

Lawyers: The Benefit of the Debrief

With clients focused on their own case, most don't realize just how challenging a job *lawyering* is. Truth is lawyers actually have a higher suicide rate than the general public and high rates of anxiety, depression and substance abuse problems. To add to the mix, lawyers are a very reluctant bunch to admit their issues and seek help.

An alternative solution for the lawyer seeking to stay on top of their game and to lower the risk of stress related mental health issues is the *debrief*.

A debrief is an opportunity to examine an activity, meeting, case or trial after the fact.

The process of examination allows the participant(s) to determine what went well; what didn't go so well; what they could have done differently; and all with a view to improving future performance. In the process, participants can also express how they felt at any point and what, if anything they did or could have done to manage the associated feelings.

Central to the debrief is keeping the process aimed towards learning. There should be nothing about the process that evokes blame or shame. The process should be informational and educational.

Debriefs are common when working in teams, particularly in collaborative family law as well as in mental health. At the discretion of the team, the debrief can include the clients or there can be two debriefs, one that includes the clients and one that is for the professional members of the team.

Even in my clinical practice, I will from time to time debrief a session with a client. Rather than focusing on the client issues, the debrief focuses on if the session was helpful and the client's experience of me in the process. I will ask questions such as, was today's meeting helpful and if so, how so? Was there anything I could have done differently that would have improved your experience? In asking these and other questions, I seek to understand my performance and the experience of it by the client. My clients seem to appreciate this process as it serves to demonstrate my interest in helping as best I can and it demonstrates my willingness to be introspective too.

Debriefing is common among mental health practitioners but not so among family law lawyers.

Imagine the opportunity to reflect on your cases, learn and thus improve performance while increasing resiliency. At times the benefit of the debrief may just be the opportunity to blow off steam about a challenging issue. In any case, lawyers can benefit from this process too and may just find it to be the tonic in the challenge of the profession.

Debriefing can come through chatting with a colleague who knows and understands the debriefing process and can help engage in a discussion on performance and performance related issues. Debriefing can also take place in a group context, typically with a facilitator and where there is some degree of trust between the participants. Debriefing is distinguished from a performance review though, where a performance review is to assess how one does ones job for the purposes of salary, advancement, etc.

Lawyers need to not only be on their game, but take care of themselves too.

If your group could benefit from a debrief or learning to use this process, give me a call. It would be my pleasure to be of service.

If you are the client and want to make sure your lawyer is on top of their game, you can ask to debrief your experience of the service provided. This can improve performance and outcomes.

Gary Direnfeld, MSW, RSW
(905) 628-4847

gary@yoursocialworker.com
<http://www.yoursocialworker.com>

Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert in social work, marital and family therapy, child development, parent-child relations and custody and access matters. Gary is the host of the TV reality show, Newlywed, Nearly Dead, parenting columnist for the Hamilton Spectator and author of Marriage Rescue: Overcoming the ten deadly sins in failing relationships. Gary maintains a private practice in Dundas Ontario, providing a range of services for people in distress. He speaks at conferences and workshops throughout North America and was the first social worker to sit on the Ontario Board for Collaborative Family Law.