

Debriefing a Code

HOW TO DEBRIEF

1. Gather your team and diffuse emotions in the air. Thank everyone for their hard work. If appropriate, let them know that there is nothing more that anyone could have done to save this person's life. (<1 minute)
2. Take a few minutes to summarize what happened in the code. Keep it simple and use language that all present will understand. Give a brief overview of the medical events that occurred to put everyone on the same page. (1-2 minutes)
3. Next, explain to everyone that although there was nothing that could have been done to change the outcome, we can learn from every code. There are lessons in both "bad" and "good" codes. Turn to your nurses, for example, and say, "What do you think went well? What could have gone better? What would you change moving forward?" (1-2 minutes)
 - a. The purpose of this is to create a safe, nonpunitive environment for people to talk and show your team that you are interested in hearing from everyone, not just providers.
4. After a few people speak, consider picking one major item to discuss. And lead with the phrase "I feel like..." rather than finger pointing. For example, "As the team leader I feel like I should have done a better job at ensuring we all performed closed-loop communication..." (1-2 minutes)
5. After a few minutes of discussion, you can end the debriefing session. Reiterate your appreciation and gratitude to everyone. End on a positive note to ensure that your team leaves feeling refreshed, supported, and ready to head back into action.

As you start doing debriefings more often, your team members will come to anticipate it and you may notice that your colleagues start performing more debriefing sessions. Your team will be stronger for this!

Note: For particularly traumatic codes, you may not want to do much in your debriefing session other than steps 1 and 2. You'll likely gather everyone together, take a moment of silence for the patient, thank everyone, provide reassurance, and let everyone know you are there if they need it. Do not feel forced to show or experience emotions during a debriefing session.

Find additional well-being resources at: <https://wellness.cooperhealth.org/>

Notes for Debriefing Leaders

Debriefing does not have to be a prolonged event where everyone discusses their feelings and becomes very emotional. When done correctly, debriefing has been shown to be effective in as little to 5-10 minutes. It improves the team's communication skills, increases staff perception of how critical cases are run, improves morale, increases staff's ability to "regroup" and decreases thoughts about the code within 24 hours.

When to Debrief

Debriefing does not have to be restricted to codes either. Examples of times where you can consider debriefing include: the critical and confusing patient encounter that requires disposition to the intensive care unit, a very aggressive patient that took a whole team to control, or even a palliative patient who you treated with unconventional measures and feel your team needs an explanation regarding. It is appropriate to debrief whenever you feel like the clinical scenario warrants it and your team would benefit from some explanation and shared discussion.

Timing of the Debriefing Session

- Ideally, the team leader should initiate it, but it does not always have to be. In the academic setting, a resident can be the person to initiate or even run the session.
- Debriefing immediately after the code ends is called a *hot debrief* and is the best time to do it, when feasible.
 - For particularly traumatic codes, the team may need time to process their emotions personally before gathering as a group and discussing the case.
 - If the family was watching the code or is still close by and can hear you, a hot debrief should not be performed.

Barriers to Debriefing

- In hectic environments, the act of debriefing often gets overlooked. This is likely due to the demand and unrealistic expectation to put our heads down, push forward, and return to work.
- It can feel vulnerable and uncomfortable debriefing a code.

Resources:

- [STOP5: A Hot Debrief Model for Resuscitation Cases in the Emergency Department](#)
- [Implementation of a Rapid Post-Code Debrief Quality Improvement Project in a Community Emergency Department Setting](#)
- [The ART of Debriefing](#)

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Pocket Card:

What to Include in a Hot Debrief

1. **Introduction:** Thank everyone for attending and state the goals of the debrief.
2. **Reactions:** Have participants briefly reflect on their feelings and reactions to the code.
3. **Overview:** Provide a quick clinical summary of the code.
4. **Plus/Delta analysis:** Ask the group — What went well? What would you have done differently?
5. **Summary:** Quickly review the main discussion points and key takeaways before the group disperses.

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