

Implementing Effective Debriefings

Debriefing is a valuable communication technique that supports reflective learning in the healthcare environment; healthcare teams may use this technique to review real or simulated clinical scenarios.

When done properly, debriefings can help care teams review their performance, understand their thoughts and actions, and identify ways to improve human and systems factors in the healthcare setting.

Debriefing discussions might include key facts about what happened during a particular event,

why it happened, what went well, what did not go well, lessons learned, and practical solutions for improvement. The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality notes that “Debriefs are most useful when they relate to specific team goals or address particular issues related to recent team actions.”¹

The following strategies can help healthcare leaders and providers (a) consider how best to incorporate debriefings into their current settings and clinical practice, and (b) develop a debriefing approach that supports performance and quality improvement.²

1

Determine how your organization plans to use debriefings as part of training and/or clinical care and whether certain situations should automatically trigger these conversations (e.g., emergency codes, cases with poor outcomes, pediatric cases, etc.).

2

Work with your organization’s legal counsel to address concerns about confidentiality and discoverability in relation to debriefings and any associated documentation. Based on your legal counsel's guidance, develop a policy that addresses these issues.

3

Consider whether using a debriefing method or framework might be helpful in your organization. Examples of various methods include [Plus-Delta](#), [TALK](#), [PEARLS](#), [TeamSTEPPS®](#), and [3D Model of Debriefing](#).

4

Make sure that team leaders and others who plan to facilitate debriefing sessions are appropriately training in debriefing techniques and strategies for effective facilitation.

5

Carefully consider each situation when determining who should be present for debriefings and the type/format of conversation to use. Factors to consider include the seriousness and complexity of the event, the participants who were involved, the various departments involved, the objectives and goals of the debriefing, etc.

6

Select locations and settings for debriefing discussions that are conducive to good communication. Participants should be able to see and hear clearly, and the setting should foster collaboration and interaction.

7

Focus debriefings on learning and improvement, and make sure they align with the tenets of [psychological safety](#) (i.e., a nonpunitive environment in which individuals feel empowered to speak up without fear of blame or retribution).

8

Establish rules for each debriefing session (e.g., in relation to conduct and confidentiality), and review the purpose and objectives of the debriefing at the beginning to set the stage for appropriate behavior.

9

Ensure that debriefings are all-inclusive and avoid power dynamics and perceptions of hierarchy. Try to engage all participants in the conversation, and give everyone an opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings.

10

Consider what elements of the event to review and assess during the debriefing. Examples might include team roles and responsibilities, various facets of communication, situational awareness, workload and workflow, errors or near-misses, and available resources (e.g., human, technology, materials, etc.).

11

Make sure debriefings focus on positive aspects of the event as well as areas for improvement. Recognizing team members positive contributions can help set the tone for a respectful, nonpunitive, and productive discussion.

12

Identify what resources your organization has in place to support providers and staff members who are experiencing burnout or distress related to adverse outcomes. Make sure debriefing participants are aware of these resources, particularly if the debriefing is related to a highly emotional or traumatic event.

13

Follow a debriefing structure that culminates in turning lessons learned into viable solutions to improve safety and quality. Make sure any follow-up tasks from the conversation are assigned and communicated to the appropriate individuals.

14

Incorporate debriefing techniques into education and training to help familiarize providers and staff members with these methods and to make them more comfortable participating in debriefing discussions.

Endnotes

¹ Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. (2023). *Reviewing the team's performance: Debrief*. TeamSTEPPS®. Retrieved from www.ahrq.gov/teamstepps-program/curriculum/team/tools/debrief.html

² Edwards, J. J., Wexner, S., & Nichols, A. (2021, November 18 [last updated]). *Patient safety primer: Debriefing for clinical learning*. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Retrieved from <https://psnet.ahrq.gov/primer/debriefing-clinical-learning>; Ritchie, D. (2021, September 23). *Healthcare debriefing: TALK, TeamSTEPPS, PEARLS*. Codimg. Retrieved from <https://codimg.com/healthcare/blog/en/debrief-talk-teamstepps-pearls>; Coggins, A., Zaklama, R., Szabo, R. A., Diaz-Navarro, C., Scalese, R. J., Krogh, K., & Eppich, W. (2021). Twelve tips for facilitating and implementing clinical debriefing programmes. *Medical Teacher*, 43(5), 509–517. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2020.1817349>; Abulebda, K., Auerbach, M., & Limaiem, F. (2022, September 26 [last updated]). Debriefing techniques utilized in medical simulation. *StatPearls*. Retrieved from www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK546660/; Ritchie, D. (2021, July 20). *How to lead a debriefing session*. Codming. Retrieved from <https://codimg.com/healthcare/blog/en/debriefing-session>

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