

CJAB Conference, April 2025

TRAUMA INFORMED DEBRIEFS: WHAT, WHY AND HOW?

Melanie G. Snyder, MBA, OWDS, MHFA

Consultant & Trainer: Trauma, Resilience, Trauma Informed Care, Reentry

Author: Grace Goes to Prison: An Inspiring Story of Hope and Humanity

TEDx: Breaking Out of Prison Thinking

CONTACT INFO:

E: melaniegsnyder@gmail.com

P: 717-572-2110

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/melaniegsnyder/>

FACILITATOR:

MELANIE G. SNYDER, MBA, OWDS, MHFA

CONTACT INFO:

E: melaniegsnyder@gmail.com

P: 717-572-2110

- 2012 - Present: Consultant & Trainer for CJABs & Reentry Coalitions for 20 counties in Pennsylvania
- 2019 - 2023: Trauma-Informed Specialist, Penn Medicine/Lancaster General Health
- 2010 - 2018: Executive Director, Lancaster County Reentry Coalition
- 1984 – 2010: Corporate/business career: several Fortune 500 firms
- Certified Trauma Trainer, SAMHSA, GAINS Center for Behavioral Health & Justice Transformation
- Certified Practitioner, Strategies for Trauma Awareness & Resilience (STAR), Eastern Mennonite University
- National Victim Assistance Academy Advanced Skills Institute: Building Trauma-Informed Organizations
- 2016-17 Baldwin Fellow: Trauma, Resilience & Trauma-Informed Communities
- Trauma Informed Leadership Certificate, University of North Florida
- Brain Story Certification, Alberta Family Wellness Initiative
- Trauma-Informed Facilitation; Nonprofit Learning Lab



FIRST, A WORD OF THANKS ...



WHAT IS DEBRIEFING?

A time to discuss things happening in your work (especially challenging/difficult events, experiences on the job) with supervisors and/or colleagues to:

- * share information
- * address issues
- * problem-solve
- * reflect and process
- * share perspectives

COMMON INTENTIONS & EMOTIONS BEHIND DEBRIEFS

Information sharing to gain clarity, gather feedback, come to a shared understanding of a situation or event

Processing / Problem-solving / Guidance-seeking to gain perspective, engage in brainstorming, planning to address a situation or solve issues; seeking validation, understanding and/or explanations

Venting to discharge anger, frustration, hurt, aggravation, irritation; de-stress

AVOID: Trauma dumps: rooted in fear, overstimulation, traumatization; needing to just unload the emotion; feeling desperate to be heard; a sign of burnout; contributes to vicarious trauma & trauma contagion

TYPES OF DEBRIEFS

Formal part of staff supervision: scheduled, intentional, usually for a designated / agreed-upon purpose; often included as part of scheduled 1:1's between a staff member and their supervisor/manager

Structured dialogues about a specific incident: Critical Incident Stress Management - CISM debriefs

 **Informal Peer/Colleague Debriefs:** conversations about disturbing or difficult things we've seen, heard and experienced on the job

Ad hoc (“sliming”): AVOID DOING THIS - often happen when someone is feeling desperate to be heard and just needs to unload; “trauma dump”

SOURCES: Advancing Adult Compassion Resilience: compassionresiliencetoolkit.org)

TEND Academy: : <https://www.tendacademy.ca/>; Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault - Low Impact Debriefing Webinar (Sept 7, 2023) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHNWNUZ5URU>; Katharine Manning: The Empathetic Workplace

WHY DEBRIEF?

Benefits of intentional, effective, regular debriefing:

- * can impact how you provide services
- * help staff feel supported
- * build connection between coworkers
- * help identify opportunities to improve organizational policies, practices, programs and physical environments

SOURCES: Advancing Adult Compassion Resilience: compassionresiliencetoolkit.org)
TEND Academy: : <https://www.tendacademy.ca/>; Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault - Low Impact Debriefing Webinar
(Sept 7, 2023) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHNWNUZ5URU>; Katharine Manning: The Empathetic Workplace

UNHEALTHY FORMS OF “DEBRIEFING”



“Sliming” / “trauma dumping” / “gory story sharing”

- Informal, ad hoc debriefs that happen without warning or permission
- Doesn't give the listener a chance to prepare to hear disturbing material
- Sliming is contagious
- May leave the listener feeling like they now carry the weight of this graphic or traumatic information, leading to vicarious trauma for the listener

VICARIOUS TRAUMA IS CONTAGIOUS

Sharing graphic details of traumatic stories with others through “gory story sharing”, “sliming”, trauma dumping may have a “contagion effect”, spreading vicarious trauma to others



**Vicarious
Trauma**
contagion

SOURCES: Advancing Adult Compassion Resilience: compassionresiliencetoolkit.org)
TEND Academy: : <https://www.tendacademy.ca/>; Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault - Low Impact Debriefing Webinar
(Sept 7, 2023) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHNWNUZ5URU>; Katharine Manning: The Empathetic Workplace

HOW “SLIMING”, TRAUMA DUMPING & GORY STORY SHARING INFECT WORKPLACE CULTURE

- ▶ Cynicism
- ▶ Hopelessness
- ▶ Morbid humor, joking, making light of, or laughing about terrible situations
- ▶ Staff become “numb” or desensitized to these situations & stories
- ▶ “I’m good” code of silence: everyone acting like these stories aren’t impacting them or anyone else
- ▶ Staff “checking out”, disconnecting, detaching
- ▶ Reduced capacity for empathy
- ▶ Telling stories about clients or situations in disparaging ways
- ▶ “One-upsmanship” or “competitive sharing” of gory stories to see who has experienced the WORST situation, client, story
 - ▶ “That’s nothing - wait til you hear MY story”

SOURCES: Advancing Adult Compassion Resilience: compassionresiliencetoolkit.org)

TEND Academy: : <https://www.tendacademy.ca/>; Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault - Low Impact Debriefing Webinar (Sept 7, 2023) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHNWNUZ5URU>; Katharine Manning: The Empathetic Workplace

VENTING VS. “SLIMING”/DUMPING

Venting

- Sticks to one situation or story
- Is time-limited
- Limits the amount of “gory detail” that is shared
- Doesn’t keep repeating the same details
- Feels healthy or at least “tolerable”
- Speaker is clear about what they need or what they’re hoping to get out of sharing the story or situation

Sliming / Trauma Dumping

- Feels toxic, unhealthy
- Overwhelms the listener with many issues or excessive detail
- Keeps repeating the same thing or goes on and on
- Not open to solutions or feedback
- No apparent goal or purpose to sharing the story other than to “get it off their chest”

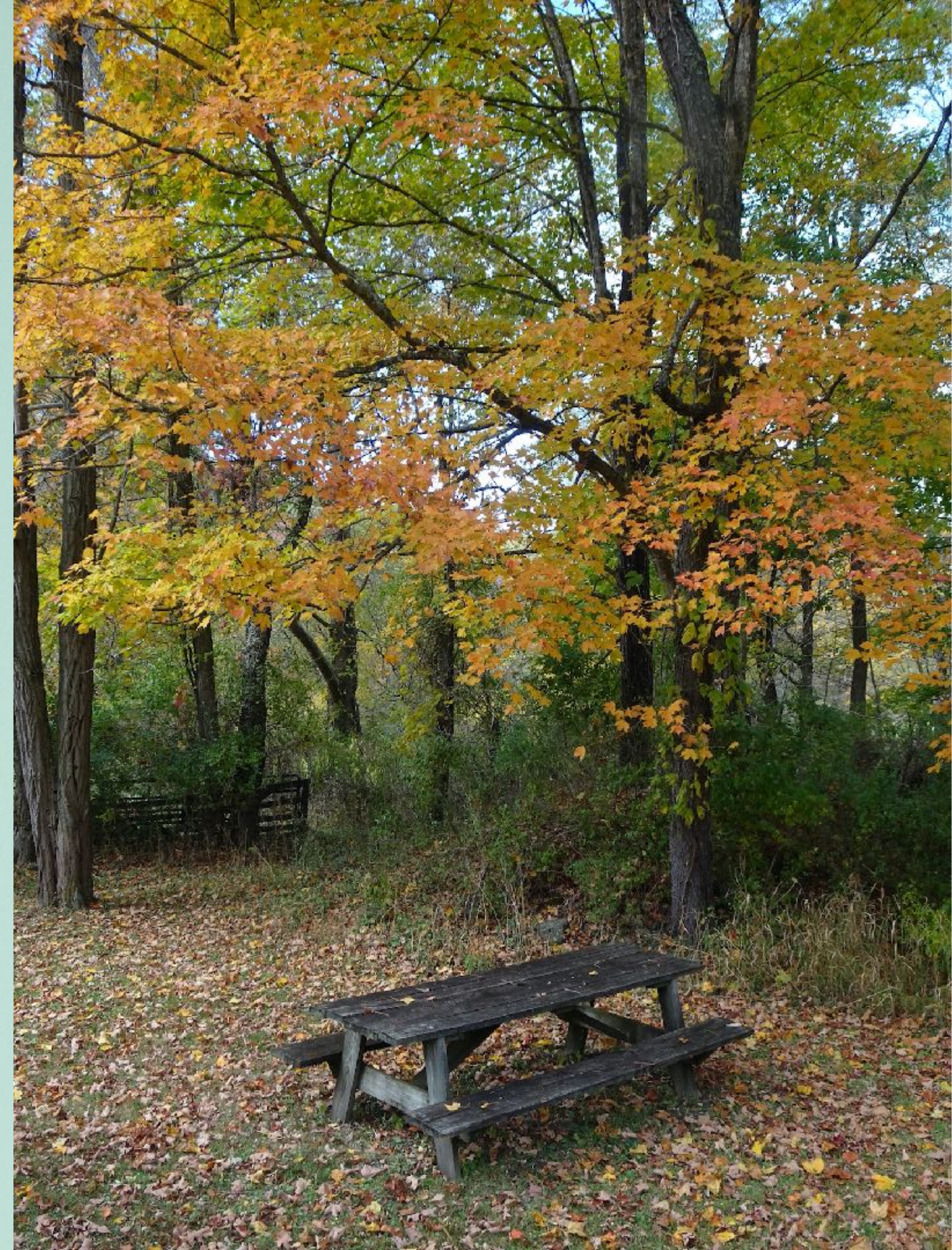
INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION:

Have you ever been slimed?

- How did that feel?
- What impact did it have on you?

Have you ever slimed someone?

- Who?
- What were you looking for in sharing the story with someone?
- How did you feel: before? afterward?
- Any idea how it might have impacted the person you talked with?



LOW IMPACT DEBRIEFING



LOW IMPACT DEBRIEFING

Visualize the tough story
being contained inside a
faucet tap.

Decide how much to release,
and at what rate.



SOURCES: Advancing Adult Compassion Resilience: compassionresiliencetoolkit.org)
TEND Academy: : <https://www.tendacademy.ca/>; Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault - Low Impact Debriefing Webinar
(Sept 7, 2023) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHNWNUZ5URU>; Katharine Manning: The Empathetic Workplace

LOW IMPACT DEBRIEFING: OVERVIEW

FOUR STEPS:

Step 1: Self awareness

Step 2: Fair warning

Step 3: Consent

Step 4: Limited Disclosure

SOURCES: Advancing Adult Compassion Resilience: compassionresiliencetoolkit.org)
TEND Academy: : <https://www.tendacademy.ca/>; Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault - Low Impact Debriefing Webinar
(Sept 7, 2023) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHNWNUZ5URU>; Katharine Manning: The Empathetic Workplace

LOW IMPACT DEBRIEFING

STEP I: SELF AWARENESS

What is the situation/story/experience I want to discuss with someone?

How am I currently feeling about this situation/story/experience?

LOW IMPACT DEBRIEFING

PLANNING FOR THE DEBRIEF

Purpose: What do I need from the listener? Listening? Validation/Commiserating? Problem-solving? Am I just looking to “vent”? (fine line between venting and “trauma dumping”)

Goals: What am I hoping will be the result(s) of talking about this?

Who: Who do I want to talk with about this? What might they have to contribute/offer? How might my sharing this story impact them? (Peer/colleague? Loved one/trusted friend outside of work?)

* IMPORTANT QUESTION: Should I be discussing this with my supervisor/manager instead?

Content: What information do I feel I need to share and in how much detail?

Timing: When would be the best time to have this conversation? For me? For the listener?

Location: Where would be the best place for this conversation? Consider privacy, confidentiality, physical & psychological safety for both me and the listener

LOW IMPACT DEBRIEFING

STEP 2: FAIR WARNING

- ▶ Before you discuss a difficult story with someone, you must give them fair warning, so they are prepared or can take time to prepare themselves to hear it.
- ▶ Let them know if the information will be graphic or disturbing.
- ▶ This is the key difference between healthy debriefs and “sliming”

LOW IMPACT DEBRIEFING

STEP 3: CONSENT

After giving “fair warning”, ask for consent. For example:

- ▶ “I’d like to debrief a difficult situation with you and the story involves traumatic content. Are you in a good space emotionally to listen?”
- ▶ “I heard something really hard today and I could really use a debrief. Could I talk with you about it?”
- ▶ “I’m having a rough day but I know you’re struggling too. Are you available and ok to talk?”
- ▶ “Do you have the emotional capacity to listen for a few minutes to something I’m trying to work through?”
- ▶ “Hey, is this a good time to talk? I’m feeling _____ and need someone to talk with about it.”

SOURCES: Advancing Adult Compassion Resilience: compassionresiliencetoolkit.org)

TEND Academy: : <https://www.tendacademy.ca/>; Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault - Low Impact Debriefing Webinar (Sept 7, 2023) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHNWNUZ5URU>; Katharine Manning: The Empathetic Workplace

LOW IMPACT DEBRIEFING

STEP 3: CONSENT (continued)

- ▶ The listener can decline, establish boundaries, or ask to schedule the conversation at another time
 - ▶ “I have 15 minutes and can hear some of your story. Would you be able to tell me what happened without any of the gory details?”

LOW IMPACT DEBRIEFING

STEP 4: LIMITED DISCLOSURE

- ▶ After receiving consent, decide how much to release from the “tap.”
 - ▶ Start with the least traumatic information, and move slowly toward the most traumatic parts of the story at a gradual pace. You may or may not need to tell the most graphic details, depending on how disturbing the story has been for you. (start with the “Cliff Notes” version)
 - ▶ Be sure to respect any boundaries your colleague may have requested in the “consent” step.
 - ▶ Pay attention to the listener’s responses (verbal & non-verbal) to the material, as well as your own
 - ▶ Let the listener know what type of feedback would be most helpful to you: silent listening, supportive/reflective response, active problem-solving, etc



LOW IMPACT DEBRIEFING IDEAS FOR THE LISTENER

1. BEFORE: PREPARE YOURSELF:

- * Physical preparation: put away other work, close screens, put phone away
- * Emotional preparation: clear your head, get into right frame of mind to be fully present
- * Be clear about boundaries you want to set (time, content, level of detail you feel prepared to hear, etc)

2. DURING:

- * Actively listen, stay present
- * Manage your own responses in the moment if you find the story being shared is “activating” for you. (exhale; notice and acknowledge your feelings; ground yourself; take a break, if needed)
- * Speak up if / when you feel you’ve heard enough of the details or can’t/don’t want to take in any more
- * Clarify any expectations the other person may have of you after the debrief or follow-up needed

3. AFTER:

- * Be sure to do something for your own self-care
- * **Follow through on any commitments made**

SOURCES: Advancing Adult Compassion Resilience: compassionresiliencetoolkit.org); TEND Academy: : <https://www.tendacademy.ca/>; Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault - Low Impact Debriefing Webinar (Sept 7, 2023) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHNWNUZ5URU>; Katharine Manning: The Empathetic Workplace

IN SUMMARY, LOW IMPACT DEBRIEFING ...

Is free

Is simple to implement

Can significantly reduce levels of vicarious trauma and staff burnout

Can enhance workplace culture

Helps teams to process traumatic aspects of the job safely and respectfully

IMPLEMENTING LOW IMPACT DEBRIEFING IDEAS FOR TEAMS

- * Share **Low Impact Debriefing** handout with leadership & team
- * Discuss how you can use this on your team
- * Address “push-back” (often in form of “we’re fine, we don’t need this”)
 - * May be true for some, but may not be true for everyone
 - * May be true right now, but may not be true in the future
 - * May not be true in every situation, even for the people who say they’re fine
 - * No harm in just giving it a try
- * Apply it to team meetings in addition to 1:1 debriefs:
 - * Start team meetings with a reminder about fair warning, consent & limited disclosure in case there are situations that need to be discussed during the meeting

*For a free copy of
the LOW IMPACT
DEBRIEFING
handout:*

*text your name &
email address to
me at*

717-572-2110

GROUP DISCUSSION

What challenges or barriers might there be with trying to implement Low Impact Debriefing in your team/organization to help staff process difficult aspects of your work?

What resources or supports would be needed from managers/supervisors or the organization to implement Low Impact Debriefing?



● IMPACT OF TRAUMA EXPOSED WORK ON OUR LOVED ONES

FOUR QUESTIONS

If you're a trauma-exposed professional, you are encouraged to ask loved ones/friends these 4 questions:

1. What is it like to live/hang out with me when I'm highly stressed by my work?
2. What would you say about how I transition from work to home?
3. What would you say about the impact hard stories and cases have on me? On you?
4. Do you think I have a good level of self-awareness about my warning signs of compassion fatigue/burnout & when it's time to take stock & reset myself?

FINALLY, consider whether you have been “sliming” friends or loved ones with gory stories from your work.

QUESTIONS?

DISCUSSION?



CONTACT INFO:

Melanie G. Snyder

E: melaniegsnyder@gmail.com

P: 717-572-2110

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/melaniegsnyder/>

