

How to Avoid the Contagion Effect of Sharing Tough Stories between Colleagues

Adapted from *The Compassion Fatigue Workbook* by Francoise Mathieu. Chapter 5. Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group. 2012.

Helpers who bear witness to many stories of abuse and violence notice that their own beliefs about the world are altered and possibly damaged by repeatedly being exposed to traumatic material. – Karen Saakvitne and Laurie Anne Pearlman, *Transforming the Pain*, p. 49

Sharing graphic details of trauma stories can spread vicarious trauma to other helpers and perpetuate a climate of cynicism and hopelessness in the workplace. Laurie Pearlman and Karen Saakvitne put forward the concept of “limited disclosure” which can be a strategy to mitigate the contamination effect of helpers (providers) informally debriefing one another during the normal course of a day. Almost all helpers acknowledge that they have, in the past, knowingly and unknowingly traumatized their colleagues, friends and families with stories that were probably unnecessarily graphic. Over time, limited disclosure was renamed to Low Impact Disclosure (LID). Low impact disclosure suggests that we conceptualize our tough story as being contained inside a tap. We then decide, via the process described below, how much information we will release and at what pace.

The process of L.I.D. involves four key steps:

- 1. Increased Self Awareness** – How do you debrief when you have heard or seen hard things? Take a survey of a typical work week and note all of the ways in which you formally and informally debrief yourself with your colleagues. Note the amount of detail you provide them with (and they you), and the manner in which this is done: do you do it in a formal way, at a peer meeting, or in the hall by your office door? What is most helpful to you in dealing with difficult stories?
- 2. Fair Warning** – Before you tell anyone around you a difficult story, you must give them fair warning. This is the key difference between formal debriefs and ad hoc ones: If I am your supervisor, and I know that you are coming to tell me a traumatic story, I will be prepared to hear this information.
- 3. Consent** – Once you have given warning, you need to ask for consent. This can be as simple as saying: “I need to debrief something with you, is this a good time?” or “I heard something really hard today, and I could really use a debrief, could I talk to you about it?” The listener then has a chance to decline, or to qualify what they are able/ready to hear. For example, if you are my work colleague I may say to you: “I have 15 minutes and I can hear some of your story, but would you be able to tell me what happened without any of the gory details?”
- 4. Low Impact Disclosure** – Now that you have received consent from your colleague, you can decide how much to release from the Tap. Imagine that you are telling a story starting with the outer circle of the story (i.e., the least traumatic information) and you are slowly moving in toward the core (the very traumatic information) at a gradual pace. You may, in the end, need to tell the graphic details, or you may not, depending on how disturbing the story has been for you.





Questions to ask yourself before you share graphic details:

- **Is this conversation a: Debriefing? Consultation? Work lunch? Parking lot chat? A social event? Pillow talk? Other...**
- **Is the listener: Aware that you are about to share graphic details? Able to control the flow of what you are about to share with them?**
- **If it is a consultation or a debriefing: Has the listener been informed that it is a debriefing, or are you sitting in their office chatting about your day? Have you given them fair warning? How much detail is enough? How much is too much? If this is a staff meeting or a case conference, is sharing the graphic detail necessary to the discussion?** Sometimes it is, often it is not. For example, discussing an incident in which a client was involuntarily hospitalized, you may need to say *“The client was experiencing significant symptoms associated with a mental illness and presented as a danger to himself”* and that may be enough. *Don’t assume you need to disclose all the details right away.*

Some additional suggestions: Experiment with Low Impact Disclosure (LID) and see whether you can still feel properly debriefed without giving all the tough details. You may find that at times you do need to disclose all the details which is an important process in staying healthy as helpers. And at other times you may find that you did not need this.