

Post-Incident Debriefs and Mental Health First Aid

Providing post-incident care and directing to appropriate professionals

AMTA and Psychosocial Hazards

Alberta Motor Transport Association (AMTA) is working to draw attention to the problem of workplace psychosocial hazards in the trucking industry. We have published a [guide on addressing psychosocial hazards](#) meant to provide best practices small- and medium-sized carriers can put into place. This bulletin presents one of the best practices from the guide: post-incident debriefs and mental health first aid.



Overview

Traumatic events can lead to the development of psychological injuries which may show up in the form of conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [1]. A post-incident debrief, also known as critical stress debriefing [2], attempts to limit the development of conditions like PTSD by providing affected individuals with an opportunity to address their reaction(s) to the incident in a safe setting.

While, after an incident, a company should investigate to determine root causes to improve future safety performance, the debrief is not an extension of an investigation's interview. It is instead meant to look after the health and safety of the person involved in the incident.

Conducting a post-incident debrief is also an opportunity to provide mental health first aid training should the organisation provide such training. Mental health first aid training is basic training that provides participants with skills to help people who are showing signs of mental health distress, and courses developed by the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) are available to show people how to recognise and respond to a mental health crisis [3].

Benefits

Mental health first aid training for workers is a practice which is easy for trucking companies to adopt. Training is provided through external service providers similar to how Standard First Aid and other safety training is done. Once complete, the company will have workers who can use their training to provide immediate and basic mental health care until professional help is available.

Post-incident debriefs are also relatively straightforward to put into practice, although the remote nature of the work done at many trucking companies means workers will not always be in a safe and controlled setting immediately after an incident. Carriers will need to be creative in how they respond to their workers.

The reason why debriefs and mental health first aid training have been lumped together in the same section is because a post-incident debrief is a natural place to be on the lookout for behaviour indicative of a psychological injury. It isn't up to the carrier to treat the injury, but they can help by responding to behaviour changes, providing appropriate support, and directing the affected individual to appropriate resources. To illustrate this last point, a carrier's staff wouldn't attempt to set a broken arm following a collision. Instead, someone with first aid training can provide basic comfort care to the person with the broken arm, contact emergency medical services, and stay with the individual until people with greater training arrive to provide help.

Challenges

Organizations should be cautious about how they approach a post-incident debrief. First and foremost, they need to understand their own limitations and accept that they are likely not competent in treating psychological injuries. Company debriefs alone should not be viewed as a tool to prevent conditions such as PTSD, and a debrief aimed at treating and preventing a psychological injury is a complicated undertaking with debatable efficacy [4, 5] with some sources recommending mandatory incident debriefing stop altogether [6]. Psychological treatment, like any medical treatment, requires experts and specialists; the carrier should not be attempting to treat acute or chronic mental illnesses through this practice since it is a very superficial strategy meant to raise awareness and identify those who should be referred to advanced treatment.

The key is to see the post-incident debrief as a way for an organisation to show its workers it cares and provide any mental health first aid it is competent in performing. Anything beyond this needs to be delegated to appropriate professionals. Part of the carrier's post-incident response plan should, at a minimum, include a reminder to all affected of what resources are available to them. It should also include guidance to workers and supervisors that distressed individuals should not be left alone or dismissed.

More Help

Mental health first aid training has been developed by the MHCC and is offered through various service providers. For example, St. John Ambulance, a reputable provider of first aid training, offers a course in mental health first aid [7].

The Canadian Red Cross offers courses in psychological first aid [8]. They offer a variety of course structures from self-care online courses to instructor-led training.

The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is a not-for-profit organisation that provides direct services to Canadians from volunteers and staff throughout Canada. The CMHA may be contacted for more information about this section; they also offer critical incident group debriefing as a service, and crisis phone services [9].

Professional counselors, psychologists, and other mental health experts can provide in-depth advice and services related to the material in this section. Organisations in Alberta can call 211 or visit the 211 Alberta website for listings of suitable service providers [10]. Finally, employers should see if their current employee assistance plan (EAP) offers debrief services.

Need Help? Contact AMTA

AMTA can provide carriers with guidance on the information presented in this bulletin. If you have any questions, please contact AMTA and our experienced staff will be happy to help. For your safety and compliance questions, please email Workplace Support Services (WSS) directly at wss@amta.ca.

For more updates like this on a variety of topics related to the trucking industry, please [sign up for our eNews](#).

References

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