

# Low Impact Debriefing

\* AKA Low Impact Processing or Low Impact Disclosure \*



? How do you debrief when you have seen or heard disturbing things?

? Do your colleagues share all the gory details with you over lunch?

? Have you ever attended a training that felt more traumatizing than informative?

## What is it?

Low Impact Debriefing (LID) is a trauma-informed technique for sharing and processing the difficult stories and images that we encounter in our work.

## Contagion

Helping professionals can unwittingly spread secondary trauma among their colleagues, family, and friends. Some helpers believe that sharing the “gory details” is a normal part of their work. And others may be so desensitized to trauma work that they forget that ordinary citizens may be horrified or shocked by our stories.

These reactions are normal and common.

An important part of LID is to stop the contagion effect. We can do this by removing unnecessary details of traumatic events. This reduces the cumulative exposure to traumatic information while ensuring that we can safely reach out to others.

## What is “Sliming”?

After a hard day, it is normal to want to talk to someone to help alleviate the burden of what you have experienced. However, if not done properly, this can leave the person on the receiving end feeling as though they now carry the weight of this - traumatic information too.

The term “sliming” describes the feeling of receiving or witnessing unnecessary traumatic content without warning or permission. Sliming can be contagious.

## Two Types of Debriefing

### 1 THE FORMAL DEBRIEF

The formal debrief happens in a structured, scheduled way. Peer consultation, supervision, and Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) are types of formal debriefs.

Research has shown that mandatory debriefing done in large groups may increase levels of psychological distress for some participants\*. Psychological First Aid and other approaches can be used to help build communities of practice for safe, formal debriefing.

### 2 THE INFORMAL DEBRIEF

The informal debrief happens in a casual, ad hoc way. Spontaneous conversations that happen in a colleague’s office or during the drive home are types of informal debriefs.

Helpers who have been exposed to traumatic events need to debrief right away and cannot wait for a scheduled supervision meeting. Informal debriefs can be harmful when the listener feels as though they have been “slimed,” rather than participating in a safe debriefing process.

LID outlines four steps you can use to protect your colleagues, friends, family, and yourself.

\* Rose, S.C., Bisson, J., Churchill, R., & Wessely, S. (2002). Psychological debriefing for preventing post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, 2. <https://doi.org/10.1002/14651858.CD000560>



### SELF-AWARENESS

The first step of LID encourages you to be aware of the stories you tell and the level of detail you provide. Before sharing, ask yourself:

*“Are all the details really necessary? Can I give an abbreviated version that still communicates the necessary information?”*



### FAIR WARNING

The second step of LID encourages you to warn your listener that the content you are going to share is disturbing or traumatic. Before sharing, warn the listener:

*“I would like to debrief a difficult situation with you and the story involves traumatic content.”*



### CONSENT

The third step of LID is to seek permission. This gives the listener a chance to decline, or to qualify what they are able and ready to hear. You may ask:

*“Is this a good time? I heard something really hard today and it involves \*insert subject matter\*”*



### LIMITED DISCLOSURE

The final step of LID is to decide how much to share. Start with the least disturbing details and gradually add more information as needed.

You may not need to share the most graphic or traumatic details to get the benefits of sharing with a peer or loved one.



Low Impact Debriefing is a practice that helps us to share and process the trauma that we encounter as helping professionals – and to do so safely and respectfully.

This simple and easy strategy can reduce contagion, prevent slinging, and protect our loved ones, colleagues, and ourselves from unnecessary trauma exposure.



When helping professionals hear and see difficult things, a normal reaction is to want to debrief with someone. The problem is that we are often debriefing ourselves all over each other.

*Françoise Mathieu, M.Ed., RP  
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**What is a helping professional?** The terms helping professional and caring professional are used to describe those whose role it is to help, care for, or protect others. This includes healthcare professionals, first responders, lawyers, judges, counsellors, therapists, teachers, funeral workers, animal care workers – and so many more.

If your job is to help others – whether that be through treatment, counselling, advocacy, volunteering, community outreach, or customer service – you are a helping professional.