The magnitude of death and destruction that often results from disasters and the extent of the aftermath response often demand special attention. Physical safety and security of victims and relief workers must take first priority. After safety is assured, other interventions may begin. Debriefing is one popular early intervention following disasters in which small groups of people involved in the disaster, such as rescue workers, meet in a single lengthy session to share individual feelings and experiences. The effectiveness of debriefing in preventing later mental health problems is controversial and some studies have found that it may even be harmful to some individuals. Debriefing has been largely replaced by an alternative early intervention with strong support called Psychological first aid (PFA), which seeks to sustain an environment of (1) safety, (2) calm, (3) connectedness to others, (4) self-efficacy — or empowerment, and (5) hopefulness. However, debriefing is still used by some.

Consider the following if you include debriefing as part of an intervention plan:

- Rest, respite, sleep, food, and water are the primary tools of early intervention.
- It is important to encourage natural recovery processes such as participants talking to fellow workers, spouses, and friends. This can decrease isolation and facilitate identification of persistent symptoms and increase the chances of early recovery.
- Debriefing has not been shown to prevent PTSD. For some, it may relieve pain, restore some function, and limit disability; however, further study is needed.

If you answer ‘yes’ to ALL of these, consider debriefing:

- Would you and your group benefit from an opportunity for education about responses to trauma (e.g. emotional reactions to disaster, somatic reactions, violence, substance abuse, and family stress)?

If you answer Yes to ANY of these, consider seeking consultation prior to debriefing:

- Do you have a homogeneous group (e.g. all firefighters)? Debriefing to these groups may be more helpful than in heterogeneous groups where participants are strangers to each other.

Remember, there are a number of early intervention approaches other than debriefing. Among these are PFA, which has better evidence of benefit and should be applied...
to other interventions such as early evaluation, close follow-up and reevaluation, case management, problem solving, emotional support training, sleep medication, intermittent psychotherapy, advice giving, and education. These should be considered as intervention plans.

**Additional Resources**

Psychological First Aid: How You Can Support Well-Being in Disaster Victims

https://www.cstsonline.org/resources/resource-master-list/psychological-first-aid