



# SURF LIFE SAVING AUSTRALIA POLICY STATEMENT PEER GROUP SUPPORT

POLICY  
NUMBER  
**1.15**  
JULY  
2006

## **Background**

Surf Life Saving Australia operates in an environment which is prone to the occurrence of traumatic events. These can include many types of incidents both on the beach and within the Surf Club surroundings. Members may experience many different reactions to these events, and Clubs need to offer support to members by ensuring they are looked after in a fair and reasonable manner. Peer Group Support Officers within the Clubs are able to offer both individual and group support to members at any stage and the following steps outline this Support Process.

## **Trauma – Definition**

A traumatic event, by definition is physically and emotionally overwhelming eg where emotion overwhelms rational or logical thought processes. This disrupts the basic personal belief systems of the survivor – including trust, security, predictability and controllability.

People may experience a range of differing reactions to traumatic events including **shock, fear, anger, helplessness, sadness and shame**. These are all completely normal reactions to an event that may be considered extraordinary.

Other effects may include tension, sleep disturbances, dreams and nightmares, fearfulness, intrusive memories and feelings, numbing, irritability, depression, social withdrawal, physical sensations, mental reactions and self medication. Usually these reactions are only experienced for a few weeks, and by utilising the support offered by Peer Group Support Officers members can rapidly decrease the time taken in coming to terms with their experience.

## **What is Peer Group Support?**

**Peer Support is part of the Workplace Health and Safety Program** in which people within Surf Life Saving Australia are trained to assist members who are effected by highly stressful events or have been subjected to stressors that are having adverse effects on their daily coping and operational functioning.

## **Who are Peer Group Support Officers?**

A Peer Group Support Officer is a person who shares the same or similar work environment and provides first contact support to members, referring on anyone who requires more specialised assistance. These people will have received specialised training in stress management.

The Peer Group Support program is a confidential process, which means not disclosing personal or identifying information, except in very rare circumstances where it is thought a person may cause harm to themselves or others. In this instance immediate support from an appropriate source should be obtained. In all other situations before any information is disclosed, permission must be obtained from the individual concerned.

The Peer Group Support process assists people to set realistic expectations and develop effective coping strategies to manage the impact of exposure to stressful events. The goal is to return members to pre-incident levels of wellness and performance as soon as possible and without long term detrimental effect. This is achieved by providing knowledge and a series of strategies to prevent and alleviate the impact of stress associated with traumatic events.

### **Key Personnel Available**

#### **Peer Support Officer**

- A Peer Group Support Officer must have received appropriate training, organised by the respective state centres if necessary and have these skills updated by attending a refresher course at least once every four years.
- Peer Group Support Officers shall have an integral role in the education of members on the Peer Group Support Services that the Club offers. This should be done through Bronze medallion training or proficiencies each season, educating members in regards to stress reactions and coping strategies that are available and may be employed.
- Peer Group Support Officers are to be the first point of call in the event of an incident, and are accountable to the Club Captain. In larger incidents the Branch Development Officer and State Lifesaving Officer are to be notified.

#### **Mental Health Professional**

- All clubs will have access to an appropriate mental health professional (psychologist or psychiatrist) in their area who will provide support upon referral to club members and their significant others through a variety of strategies.

#### **Role of a Peer Support Officer**

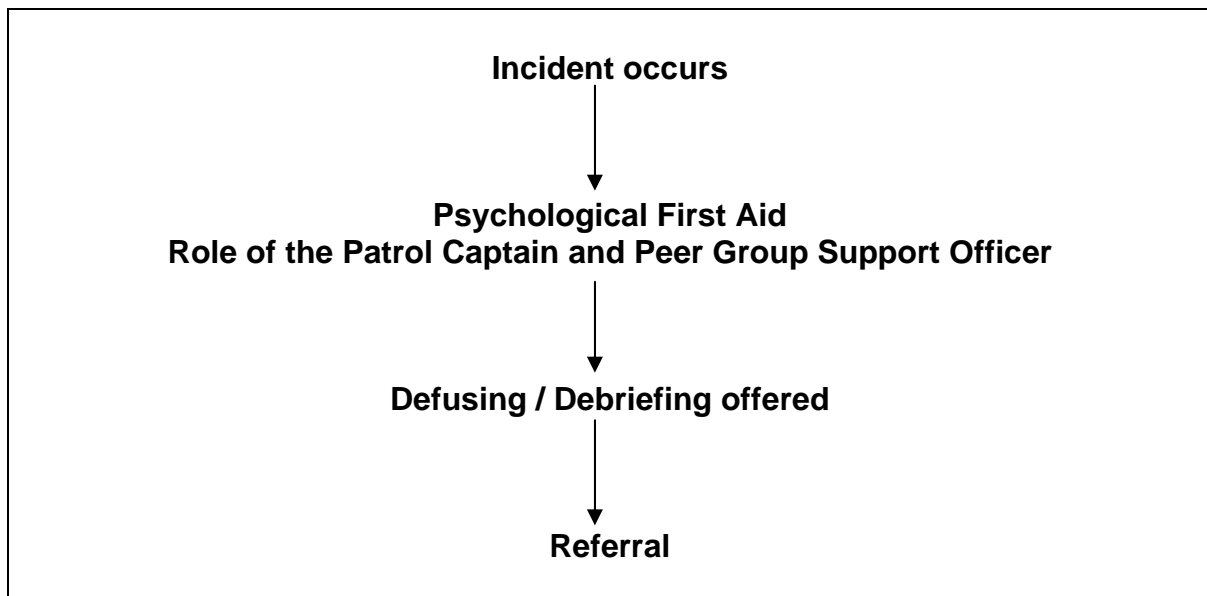
Following exposure to stressful events the Peer Support Officer may

- Provide initial support to Club members and their 'Significant Others' to alleviate symptoms and encourage a prompt return to independent functioning and coping in their lives.
- Assist Club members to understand the impact of a stressful event.
- Educate Club members on stress reactions and natural coping mechanisms and strategies they possess.
- Assist in the referral process to mental health professionals for further counselling for club members when required.
- Play a role in the organising and staging of formal psychological debriefing sessions for club members when deemed necessary.

The types of interventions employed by the Peer Support Officers may include, but are not restricted to:-

- Psychological First Aid
- Defusing
- Family/Significant Other support
- Organising and assisting in Psychological Debriefing
- Follow up/ Referral

## Peer Group Support Process



### **STEP 1 – Incident Occurs**

#### **When Peer Group Support may be needed**

Within the Surf Life Saving environment there are many types of extraordinary incidents that can occur. The following situations may be times that the Support of a Peer Group Officer can be of assistance to members

- When the event is extraordinary
- Occurrence of a serious incident
  - o Death/Drowning
  - o Failed resuscitation
  - o Injury to Patrol Member
  - o Rescued person known to Patrol Member
  - o Rescued patient with extensive injuries
  - o Shark attack rescue
  - o Patrol Member in danger (surf etc.)
- Strong media involvement and interest
- A large number of members are involved
- Members appear distressed by the event
- There is evidence of distress or adverse behaviour
- On request

*Note* – An incident that may be considered small or minor may trigger a large reaction in some members due to a previous incident they may have experienced, or an accumulation of smaller incidents and life pressures that cause a build up effect. Therefore different people will have differing levels of reactivity to the same event. Members who seek guidance of counselling from a Peer Group Support Officer must feel free to express their emotions and feelings in a safe and supportive environment.

#### **How this is accomplished**

By being able to provide:-

- Education about crisis events and stress management
- Psychological First Aid
- Practical assistance

- One on one support
- Telephone support
- Facilitating a Defusing
- Attending a Psychological Debriefing
- Referring on
- By being available

### **Role of the Patrol Captain**

*Carry out a Primary Review and Assessment of Patrol Members eg:*

- Change in personality
- Withdrawal behaviour (most dangerous)
- Excessive talking of incident
- Avoidance behaviour after incident
- Members numbed by experience
- Members aggravated/agitated

### **Refer to Peer Group Support Officer**

A list of names and contact details of Peer Group Support Officers can be available upon request from your State Centre/Branch Office. Clubs need to ensure that they have a Peer Group Support Officer and that other Club members are aware of who this Officer is, and how to contact them.

## **STEP 2 – Psychological First Aid**

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### **Role of the Peer Group Support Officer Post-Incident**

Psychological First Aid or a defusing session needs to be implemented as soon as possible after the incident has occurred to ensure that members' needs are well looked after. The end of patrol is the ideal time to conduct this session. A session which enables the group to talk about the incident is most beneficial in a small group of members – and best with the all those involved in the incident in attendance.

Defusing is a short sharp session that takes place within a few hours of an event. This is less formal and structured than a debriefing session and aims to stabilise the affected persons.

Psychological support is extremely important for traumatised people in the aftermath of a traumatic event. The Peer Group Support Officer can aid in this process by providing human comfort and support. It is important to convey recognition of their suffering in a compassionate and respectful manner – this is one of primary stages in their recovery process.

## **STEP 3 –Debriefing**

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### **Debriefing**

Debriefing aims to reduce the impact of a crisis event, as well as accelerating the normal recovery process. The differing forms of debriefing intervention include on scene support (limited and brief), defusion (short and unstructured) or debriefing sessions which is a structured group discussion that is designed to put an event into perspective for those involved.

Debriefing is an opportunity for the Peer Group Support Officer to facilitate a group discussion for the members who are involved. This does not replace good support or professional counselling. Debriefing is part of an ongoing process to facilitate the emotions of those involved.

### **Benefits of Debriefing**

- Stress reduction
- Chance to ventilate pent-up emotions
- Trigger to deal with past events
- Opportunity for stress reduction education
- Emotional reassurance
- Forecasting of symptoms that may materialise later
- Normalisation of reactions
- Improve group cohesion
- Reduce potential for future tensions
- An opportunity for screening and referral

### **Debriefing Guidelines**

Ensure that when conducting a debriefing session it is seen to be an appropriate and therapeutic intervention. If possible try to gain an understanding of the expectations from the session.

The setting of the debrief needs to be conducted in a quiet and comfortable area, that is free from interruptions and disturbances. Ensure that there are no telephones – in particular mobile phones. Refreshments should be provided at the end of the session.

The Peer Group Support Officer needs to gain all possible information about the event, and be prepared for the session. Around 2-4 hours can be put aside for a group of around 15 people.

Psychological Debriefing is facilitated by a mental health professional assisted by the peer support officer. The debriefing session is very much as sharing process. It is essential that all members approach the session with a supportive, understanding and approached with a positive look. It is essential that there is no atmosphere of criticism or blame for the process to be beneficial to all members.

### **GLOSSARY**

<b>Psychological First Aid</b>	This is comfort and support offered immediately to people who have been exposed to a traumatic event. Because personal reactions to trauma differ widely the supporter should be able to adapt responses to the needs of the traumatised person.
<b>Defusing</b>	A shortened version of the debriefing, which should take 20-45 minutes to complete. Should be applied within as close to possible after the incident (Max 8 hours) with small groups of 6-8 people.
<b>Debriefing</b>	A structured group process designed to mitigate the stress of a stressful event. It is designed to hasten the normal recovery process of a homogenous population who are experiencing normal reactions to an acutely distressing event.

## **STEP 4**

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### **Referral**

Members may need to be referred to a trained councillor for follow up assistance in dealing with the incident. The Peer Group Support Officer will need to contact the Councillor and brief them on the situation, keeping all member details confidential.

The Peer Group Support Officer will need to ensure that a confidential, undisclosed report is produced for distribution to the Club Captain, Branch Development Officer and State Lifesaving Manager for future reference.

Your respective State Centre is to keep all documentation and files pertaining to the incident and the support offered, including follow-up actions, councillors' names and contact details in case a claim be filed.

### **Steps after the session has taken place**

After the debriefing session has taken place, appropriate documentation needs to be fulfilled and an assessment of members' state assessed. This includes their immediate safety - ensuring they are in a suitable state to drive home etc. This is the responsibility primarily of the Peer Group Support Officer or the Patrol Captain.

Members who were involved in any stage of the debriefing process will need to be contacted approximately two weeks after the initial session for a follow up assessment. The Peer Group Support Officer can use the Post Traumatic Symptom Scale Questions to review the members' symptoms (if any) and gauge whether professional counselling needs to be sought in regards to what they have experienced and how they are coping. (Referral)

The Patrol Captain or Club Captain need to alert and recontact the Peer Group Support Officer if any similar events occur to the same individuals. This is to ensure that retriggering and accumulation of traumatic events does not occur.