

LOW IMPACT DEBRIEFING

Debriefing is an important aspect of dealing with trauma and vicarious trauma—but we must remember that what we share also has an impact on the listener. One way to help ensure that we are not unwittingly traumatizing our colleagues and friends is to practice Francoise Mathieu’s Low Impact Debriefing strategy.

Low Impact Debriefing is a four-step process:

- 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. How much detail do you (or your colleagues) provide?
- 2. Fair Warning**
Before you tell anyone around you a difficult story, you must give them fair warning. When you call someone with bad news, you often give them warning—for instance, “are you sitting down?”
- 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.
- 4. Low Impact Disclosure**
When you have received consent from your colleague, you can decide how much to share. 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. Think about what it is you need to share in order to process your feelings and reactions to the story.

Keep in mind that when someone comes to share information with you, you also can practice setting boundaries when you don’t feel you are in a place to be supportive.