

TITLE: PEER GROUP COUNSELLING	
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PURPOSE:

To provide guidelines on the actions to be taken following an incident that does or could create stress or trauma for persons involved in the incident, in particular the attending lifesavers and lifeguards.

Lifesavers and lifeguards operate in an environment which is prone to the occurrence of traumatic events. These can include many types on incidents both on the beach and off. Those involved may experience many different reactions to these events, and there is a need to offer support by ensuring they are looked after in a fair and reasonable manner. Peer group support officers within the lifesaving and lifeguarding services are able to offer both individual and group support at any stage, and the following steps outline this support process.

A traumatic event, by definition, is physically and emotionally overwhelming, e.g. where emotion overwhelms rational/logical thought. This disrupts the basic personal belief systems of the survivor — including trust, security, predictability and controllability.

People may experience a range of differing reactions to traumatic events, including shock, fear, anger, helplessness, sadness and shame. These are all completely normal reactions to an event that may be considered extraordinary.

Other effects may include tension, sleep disturbances, dreams and nightmares, fearfulness, intrusive memories and feelings, numbing, irritability, depression, social withdrawal, physical sensations, mental reactions and self-medication. Usually these reactions are only experienced for a few weeks, and by utilising the support offered by peer group support officers, it can rapidly decrease the time taken in coming to terms with the experience.

SCOPE:

This Guideline applies to

- Lifesavers, club captains and/or team leaders
- Lifeguards and lifeguard supervisors
- Coastal managers

This Guideline applies to volunteer lifesavers and employed lifeguards in both ocean and stillwater environments.

GUIDELINE DESCRIPTION:

1.0 What is peer group support?

Peer support is part of the workplace health and safety program in which people within the lifesaving and lifeguarding services are trained to assist those who are affected by highly stressful events or have been subjected to stressors that are having adverse effects on their daily coping and operational functioning.

2.0 Who are peer group support officers?

- 2.1 A peer group support officer is a person who shares the same or similar work environment and provides first contact support, referring on anyone who requires more specialised assistance. These people will have received specialised training in stress management.
- 2.2 The peer group support program is a confidential process, which means not disclosing personal or identifying information, except in very rare circumstances where it is thought a person may cause harm to themselves or others. In this instance, immediate support from an appropriate source should be obtained. In all other situations before any information is disclosed, permission must be obtained from the individual concerned.
- 2.3 The peer group support process assists people to set realistic expectations and develop effective coping strategies to manage the impact of exposure to stressful events. The goal is to return those affected to pre-incident levels of wellness and performance as soon as possible and without long-term detrimental effect. This is achieved by providing knowledge and a series of strategies to prevent and alleviate the impact of stress associated with traumatic events.

3.0 Key personnel available

3.1 Peer group support officer

- A peer group support officer must have received appropriate training organised by the lifesaving and lifeguarding services and have these skills updated by attending a refresher course at least once every 4 years.
- Peer group support officers shall have an integral role in the education of the peer group support service that is offered. This should be done through training or induction, educating in regards to stress reactions and coping strategies that are available and may be employed.
- Peer group support officers are to be the first point of call in the event of an incident.

3.2 Mental health professional

- All lifeguards will have access to an appropriate mental health professional (psychologist or psychiatrist) in their area who will provide support through a variety of strategies.

4.0 Role of a peer group support officer

4.1 The role of the peer group support officer should include:

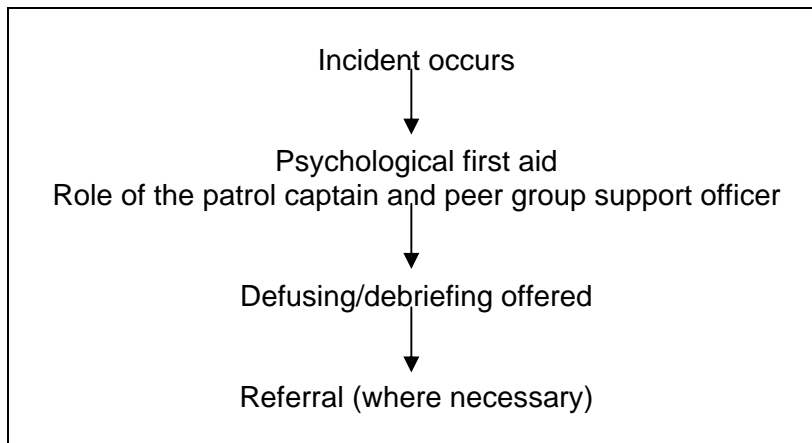
- Following exposure to stressful events, the peer group support officer may provide initial support to alleviate symptoms and encourage a prompt return to independent functioning and coping in the lives of those affected.
- To assist in understanding the impact of a stressful event.
- To educate on stress reactions and natural coping mechanisms and strategies possessed by those affected.
- To assist in the referral process to mental health professionals for further counselling when required.
- To play a role in the organising and staging of formal psychological debriefing sessions when deemed necessary.

4.2 The types of interventions employed by the peer group support officers may include, but are not restricted to:

- Psychological first aid
- Defusing
- Family/significant other support
- Organising and assisting in psychological debriefing
- Follow-up/referral

5.0 Peer group support process

The peer group support process is summarised in the flow chart below and outlined in the following steps.



STEP 1 – Incident occurs

When peer group support may be needed

Within the surf lifesaving environment, there are many types of extraordinary incidents that can occur. The following situations may be times that the support of a peer group support officer can be of assistance:

- When the event is extraordinary
- Occurrence of a serious incident
 - o Death/drowning
 - o Failed resuscitation
 - o Injury to a colleague
 - o Where the rescued person is known to the rescuer
 - o Where the rescued patient has extensive injuries, e.g. shark attack
 - o Where the rescuer is put in danger (heavy surf, etc.)
- Strong media involvement and interest
- A team rescue
- Where those involved appear distressed by the event
- Where there is evidence of distress or adverse behaviour
- On request

Note – An incident that may be considered small or minor may trigger a large reaction in some people due to a previous incident they may have experienced, or an accumulation of smaller incidents and life pressures that cause a build-up effect. Therefore different people will have differing levels of reactivity to the same event.

Those who seek guidance or counselling from a peer group support officer must feel free to express their emotions and feelings in a safe and supportive environment.

How this is to be accomplished

By being able to provide:

- Education about crisis events and stress management
- Psychological first aid
- Practical assistance
- One-on-one support
- Telephone support
- Facilitating a defusing
- Attending a psychological debriefing
- Referring on
- By being available

Role of the patrol captain/lifeguard supervisor

The primary review and assessment should look for:

- Change in personality
- Withdrawal behaviour (most dangerous)
- Excessive talking about incident
- Avoidance behaviour after incident
- Numbness caused by experience
- Aggravation/agitation
- Hypersensitivity to similar events

Refer to peer group support officer

A list of names and contact details of peer group support officers can be found in the Patrol Operations Manual. Clubs need to ensure that they have a peer group support officer and that other club members are aware of who this officer is, and how to contact them.

STEP 2 – Psychological first aid

Role of the peer group support officer post-incident

Psychological first aid or a defusing session needs to be implemented as soon as possible after the incident has occurred to ensure that members' needs are well looked after. The end of patrol is the ideal time to conduct this session. A session which enables the group to talk about the incident is most beneficial in a small group of members — and best with all those involved in the incident in attendance.

Defusing is a short, sharp session that takes place within a few hours of an event. This is less formal and structured than a debriefing session and aims to stabilise the affected persons.

Psychological support is extremely important for traumatised people in the aftermath of a traumatic event. The peer group support officer can aid in this process by providing human comfort and support. It is important to convey recognition of their suffering in a compassionate and respectful manner. This is one of the primary stages in their recovery process.

STEP 3 – Debriefing

Debriefing

Debriefing aims to reduce the impact of a crisis event, as well as accelerating the normal recovery process. The differing forms of debriefing intervention include on-scene support (limited and brief), defusion (short and unstructured), or a debriefing session, which is a structured group discussion that is designed to put an event into perspective for those involved.

Debriefing is an opportunity for the peer group support officer to facilitate a group discussion for the members who are involved. This does not replace good support or professional counselling. Debriefing is part of an ongoing process to facilitate the emotions of those involved.

Benefits of debriefing

- Stress reduction
- Chance to ventilate pent-up emotions
- Trigger to deal with past events
- Opportunity for stress reduction education
- Emotional reassurance
- Forecasting of symptoms that may materialise later
- Normalisation of reactions
- Improve group cohesion
- Reduce potential for future tensions
- An opportunity for screening and referral

Debriefing guidelines

Ensure that when conducting a debriefing session, it is seen to be an appropriate and therapeutic intervention. If possible, try to gain an understanding of the expectations from the session.

The setting of the debrief needs to be conducted in a quiet and comfortable area that is free from interruptions and disturbances. Ensure that there are no telephones — in particular, mobile phones. Refreshments should be provided at the end of the session.

The peer group support officer needs to gain all possible information about the event, and be prepared for the session. Around 2–4 hours can be put aside for a group of around 15 people.

Psychological debriefing is facilitated by a mental health professional assisted by the peer group support officer. The debriefing session is very much a sharing process. It is essential that all members approach the session with a supportive, understanding and positive outlook. It is essential that there is no atmosphere of criticism or blame for the process to be beneficial to all members.

STEP 4 - Referral

Members may need to be referred to a trained counsellor for follow-up assistance in dealing with the incident. The peer group support officer will need to contact the counsellor and brief them on the situation, keeping all member details confidential.

The peer group support officer will need to ensure that a confidential, undisclosed report is produced for distribution to the club captain, branch development officer and state lifesaving manager for future reference.

Organisations should aim to keep all documentation and files pertaining to the incident and the support offered, including follow-up actions, counsellors' names and contact details, in case a claim is filed.

Steps after the session has taken place

After the debriefing session has taken place, appropriate documentation needs to be fulfilled and an assessment of members' states made. This includes their immediate safety — ensuring they are in a suitable state to drive home, etc. This is the responsibility primarily of the peer group support officer or the patrol captain.

Members who were involved in any stage of the debriefing process will need to be contacted approximately 2 weeks after the initial session for a follow up assessment.

The peer group support officer can use the Post Traumatic Symptom Scale questions to review the members' symptoms (if any) and gauge whether professional counselling needs to be sought in regards to what they have experienced and how they are coping (referral).

The patrol captain or club captain needs to alert the peer group support officer if any similar events occur to the same individuals. This is to ensure that retriggering and accumulation of traumatic events does not occur.

DEFINITIONS:

Critical incident stress, also referred to as post-traumatic stress, means 'physical and/or emotional disorder caused by excessive amounts of stress'.

Defusing means 'a shortened version of the debriefing, which should take 20–45 minutes to complete. Should be applied as close to possible after the incident (max 8 hours) with small groups of 6–8 people.'

Debrief means 'to receive information from a person involved in a mission or task'.

Debriefing means 'a structured group process designed to mitigate the stress of a stressful event. It is designed to hasten the normal recovery process of a homogenous population who are experiencing normal reactions to an acutely distressing event'.

Post-traumatic stress, also referred to as critical incident stress, means 'physical and/or emotional disorder caused by excessive amounts of stress'.

Psychological first aid means 'comfort and support offered immediately to people who have been exposed to a traumatic event. Because personal reactions to trauma differ widely, the supporter should be able to adapt responses to the needs of the traumatised person'.

REFERENCES:

Surf Life Saving Australia, 2003. Surf lifesaving training manual, 32nd edition. Elsevier Australia Pty Ltd.

APPENDICES:

Nil

Guidelines for Storage and Handling of Dangerous Goods

SECTION 8