

Low Impact Debriefing

Four steps to process difficult experiences with others

Mathieu, 2012. Adapted from Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995.



How do you debrief after hearing or seeing something difficult?



Have you ever heard a story that hitched a ride with you?



Do work stories follow you into the lunchroom?

What is Low Impact Debriefing?

Low Impact Debriefing (LID) is a practice that helps us to share and process the difficult experiences that we encounter without inadvertently traumatizing others.

This strategy can reduce contagion, prevent sliming, and protect our colleagues and loved ones from unnecessary secondary trauma exposure.

Why is it important?

Some professionals believe that sharing the “gory details” is a normal part of their work. Others may be so desensitized to trauma work that they forget that friends and family may be shocked and horrified by their stories.

These behaviours are normal and common. The urge to share graphic details can also become contagious: *“You think that’s bad? Listen to what I heard...”*

The concern is that helping professionals can unwittingly spread secondary trauma among their colleagues, family, and friends when they share graphic details without considering their impact.

At TEND, we use the term **“sliming”** to describe the experience of receiving or witnessing unnecessary traumatic content without warning or permission.

Over time, repeated exposure to secondary trauma can lead to secondary traumatic stress, a potentially debilitating stress response that can alter the way one functions and makes sense of the world (Mathieu, 2012, 2023).

When should it be used?

Low Impact Debriefing (LID) can be used in any situation where distressing or potentially traumatic information is being shared, such as:

- Formal debriefs, including team meetings, case reviews, huddles, or post-incident discussions.
- Informal debriefs, including spontaneous conversations with colleagues in the hallway or office, over lunch, or with loved ones on the drive home.
- Training and education opportunities, particularly when sharing case examples, scenarios, or stories.

The goal of LID is to reduce our cumulative exposure to traumatic information while still creating space for people to connect and seek support. By doing so, we can help to create a more sustainable and respectful culture of mutual support.

The Four Steps of Low Impact Debriefing



Self-Awareness

After a challenging situation, take a moment to reflect on how you feel and what you need. Consider:

- *What emotions or physical reactions am I noticing?*
- *What do I need right now: connection, reassurance, practical support, or simply a chance to talk?*
- *Am I ready to talk right now? Would it help to take a moment to rest first?*

A brief check-in can help you be more intentional about what you share, when, and why.

1



Fair Warning

Identify a trusted person to connect with and warn your listener that the content you want to discuss is potentially disturbing or traumatic.

You can offer a general overview of the subject matter without going into detail. For example:

"I need to debrief something that was pretty upsetting. It involves [insert subject matter]. Do you have the capacity for that right now?"

2



Consent

Seek permission before sharing any details. This allows the listener to decline or set boundaries around what they have the capacity to hear.

Examples of boundaries a listener might set include:

- *"I'm okay talking about this, but can you keep it fairly general?"*
- *"I can listen, but I may need to stop if it becomes too much."*
- *"I don't have the capacity for this right now, but I can help you find someone who does."*

3



Limited Disclosure

When telling your story, focus first on what happened in general, how it affected you, and what you need now.

Start with the least distressing details and add more information only as needed.

You may not need to share the most graphic details to get the benefits of connecting with a trusted person.

4