

**Sports Chaplains – A Club Debrief**

As every traumatic event is unique and the needs of clubs and people vary, so will the handling of a club trauma Debrief (‘defusing’ session). Listed below are some key thoughts when managing such a session, which typically will be the first occasion when all the club’s playing squad, backroom and support/ admin staff will meet together following a tragedy of some sort involving someone in the club. Such a group / corporate session aims at reduction of distress and a restoration of group cohesion and unit performance.

We trust these guidelines help you in your chaplaincy ministry and care of grieving people.

Such a group ‘debrief’ session should ideally constitute stage one of a club’s Trauma Risk Support procedure/ policy.

The debrief would typically, but not exclusively, occur one afternoon or evening during the week after the incident traumatic/ critical incident. It includes the whole club / large group . It is a broad group ‘defusing’ session, not a Trauma Risk Supportmeeting ( TRSM ) with an individual player or club employee/ volunteer.

**Pre-planning**

Meet with or as a minimum speak by phone with someone within the club who is in a position to give you the fullest and most accurate details of the nature of the critical incident that has occurred. Ask them what happened – give them an opportunity to off-load .

**Timing** : Choose a time in consultation with the club when the club debrief can take place, ideally within one week of the critical / traumatic incident having happened.

If at all possible organise the session involving food and refreshments of some sort as this brings people together and into the informal presence of the chaplain so they feel comfortable when he/ she speaks later once people have eaten. Ideally , try and ensure that all personnel are able to attend , including those not directly involved in or present when the incident happened. These folk are an important part of the trauma risk management and healing process too.

Ensure that you or the club print out beforehand a plentiful supply of the Club Trauma Risk Support handbook, making sure that your up-to-date contact details as club chaplain are contained in the document.

Ensure that the club also post it afresh to their website and on any club Facebook closed-groups for others not attending the Debrief .

For your personal preparation for such a debrief session which will be a pastorally challenging situation, let other chaplain colleagues and your church leaders/ housegroup members know you are going to the Debrief and get them to pray for you.

Pray in the car as you travel to the club.

**Venue/ setting**

Suggest to the club a ‘warm’, relaxed setting : club lounge, stadium function suite, quiet bar area. Not an academy classroom !

**Format of the session**

After food/ refreshments get the Key Stakeholder (ie, Chief Executive officer / Club Chairman or one of their deputies) to do the following…

Welcome everyone . Welcome the family members (of anyone who was involved in the incident) if they are present.

Express his / her personal deepest sympathy to the family.

Summarise the facts of the incident and post incident (They can get help from another person, e.g., Doctor, or you the chaplain). This is important in order to address any feelings of anxiety/ confusion over what did/didn’t happen.

Introduce you as the club Chaplain reminding everyone who you are, your duties, and your work in assisting individuals dealing with heartache, loss and grief. (This sets a good platform with the listeners)

As Chaplain then talk about what we (the club) are going through (Shock, Tragedy, Grief & Loss).

Make sure you give a clear word of ‘re-assurance’ to those present - ‘What you are going through are the normal symptoms of shock and grief.’

**Know the stages of grief: and briefly explain them**. ( These can be found in the Trauma Risk Support Handbook )

Next, ensure that you give a clear word of ‘encouragement’ to those present: ‘Do talk about what / how you are feeling’ : ‘it is a strength of character and not a weakness to be willing to talk’

After you have spoken, there may well be an understandable silence, as people infrequently find themselves in such forums and are not quite sure what to do or say in such circumstances. Nevertheless , many at this stage will have a deep desire to do something to mark the loss they are feeling. Therefore , introduce some gentle activities that represents what might be called ‘ Active remembering’ : that is some gestures to initiate and help process the trauma/ grief: for example, these might include : pass around at this juncture a Condolence book(club-branded if possible) . Or something similar with a large ‘Deepest Sympathy card ‘ to be signed by all from the club and to be passed on subsequently to the family .

Memory card activity: everyone to consider writing a favourite memory of the deceased on a parcel tag or post it note ( provided by you ). These then to be tied to a piece of string and/ or put up on a wall. Everyone then to stand together, ‘shoulder to shoulder’, arms around each others’ shoulders as in a team line-up , reading of the messages / tributes / memories as the line of persons moves along.

Some younger individuals present may prefer to write some comments on the victims’ Facebook page. Check before the sessions if members of the public/ others have already begun to do this and you might introduce this specific action of remembering by reading out some of the comments already posted online. Alternatively, suggest that those present might firstly silently read such posted tributes, before making their own.

Once these acts of active remembering have been underway for some time ( but not too soon; do not rush them ) then ask if anybody present would like to share something or say something about what has happened / about the person injured or deceased. This is a very important part of the time together. Do not be afraid of an initial, embarrassed, possibly long silence. Give people a few minutes to gather their thoughts. Most certainly do not pressure anyone to say anything ( captain / best friend etc) and certainly prepare yourself to witness tears/ shakes of those experiencing deep grief and yet wanting to say something. Be gentile, be patient. Be sure to affirm everyone sharing anything, even those who say very little, e.g., Bob saying, “I don’t know what to think!”, “I’ve got nothing to say!” You can affirm then by saying, “Thanks Bob for being honest with us. You have expressed what many of us here are thinking (& feeling). It’s important to say even that.” By discussing this you’re helping them to understand the dynamics of grief and loss and why honesty with thoughts, feelings and physical expression is so uncommon and irregular but important.

If, having been introduced beforehand to any members of the deceased’s family present, and having asked them beforehand if they would like to, invite any who expressed an interest to do so, to share a few words.

Again, having checked with the family beforehand that they would have no objections, say a brief prayer for the deceased , the family and those present.

To conclude the CEO or Club Chairman will round off, share thanks and condolences and reinforce that the Chaplain will (1) be available afterwards to chat and (2) meet individually over time with players/ coaches / staff one to one . The chaplain then should not speed away from the meeting but rather spend time after the debrief listening and talking with people – giving people time to off-load – affirming the importance of their courage, honesty and willingness to talk about their sense of shock and loss.

Every session is different. Every club, circumstance and expectation differs. Prepare to be flexible and allow God to minister to the shocked, hurting and bereaved . Don’t go in under prepared. Spend some time in prayer and in God’s Word before you go in. Then simply trust the Holy Spirit. He will guide you.

Try to keep any “God conversations” to a minimum as this isn’t the agenda here. Such a forum is not a time for Christian apologetics but for bringing and ministering God’s love and compassion. Some of these deeper issues can be addressed, perhaps at the funeral service and in later conversations. However, do not assume that you will be taking the funeral, even if club personnel feel it would be appropriate and helpful. The choice of minister / vicar/ funeral celebrant to officiate at the service is the absolute prerogative of the immediate family of the deceased and their choice should be deferred to and respected.

If during the post-session conversations you are engaged in a one-to-one discussion and someone expressly asks about how your Christian faith makes a difference to how you personally cope during tough and tragic times, share personally about when life got tough for you and how you found comfort in God’s care, how He has seen you through the tough times , how He says that He’s near to all those who mourn. Encourage them that, “we can talk with God at all times – even when we grieve – because he is near to us – irrespective of whether we feel good or bad or are good or bad! He loves and cares for us all. Tell Him how you feel. This is good for our souls.”

Always be encouraged and remember that you are God’s man/woman for this grieving community. They need a comforter and counsellor – you reflect the heart of God for humanity during these deeply emotional times. Don’t feel you have to do too much – just being there – loving them – listening to them – consoling them – will make a difference.

**Post-event actions**

In the weeks following the critical incident, if the club doesn’t have a trauma risk support procedure/ policy , take the opportunity to discuss whether you and the club’s officers can work on developing one, in the light of recent events.

Introduce them to the Trauma Risk Support Meeting framework and suggest that this could be one of the plusses that comes out of the tragic incident.

If the club is one who already has a trauma risk support/ management / critical incident response procedure or policy , move to the next step in the procedure ( the debrief forum being one of the earliest stages ). Next steps for chaplain are obviously follow-up conversations and visits with those individuals who at the debrief meeting were already presenting obvious shock symptoms and requesting help.

Next formal step under the Trauma Risk management procedure would be for the club (1) to set up as soon as possible a rota of one to one initial Trauma Risk Support Meetings ( TRSMs) between every player / coach / staff member and chaplain and (2) A player/ coach / staff member showing high levels of trauma / distress in initial TRSM meeting to be provided with a follow-up TRSM meeting one month later to assess how well they have come to terms with the traumatic event at that point. These TRSM meetings are the foundations of a support system that aims to ensure that trauma-exposed personnel/ players are supported and encouraged to seek timely help should they develop mental health problems that fail to resolve spontaneously.

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