

DEBRIEFING IN THE FUNERAL HOME

An effective tool to de-stress

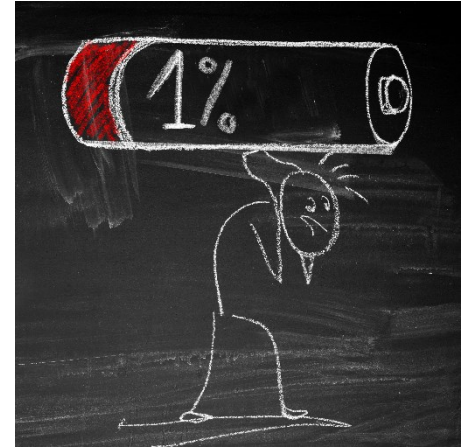
While speaking at an event for funeral service professionals, I asked, “How do you de-stress after a difficult call?”

A participant’s hand went up, “I go shopping.”

Another hand went up, “I listen to heavy metal music.”

No one else offered a personal strategy, which is not surprising. Historically, a funeral director’s role as last responder has gone largely unrecognized, with little thought ever given to coping strategies.

Yet, times have changed. More overdoses, suicides, homicides and mass casualty events headline the news, with expectations that funeral directors are equipped with psychological armor to cope as usual. In essence, funeral directors are expected to just suck it up and move forward.



Maybe this is why more and more funeral professionals are burning out.

While both men and women are affected by stress, men are less vocal about their mental health. Yet, not unlike law enforcement, funeral directors need—and deserve—support to protect their own well-being and that of their staff. After all, the wealth of a business is built on the health of its employees.

Studies show that women tend to talk more about personal things while men tend to talk more in business-focused contexts, like meetings (Time, 2017). With that in mind, could an evidence-based coping strategy of team debriefings help support funeral industry mental health with the changing times? Absolutely. After all, if it’s good for first responders, it’s good for last responders.

“Raise your hand if you’ve heard of debriefing.”

Not a single hand went up.

Stress debriefing is a process of communication that takes place between staff following a difficult case. Developed by Dr. Jeffrey Mitchell in 1974, the technique can be used for any group facing work-related stress, including funeral professionals.

An effective tool used to provide emotional support following a stressful event, studies show that debriefing can help reduce the risk of developing compassion fatigue and other stress-related disorders that can lead to burnout if left unchecked (Mitchell, 1988; Young, 1994).

The goal of debriefing is to give staff the space to process emotions and release steam after a difficult call. Like tending to the body of a 5-year-old who died from abuse. Those types of calls.

By adopting debriefing in the workplace, funeral homes can protect employee assets and support staff longevity through stressful days.

The keys to debriefing are structured yet simple. Provide a safe environment, and use the time to externalize emotions without critique or judgment. If the traumatic call somehow went sideways, an analysis of what went wrong is done another time, not during the debriefing.

Modified debriefings may also prove useful in the funeral home. Consider inviting the staff to stay after hours for pizza, and talk through the difficult call before they leave for home. Even a quick and dirty debriefing is better than none.

No matter the setting, getting staff to externalize emotional steam is the goal.

If debriefing is a simple cost-effective way to release stress, why haven't funeral homes been engaging? Because historically, debriefing was applied to first responders with little thought given to last responders.

Yet, no profession needs to release stress more in today's changing times than funeral professionals. Because nobody can pour from an empty cup.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lynda Cheldelin Fell is founding partner of the International Grief Institute, author of the award-winning Grief Diaries anthology series, former firefighter/EMT certified in critical incident stress management, and a member of the continuing education faculty at Whatcom Community College. She has earned six national literary awards and five national advocacy award nominations for her work.

For a 3-hour debriefing workshop training, contact Lynda Cheldelin Fell at 360-510-8590 or lynda@internationalgriefinstitute.com.