

HELPING PEOPLE WHO HAVE RECENTLY EXPERIENCED TRAUMA

I. What is a Trauma?

- Something that makes the person realize they could have died
- Something that makes the person feel powerless, helpless, and paralyzed
- A sudden and overwhelming experience. It owns the person, they don't own it.
- A time when the person experiences extreme fear, even if only for a short while
- A time when the person cannot think clearly. Sometimes they react automatically; that is, without thinking.
- More than stress. Stress does not have the sudden and life-threatening quality that trauma has.
- A shock to the system, which is why it affects the whole system and creates a state of emergency.

II. Preparing to debrief people who have been through trauma

- **Timing.** It is best to begin the debrief as soon as possible after the crisis has occurred. The debrief should begin no later than 72 hours after the trauma.
- **Talking**
 - People involved need to be encouraged to talk. They need to have someone who will listen actively and compassionately, but won't judge them.
 - Don't be surprised if people are confused at times, talk rapidly, become emotional, or even express anger at you, the facilitator.
- **Togetherness.** Each person who was exposed to the trauma should be debriefed, preferably as a group so as (1) to corroborate or confirm the reality of what happened and (2) to provide mutual support.
- **Time**
 - Healing from a trauma takes time.
 - Don't expect the meeting with all those involved to be quick. Each person will need times to talk. Extend grace and patience.
- **Take care of yourself.** Facilitators can often become traumatized after listening to stories of trauma.
 - Find a trusted friend with whom to share feelings and symptoms you yourself may be experiencing.
 - Get rest and sleep.
 - Find activities to enjoy which help you relax.
 - Find time for spiritual, physical, and emotional refreshment.

III. Phases of Trauma Debrief.

When you have gathered all the people who were involved in the trauma, lead them through the following seven phases.

- **Introduction phase**
 - The goal in this phase is to explain the purpose of meeting together.
 - Remind each person to not judge the others.
 - Ask people to promise not to share with others what is discussed in this meeting. People need to be free to share what they are feeling and know that people won't gossip about them.
 - Explain that everyone will have a chance to share, and that it is important not to interrupt someone who is speaking.
- **Fact phase.** The goal of this phase is to find out what happened.
 - Ask each person to explain what happened from their perspective and what their role was in the traumatic event. In this phase we want people to state the facts and not their feelings. They will express their feelings in a later phase.)
 - Ask each person to explain what they did or didn't do during the trauma event.
- **Thought phase.** The goal of this phase is to move from factual to personal.
 - Each person explains what his first thought was after he/she stopped reacting in an automatic fashion.
 - Thoughts naturally flow into feelings, so as the participants talk about their thoughts about the incident, encourage them to also share their feelings (which takes us to the next phase).
- **Reaction phase.** The goal of this phase is to move from thoughts about the trauma to feelings about the trauma.
 - Ask each person to explore their reactions to the trauma. These questions could help:
 - What won't leave your mind about what happened?
 - What was worst part for you?
 - It is important as a facilitator that you *validate* what each person says.
- **Symptom phase.** The goal of this phase is to help each participant understand how the trauma has impacted them and is still impacting them.
 - Ask each person to describe any symptoms/emotions they experienced during and after the event.
 - Then ask them to identify what symptoms they are still experiencing.
- **Teaching phase.** The goal of this phase is to (1) help participants understand what is normal and not normal, and (2) help them understand what to expect in the future and how to continue the healing process.
 - If people have been physically injured it is important for them to see a doctor.
 - These are normal reactions to trauma: Shock, anxiety, denial, guilt, anger, shame, trouble sleeping, nervousness, crying, shaking, depression, and grief.
 - Each person is unique, so reactions will vary.
 - Recovery will take time, but each person will overcome these feelings if they are patient.
 - Encourage each person not to compare themselves with others. All people are different.

- It is important for each person to talk about the event as often as needed.
- Encourage them to spend extra time in prayer and reading God's Word. These Psalms may be helpful Psalm 6, 11, 13, 17, 22, 23, 27, 31, 42, 44, 46, 55, 56, 57, 62, 66, 69, 70, 77, 88, 91, 102, 107, 116, 118, 121, 130, 139, 142, 143, 146.
- Encourage each person to take time for physical rest.
- Help the participants to understand the various losses they have experienced because of the trauma:
 - Loss of CONTROL over their life
 - Loss of TRUST in God or other people
 - Loss of a sense of JUSTICE or FAIRNESS
 - Loss of something PERSONALLY SIGNIFICANT (property, self, or a loved one)
 - Loss of a sense of IMMORTALITY
 - Loss of FUTURE
- Help each person to understand that trauma may make them feel childish; that is, they want to be treated as a child or they want someone else to take care of them. This is due to losing their confidence to be able to take care of themselves.
- Suggest ways to manage stress.
- **Follow up phase.** The goal of this phase is to conclude the meeting and make plans for the future.
 - Summarize what people shared.
 - Answer questions.
 - Suggest people keep a journal to write down thoughts and feelings.
 - People should not revisit the scene of the trauma until they are ready.
 - Discuss what resources and strengths each person has to overcome this crisis/trauma.
 - Discuss a short-term plan to bring back stability.
 - What is needed physically, medically and/or emotionally?
 - What support, encouragement, and hope are needed?
 - Plan a follow up meeting, if necessary.