

Conversation for Debriefing a Traumatic Event

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"The Art of Focused Conversation"

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This conversation framework is intended to be used after immediate emergency needs are met, to work through the shock towards recovery. It is best used with a group to get different perspectives and create group support, but can also be used for personal journaling. Create a comfortable and relaxed space, and take your time. Expect some long silences. Ask at least one question from each level, and listen respectfully to each answer.

This was used by a group of facilitators after 9/11 when they were too stunned to do their planned agenda, but needed to be together. And, after Hurricane Katrina, a facilitator led the conversation with people who had been evacuated. Afterward, the group felt renewed hope and commitment to rebuild their lives.

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Debriefing a Traumatic Event

For use with colleagues, friends and family:

- A group member can help the group guide its thinking with the following questions to begin to process traumatic situations and respond to them productively.
- The sequence of questions is designed to gradually move from surface observation through personal reflection, thoughtful interpretation, and resolution.

Aims of the conversation:

To talk about personal experiences of the trauma

To face reality and begin to deal with it productively

To move from shock to beginning to come to terms with the situation

Opening:

This event has shaken all of us. Let's take a little time to reflect on what's happened, so we can come to terms with it. I'm going to ask some questions that will help us gradually process what happened. I would like you to let everyone have their own answers – no interrupting, arguing, or judging what anyone says.

Objective Questions:

Imagine you were a video camera recording what you have seen and heard happening since the first events. What actions, words, phrases, objects, and scenes are recorded on your tape?

Let's get everything — the first events, then everything that has happened since -- so we all have as full a picture as possible of what has happened to this point.

Reflective Questions:

What were your first reactions?

What shocked or frightened you most about this incident?

What images or previous experiences were triggered for you?

How else did you find yourself reacting?

Interpretive Questions:

What impact has this had on you personally? How are you different now?

How we different as a group or as a society as a result of these events?

How has our view of the world changed?

What might have been some contributing factors to why this happened?

What might be some of the underlying issues behind all of this?

What might we learn from this?

Decisional Questions:

What can we do to deal with the situation in the short term?

What are some things we can do to begin to deal with the underlying issues and prevent events like this from happening again?

What can we do to help each other?

Closing

We will undoubtedly continue to reflect on this. If you need help, please be sure to ask for it.

Hints:

Some of these questions are difficult to answer, so if there are few spoken answers, don't worry.

The very fact of raising these questions and following this flow allows deeper reflection later.

It may be helpful to print out the questions for people to take with them for later reflection.

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