or when sanctions for nonconformity are too harsh. Furthermore, the frequency with which respondents cite leadership as a contributing factor to negative group interactions underlines the broad scope of responsibilities inherent in the group leader's role"* (p. 428). Remember that their research was carried out on groups where there was much more time allowed for establishing the structure, trust and climate within the group than what is allowed in a debrief group.

It is indeed good to have one's thoughts, reactions and impressions validated by others. However, this is no easy achievement in a debrief-group with a very time limited existence, and requires leadership that involves a variety of functions. They need to; quickly establish an atmosphere of trust; outline the goals and motivate for participation; build a relationship to the whole group and each individual member; be a role model for the participants; choose, address, clarify and time important issues; build cohesion and support within the group; guard

against destructive group-processes; assess strengths and vulnerabilities in participants, and fine tune a positive group process. These tasks require that the leaders must make use of all their interpersonal and professional skills.

Elsewhere this author (Dyregrov, 1997a) has emphasized the importance of the early parts of the debriefing, to ensure that a facilitative climate and process is established to help participants benefit from such meetings. Usually it takes time to build the trust and establish the climate necessary for members to easily talk about their experiences, thoughts and reactions. In debrief groups a climate that can facilitate everything that is to take place later is established by the leaders during the introduction phase. This must be done in such a way that members feel comfortable about sharing their inner experiences. This trust is built by the way that leaders present themselves, the purpose of the meeting, and the rules. The introduction with its focus on rules and structure show participants that there is clear leadership and a clear procedure to what will take place. This lowers anxiety, and enables participation. However, too much structure will easily be experienced by participants as negative (see Rohde & Stockton, 1994). Leaders have to create a balance between structure and flexibility that facilitates participation.

Trust and authority is built and based on a combination of non-verbal and verbal communication. It is formed by the way the leaders use their eyes, by what they say, and the manner they say it in. The leaders must be able to look at the members, moving their eyes from side to side during the introduction to include all members of the group, and then change focus and give total attention to each group member during the fact-phase. By their investment of energy in the group, the leaders will determine how much the members will invest in the process to ensue. An unprepared leader without the power to motivate or focus the group on its purpose will not be successful. If the leaders do not “take” the necessary authority in the group, and instigate the group rules, they will have little control over how the group deals with difficult themes, emotions and conflicts later on.

The interaction between the leader and co-leader provide a role model that will determine the climate for the following group process. The way the group is seated and the way each member is treated during the fact face will add to the climate that determines whether group members are willing to talk about what has happened. To complicate things further; if the leader behaves as an expert, who wants to comment on the member’s utterances, the process

is slowed down. Here the affirmation of group member's reactions is not coming from the other group members but from the leader. Although this may increase the leader's self confidence, status and feeling of importance, it may be negative for the group as a whole. However, when members signal unique reactions not easily affirmed by the others, the leader has to normalize this by commenting on the reactions. This demand solid knowledge about usual and not so usual crisis reactions on the part of the leaders.

Problems in the group-process

The group-process can be complicated because the participants are at different stages in their reactions, by members not participating or disrupting group process, by conflicts etc., (Galinsky & Schopler, 1994). Galinsky & Schopler (1994) refer to research that found participants more likely to be aware of negative effects than were leaders. Group leaders need proper training to help them understand the factors that can impede group processes.

The interaction between leader and co-leader is an area that already has been briefly mentioned. The way they interact will powerfully influence the group, and can stimulate positive and create negative effects among the participants (Galinsky & Schopler, 1980). Disagreement between the leaders can instantly have its impeding effect on the group. Good co-leadership requires that a good chemistry exists between the leaders, that their roles are clearly delineated, and that they come well prepared (see Galinsky & Schopler, 1980 for advice on co-leadership). The members subconsciously perceive even the way the leader looks at the co-leader during the introduction and if this is without respect and warmth, it can reduce the favorable climate of the group.

The complexities of debrief meetings become evident when we have to address the themes that participants do not raise themselves.

A group of colleagues met for a psychological debrief-meeting following a suicidal attempt by a person in the group. The person succeeded enough to become paralyzed from the neck down. The group struggled with guilt that they were able to talk openly about, but nobody managed to raise the issue of "Maybe it would have been best if he died". When this theme was sensitively raised by the debrief-leader, it obviously was an important one for them to be able to share thoughts and feelings around.

The leader's task is, as Aveline (1993) says, to attend to the unattended. By observing when a group nerve is touched, by using prior and present experience and knowledge, the leaders have to time the discussion of important themes for the group, whether the themes are raised by the members or they are focussed by the debrief leaders.

It is in this fine-tuning of the group, in how fast or slow to move, how deeply to explore the themes, when to change the theme and when to move on to a new phase, that the skills of the group leaders come into force. Without the proper "feel for" the group, understanding of the process, and authority to steer it, the group may lose its beneficial potential.

Debrief groups and the future

There is no reason to believe that debrief-groups have found a formula that never needs to be changed. In the following some aspects that concern the future of debrief-groups will be described.

There is a need to achieve a better fit between the type of group to be debriefed and the debrief process involved. This is especially so as debrief groups are no longer restricted to emergency responders, but used for primary victims as well. Groups of primary victims do not have the training and experience of professional helpers, and thus these groups will contain people with a more varied background. Such groups will need more experienced leaders to handle the problems that may arise when members have a more heterogeneous background and exposure.

There is also a need to develop more specific guidance to participants on how they can handle specific after-reactions following crisis events. Direct instrumental and confrontative coping shows a positive relationship with health, probably by improving the sense of control in addition to better concrete problem solving (Paez, Basabe, Valdozedo, Velasco & Iraurgi 1995). During debrief-meetings this author has conducted over the last years participants have been informed about very specific techniques that they can use to take control over intrusive images (see Dyregrov, 1997b). Such specific guidance can be given in written form, but some verbal instructions may often be needed. Psychoeducational aspects have always been part of debriefing, but I foresee a more specific use of such measures.

Being mentally prepared for what is to be expected help people identify, sort out and accept their reactions as part of a normal reaction, and it helps people understand what happens within themselves and in their relationships. From a therapeutic viewpoint it seems important to highlight the need of psychoeducational work, both during crisis and grief intervention, as well as when post-traumatic therapy is needed.

Activity seems to be especially important for individuals in stressful situations and can be highly effective in reducing threat and distress (Gal & Lazarus, 1975). This also makes the psychoeducational aspects of the debriefing with suggestions to members on how to actively deal with the situation at hand a powerful tool in improving the participant's sense of control. Important advice should be outlined involving activity that can decrease tension, counteract avoidance, lower intrusions and regulate and help in the meaning-transition over time. Those who become more passive in the face of stress may continue to experience stress-effects over a longer period of time. As Gal & Lazarus (1975) reported, individuals get considerable relief from symptoms by "forcing" themselves to engage in activity following intense stress. It is important to note that it is not the actual control of the situation, it is the feeling of mastery that the person gains from the action he is performing that reduces his anxiety and feeling of helplessness (Gal & Lazarus, 1975). Debrief meetings in itself is a kind of activity that may have helpful effects by engaging participants in a ritual that provides social support, and a sense of control and structure in anotherwise turmoiling situation. This can play a significant role in regulating the emotional state.

It will also be important to learn if there are people or groups of people that do not benefit from such group meetings. Several researchers have found that the power of the word, linking emotion to the verbal system, is not without it's risks. To be able to benefit from this it seems that the person must be able to bring the powers of the symbolizing process and the verbal system to bear in reorganizing emotions schemas and rendering them more veridical and adaptive in current life (Bucci, 1995). Shalev (1996) contends that: "Some individuals, by virtue of their coping style, may do better when allowed to repress and forget their trauma" (p. 212). But what if the consequences of repression are more medical illness? Should we work to include these people in groups to prevent these defenses often associated with disease to continue? Should individual follow-up be instigated or should they be left alone? A number of researchers have shown that individuals who use inhibitory (repressive) coping strategies in the face of stressful life events exhibit increased objective health problems. Schwartz (1990)

found that in a sample of women with breast cancer, repressors reported significantly less negative emotions, yet the rate of remission was 46 % lower than non-repressors. Although not in favor of mandatory debriefings, this author thinks there is a challenge to try to involve highly defensive subjects in groups or individual follow-up in a way that do not harm them.

Pennebaker's results (1990, 1993) show clearly that confronting negative affective reactions produces short term negative effects, and avoiding negative affective reactions causes short term positive effects. Nevertheless, long term positive effects on health and affect is usually gained by confronting negative affective reactions. We have a lot to understand regarding how painful themes need to be addressed during debrief-meetings.

Rimé (1995) has pointed out that natural social situations are not likely to offer people opportunities to verbalize in depth and at length feelings experienced during an emotional episode. He writes: “ It may thus be that what people evidence as social sharing behaviors in everyday life would rather be uncompleted attempts at processing episode-related emotional information. One can probably conclude that in the field of emotion, there is ample place for professional intervention” (p.287). Ritualized follow-up sessions, such as debrief-meetings, may be one necessary professional intervention to help process critical events.

Much research in the last decade has demonstrated a relation between dissociation and PTSD (ref). By providing an early opportunity for calibrating the mental apparatus and getting in touch with emotional and cognitive reactions, debriefing may prevent a continuation of a dissociative reaction. The problem we face is that there may be great individual differences in the tempo of assimilation of distressing experiences, that may make it difficult for the whole group to benefit from debriefing at the same time.

While debrief meetings from the onset has been thought of as a useful way to identify those in need of individual treatment, there may also be a need to let some debrief groups evolve into crisis groups that can continue to meet over a limited number of sessions. Although this is not usually needed for trained emergency responders, groups of primary victims may need such group follow-up to be organized. Juhnke and Osborne (1997) have described one such outgrowth of a debrief group that they have named “Solution-focused debriefing group”. This group for adult survivors of violence meets once a week for three weeks with the first meeting following the typical CISD format. It may well be that the use of CISD with primary victims

requires more complex interventions, where we need to try out various combinations of individual and group assistance during the period following the critical event, as well as better strategies for screening out those that require more intervention.

Conducting helpful debrief-groups is part training, part experience and much artwork. It requires respect for the complexity of people, groups and group-processes. It is a group activity that can be healing and helpful when the debrief-leaders are able to establish a facilitative climate. It requires, however, a constant fine-tuning of the group process to ensure that interventions do not end up hurting the participants.

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