

## **Debrief and Grieve**

*September 22, 2017*

Today as I sat at the back of the room, the emotions returned. It was during a workshop with respect to mental health awareness for first responders. Although "retired" for the last three years, I had been a volunteer firefighter for almost ten years before that. As I listened to the speakers share their stories, one speaker in particular tripped a switch in me.

Suddenly, it was July 6, 2006 at 4am, and I was back in that family's home. I was doing chest compressions for the very first time, in a zone of uncertainty, and hearing the 82 year old woman's son going hysterical in the background. Although we did our best, the woman died at the scene.

There were three firefighters on the truck for that call; a Captain, a Lieutenant, and an inexperienced firefighter. That was me. On the way back to the fire hall, the Lieutenant glanced at me in the rear-view mirror and said "You ok with that, Paul?" I simply said "Ya," and continued my gaze out of the window in the backseat of the fire truck.

Not only was it my first time doing compressions, but it also involved a mother and a son. That held a special dynamic for me, because of my personal relationships. At the time though, I never let on about how bothered I was by that call. It happened in a time and place where feelings were not discussed. The fire service and farming community in which I lived were clubs for hard "Men;" not sissies who talked about their feelings. For the era, "You ok with that, Paul?" was actually stepping out of the box. Unfortunately, that was the extent of the debrief.

Fast-forward to today. I was in a room filled with first responders, mental health professionals, victims services, and survivors of incredibly difficult situations. In spite of all of that, I still felt the need to stifle my feelings and tears when listening to some of the speakers. In the realm of those in the helping professions, there should have been no safer place than that to allow myself to emote. Yet, I didn't.

I worried about stigma. I worried about drawing attention to myself. Would my friends make negative comments that I was soft or over-sensitive? Although I know the uncomfortable comments would come from a place of ignorance and lack of awareness, I also knew that they would hurt.

So, here I am processing my feelings to myself almost twelve hours later. During the workshop however, I made a point of paying special attention to how I felt in that moment: a skill taught to me by my therapist. I then wrote out my feelings because by acknowledging them, I can start to accept them.

So, in that moment, I felt tremendous anxiety. It felt like my heart was skipping beats and racing. There was tension in my neck, and a lump in my throat. I felt like I could wail at any time, and I was trapped. Trapped in that room, trapped in my body, and trapped in my mind.

I also felt incredible sadness. Sadness that I would not allow myself to publically cry, and sadness that I had not thought about that family for years. Their lives were forever changed and even though it was a milestone call for me, it eventually just became another day at the office.

I have spent the entire day engulfed with anxiety and sadness, yet I have still not allowed myself to weep and feel those feelings. I have taken the first step by expressing these thoughts and feelings here. The second step will be to share them. Only by sharing them can I begin the path to discovery and recovery. Only by sharing them can someone know that I need help; even if only for a moment.

Although I am no longer a firefighter, I remain connected with emergency services. Also as a family professional, I am constantly told stories of trauma and sadness. The feelings I experienced today are likely to come again with other stories. The secret is to discuss them, and the feelings. Share the stories, and share the feelings. The content of the story isn't as important as the affect of the story. Allow yourself to debrief and grieve. It will help you to move forward...

Paul Brown, HonBSc, AccFM, CP Med

*Paul is an author and private practice mediator. He served as a volunteer firefighter in a rural community for almost ten years, until he retired due to relocation of his family in 2014. Paul has also worked as a Child Protection Worker, and is a current member of After The Call, a critical incident stress management team for First Responders.*