

# Critical Incident Debriefing? Who needs it?

*Individuals exposed to horrifying, life-threatening events are at heightened risk for posttraumatic stress disorder. Given the substantial personal and societal costs of chronic PTSD, mental health care professionals have developed early intervention methods designed to mitigate acute emotional distress and prevent the emergence of posttraumatic psychopathology. The method most widely used throughout the world is psychological debriefing. Dr Philipa Kirkpatrick, an RGBB member, has given us the following article.*

## An Essay on Psychological Debriefings or Critical Incident Debriefings using the Mitchell & Dyregrove Model

On Monday May 12th 2003 at approximately 11.30 pm there were three simultaneous terrorist attacks on residential compounds in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Several lives were lost, people were badly injured and homes were damaged or destroyed.

The terrorists used vehicles packed with explosives and then went house to house with machine guns causing extreme terror culminating in the most traumatic event that most people have ever witnessed.

I had some friends and clients living on the targeted compounds and I immediately rang to see if they were safe. Sadly, I was to learn later, two had died; others were traumatised by the explosions and the subsequent devastation of their homes. I asked if I could help through psychological debriefings.

Later that morning I was contacted by the management of a large aircraft company who employed mainly American ex-military personnel who were housed on one of the compounds. We arranged times for me to be present on site. A room was allocated for me and a notice was put on the in-house television and was posted at various bulletin boards throughout the compound.

The initial response was disappointing and I felt this was because it was not encouraged by the managers. It could also have been that I was not known to this tight knit community (ex-military and their families)

and I was not an American. Trust had to be built up and more information needed to be given to the community in order for them to realise the benefit of debriefing and conversely, the possible damage of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, if reactions are left to take their devastating course.

A "Town Hall" meeting was called to inform the residents of several issues resulting from the bombings and also with the intention of restoring calm. All the residents were obliged to attend and I was given an opportunity to speak to them as a whole (approximately 300 people). I really feel that this made the difference and I was approached by many people after that meeting.

Also after that meeting, I was invited to come under the wing of the insurance company representing the aircraft company with a view to organising the debriefings. I welcomed this opportunity as some of the "beaucratic resistance" was taken on by them and I was able to proceed.

It fell to the department supervisors to make appointments for their staff and over the next two weeks I carried out 13 debriefings and 7 follow ups. I debriefed military and ex-military men and women, Gulf War veterans, Vietnam veterans, housewives, medical personnel and children.

I debriefed "housesitters" who were looking after two cats for friends on leave in the UK. They were nurses and left the severely damaged house to help the injured. They were extremely traumatised when they went back to the house and could not find the cats.

Also during this time I debriefed a man who was shot at several months before in a drive-by shooting. He was not debriefed at that time and was subsequently extremely traumatised by the bombings. His compound was not targeted, nevertheless, it affected him very badly and brought back horrific memories of the previous trauma. Miraculously he was not injured physically but two weeks later, his colleague was not so lucky and he was killed under similar circumstances. I used the re-wind technique with this client and it was very successful.

The largest debriefing session I did was 10 people. Married couples, single men, married men on bachelor status. All this group were from military families (1st, 2nd generation) and all but two were ex-military, ex-combat personnel.

