



A Beginner's Guide to Debriefing

Amy Miller

Expat Resilience and TRAIN International

Impact and Benefits of Debriefing

Debriefing—reflecting on and processing experiences—plays a crucial role in psychological well-being, especially after significant or challenging life events. Here's a breakdown of its impact, benefits, and consequences when it is neglected:

Psychological Impact and Benefits

1. Emotional Release and Regulation

- Processing experiences allows individuals to express emotions they may have been holding back. By talking or reflecting on what happened, people can better understand their feelings and reduce emotional tension.
- This helps prevent feelings of overwhelm, anger, or sadness from festering.

2. Sense-Making and Clarity

- Debriefing helps people organize their thoughts and experiences into a coherent narrative.
- This process brings clarity and allows individuals to identify what they learned or gained, making sense of confusing or emotionally heavy events.

3. Reduces Psychological Residue

- When we don't process experiences, they can linger in our minds, causing stress, intrusive thoughts, or rumination.
- Debriefing helps "file away" the experience, reducing its psychological weight.

4. Promotes Growth and Resilience

- By reflecting on experiences—whether positive or negative—individuals can identify lessons learned, strengths discovered, and areas for growth.
- This helps build resilience and self-awareness, fostering greater confidence in handling future challenges.

5. Validation of Feelings

- Sharing experiences with a trusted person validates emotions and reinforces that it's okay to feel what they feel.
- This connection reduces feelings of isolation and shame.

6. Improved Coping Strategies

- Processing difficult experiences allows individuals to identify coping mechanisms that worked—or didn't—during the event.
- Over time, this strengthens emotional regulation skills and adaptability.

What Happens When People Don't Debrief?

1. Emotional Bottling and Suppression

- When emotions are not processed, they can become suppressed or "bottled up," leading to anxiety, irritability, or outbursts.
- Unprocessed emotions can also manifest physically, contributing to stress-related health issues like headaches or fatigue.

2. Increased Stress and Rumination

- Unprocessed events can remain mentally unresolved, leading to rumination—repeatedly revisiting the experience without finding closure.
- This increases stress, disrupts sleep, and prolongs emotional discomfort.

3. Stagnation in Growth

- Without debriefing, individuals miss the opportunity to reflect on what they've learned and how they've changed.
- This lack of reflection can limit personal growth and make future challenges harder to manage.

4. Build-Up of Unresolved Trauma

- Significant life events that go unprocessed can create long-term psychological consequences, such as post-traumatic stress symptoms or chronic anxiety.
- Even minor events, if stacked over time, can accumulate and impact mental health.

5. Feelings of Isolation

- People who don't debrief—especially with others—can feel alone in their experiences. The absence of validation and connection may make their struggles feel heavier.

6. Negative Impact on Relationships

- Unresolved feelings can spill into personal and professional relationships through irritability, withdrawal, or lack of empathy.
- A lack of emotional processing can make it harder to communicate effectively with others.

Without debriefing, experiences—especially difficult ones—can remain unresolved, impacting emotional well-being, stress levels, and relationships. Debriefing is not only a valuable tool for self-awareness and growth, it can also provide closure, clarity, and a path forward.

Three Step Debriefing Model: What? So What? Now What?

The **What? So What? Now What?** model is a simple yet powerful framework for guiding individuals or groups through a structured debrief of their experiences. It encourages reflection, learning, and planning, making it especially useful after a significant event, transition, or experience. This model is widely used in education, debriefing, coaching, and counseling.

This three-step model takes participants through three stages of reflection and works well especially in one-on-one situations:

Step 1: WHAT?

What was the experience? What happened?

Goal: *Gather facts and observations about what happened.*

In this step, the focus is on objectively describing the event or situation without judgment or interpretation. The goal is to create a shared understanding of what took place and establish a foundation for deeper reflection.

Key Questions:

- What happened during the experience?
- What were the key events, actions, or moments?
- Who was involved?
- What did you observe, hear, or feel?
- What stood out to you?

Example in Practice:

Let's say someone has returned home after living abroad.

- *What happened?* "I lived in another country for three years. I worked with an international team, adapted to a different culture, learned a new language, and traveled extensively. Now I've moved back home."

At this stage, responses are straightforward and descriptive.

Step 2: SO WHAT?

What was the meaning of what you experienced? What patterns can you identify?

Goal: *Explore the significance of the experience.*

- Here, individuals begin to interpret what the events meant to them, what they learned, and how it affected them.
- **Validate their feelings without correcting them.**
- Guide them into looking for patterns that may show up in their experiences, their decisions, and their relationships with others and God.
- Continually refer to observations from the first stage. Ground interpretations in concrete examples and ask more questions about anything that intrigued you in the first stage.
- This step deepens self-awareness and connects the experience to broader insights or growth.

Key Questions:

- Why does this experience matter to you?
- What emotions did you feel during or after it?
- Do you see any recurring patterns of event, behaviors, conflicts, or reactions?
- What did you learn about yourself or others?
- How did this challenge or change you?
- What went well, and what didn't?

Example in Practice:

Reflecting on the return home after living abroad:

- *So what?* "At first, I felt excited to come back, but then I realized I had changed a lot. I felt disconnected from friends who couldn't relate to my experiences. I also learned that I'm more adaptable and resourceful than I thought. The skills I developed abroad are now strengths I can use at home."

At this stage, the focus shifts from *what happened* to *why it matters* and its impact.

Step 3: NOW WHAT?

How can you apply what you have learned in future situations?

Goal: Decide on actions or next steps based on the insights gained.

- This step is about looking forward. It helps individuals consider how they can apply what they've learned to similar situations, make changes, or plan future actions.
- This makes the reflection practical and growth-oriented.
- This step may bleed over into coaching. You'll need to decide if that is a role that is appropriate for you to take on.

Key Questions:

- What will you do differently next time?
- How can you use what you've learned moving forward?
- What specific steps or changes will you make?
- Who can help you or hold you accountable?
- How can you build on this experience?

Example in Practice:

After reflecting on their re-entry experience:

- *Now what?* "I'll reach out to others who've lived abroad to build new connections. I'll also share stories with close friends to help them understand my journey. Professionally, I'll highlight my cross-cultural skills as a unique strength in my work."

At this stage, the insights turn into concrete actions that lead to growth, change, or resolution.

Why This Framework Works

- **It's simple and clear** – The three steps provide a natural flow from observation to reflection to action.
- **It encourages reflection** – People often skip reflection, but this model creates space to process experiences meaningfully.
- **It promotes growth** – By focusing on what comes next, individuals move forward with clarity and purpose.

By consistently using the **What? So What? Now What?** model, you empower people to turn their experiences into valuable insights and actionable steps for the future.

Basic Debriefing Questions

Types of Questions

- **Clarifying questions**

- Clarifying questions are asked with the intention of making sure the listener understands what is being said.
- These could also be used if you have become distracted.
- You can ask for clarification of the message itself, the context, or intent of the message.
- These questions help us not jump to conclusions or assume we know what they mean.

- **Probing questions**

- These shouldn't make the speaker feel like they are being interrogated, but they are used to move deeper into the message and further explore what the speaker is saying.
- These are the questions that help us encourage the speaker to tell us more.
- Some probing questions are "the question behind the question"—asking more pointed or more challenging questions that helps uncover negative mindsets, attitudes, and behaviors.

- **Confirming questions**

- Good listeners want to check their understanding – to make sure they heard the message accurately.

Easy Examples:

- **Clarifying questions**

- When you say {that}, what do you mean?
- Did you mean...
- How so?

- **Probing questions**

- Say more...
- What does that mean to you?
- Why is that important to you?

- **Confirming questions**

- So what you're saying is...?
- So your conclusion is...?
- Am I right when I say I am hearing ...?
- Can you say that again? (I want to make sure I got it.)

Staying In Your Lane (Knowing When To Refer)

When debriefing others it's crucial to know when to refer someone to a professional. Trying to "be the hero" and handle issues outside your expertise can unintentionally do more harm than good. Here's why recognizing your limits is so important:

1. Staying in Your Lane Protects Others

People who are struggling with serious emotional, psychological, or personal challenges need the right kind of help. If someone needs a therapist, counselor, or medical professional, stepping in when you're not qualified could delay them from getting appropriate support. A well-meaning but unqualified approach can leave issues unresolved or even worsen them.

2. You're Not Expected to Solve Everything

It's natural to want to help, but taking on more than you're trained for creates unnecessary pressure on you and can set false expectations for the other person. Your role might be to listen, offer guidance in areas you're experienced in, or support their growth—but not to "fix" deep-seated issues.

3. Recognizing Red Flags Is Part of Being Responsible

Part of being an effective debriefer is knowing how to spot when someone's challenges go beyond your expertise. Whether it's persistent sadness, overwhelming anxiety, trauma, or behavior changes, knowing when to refer builds trust because it shows you care enough to connect them to the right help.

4. Protecting Yourself From Burnout

Overextending yourself into areas you're not equipped for can lead to emotional fatigue or burnout. You can't pour from an empty cup. Staying within your strengths allows you to maintain energy, focus, and confidence in what you can offer.

5. Collaboration Builds Better Outcomes

Referring someone doesn't mean you're giving up—it means you're collaborating with others who are better positioned to help. By recognizing the limits of your role, you create space for experts to step in and provide targeted solutions. This ensures the person gets comprehensive care.

6. Being Ethical and Professional

Integrity matters. Knowing your limits and being willing to refer shows professionalism and respect for the person you're debriefing. It builds credibility and ensures your work is both ethical and effective.

You can be a powerful source of support *and* recognize when someone needs a specialist. Referring someone doesn't make you less helpful—it makes you responsible, compassionate, and committed to their well-being.

When to Refer

First Tier Referral:

Any threat of harm to themselves or another is an urgent warning sign requiring professional oversight. A threat might include self-mutilation, severe addictions (such as alcohol and drug use), thoughts of suicide or homicide, or an eating disorder. Each of these struggles has the propensity to become lethal without notice.

Second Tier Referral:

Expressions of extreme emotional pain that seem more extreme than the situation warrants are often a sign that there is underlying trauma. Those with a history of trauma (such as abuse or tragedy) are very susceptible. Consequently, extreme pain may also present itself as numbness, an inability to articulate or express emotion. If either form of pain is observed, professional help should be sought out.

Third Tier Referral:

When working with children, couples, or families, a pastor should assess the complexity of their relationships. When family dynamics appear to be causing a level of stress that affects a person's ability to cope, family therapy may be appropriate. Marriage and family therapists address relational issues and introduce patterns that are edifying to the health and well-being of each family member.

Often, personal intuition will let you know it is time to refer.

Source: Silas West, Psychotherapy, LPC