

Debriefing

When it comes to reentry—that two-week period immediately following cross-cultural outreach—I'm a mess. In fact, more often than not, I turn into a puddle of goo. One minute I'm happy. The next I'm in serious need of Prozac. At noon I'm planning a return trip to Guatemala, and at 12:15am I'm promising to never leave the U.S. again. Right is left and up is down (except when it's up). Which side of the street do we drive on again? Can I drink the water? What time is it in Kenya right now? Did I really just spend a \$1.44 for a cup of coffee? While people are starving? I must not be a Christian!

Reentry is a confusing, upside-down whirlwind of emotions that can put even veteran missionaries on their ears. And if it does that to people who don't regularly spend much time on their ears, imagine how it can affect teenagers who regularly do! Which means that you deserve 20 years of hard labor—or two hours watching presidential election debates—if you don't take the time to weave debriefing into the fabric of every mission trip you lead.

A Definition

Though the word itself has CIA overtones, debriefing is simply a matter of helping people reflect on their experiences. It can be done in a group setting or solo, both during the trip or after it. And in fact, there is no one right way to debrief. Because people—even those who look alike, dress alike, and have pierced the same body parts—are unique. But there is a goal: *We need to help people process what they've learned so they can grow in Christ and become of greater value to His work in the world.*

Rest assured, if you leave your students alone, they will sort through their experiences and lock into some high and low points. But they're also likely to take a circuitous path and return home more hurt than helped by the trip. I find it helpful to think about debriefing as a process that occurs in four stages:

- **Pre-Trip** Several years ago I joined a half dozen buddies on a hike to the top of Mount Baker in Washington. It's a three-day ordeal for a novice, and while it's no Mount Everest, it's far more taxing and dangerous than any E-ticket ride at Disney World. We had a wonderfully challenging climb to the summit and enjoyed glissading—i.e., skiing without skis—back down to base camp.

But after that point, the trip fell apart. Why? Because we were emotionally unprepared for the six-hour hike back to the van. We never talked about the last part of the trip. I never even thought about it. In fact, I sort of mindlessly figured that once we stepped off the glacier, took off our crampons, and unhitched our ropes, we were done. But we weren't. We faced a 10-mile hike, all carrying 40-pound packs, on a dangerous ridge. And we'd been up for 20 hours when we started. Needless to say we were a surly group when we finished. But it didn't have to be that way.

The next year we climbed a different mountain and easily survived an equally difficult hike out. Why? Because I started preparing people for the descent while the trip was still months away.

And that's when debriefing starts! Months in advance. Your students need to be told—when they pay their deposits—to expect a disorienting reentry. Parents must be told that their kids may be out of sorts when they return. Everyone is miles ahead even if you pass out a packing list that includes "bring a good attitude for reentry because it can be confusing" right next to "bring bug spray, a Bible, and Spanish- English dictionary."

I'm not suggesting that we offer kids a heads up in order to take the pain away. It's necessary for students to struggle with the gross inequities of wealth and opportunity on our planet. I want them to wrestle with spending more money on a movie than it takes to feed a third-world AIDS orphan for a week. I think we should be worried if their transitions back into Western culture are seamless. I just don't want them becoming catatonic or ripping anyone's head off during their reentry struggles. That's why advanced warning can help kids stay sane. They face enough emotional peaks and valleys during adolescence—as adult leaders, we need to help them process the additional ones that short-term mission trips will add.

- **During the Trip**

The second natural stage for debriefing occurs during the trip itself, especially if you're on the field for more than a week. It can be as simple as ending the day with some probing questions: *What's been the high point of your trip so far? The biggest surprise? How did God break your heart today? What was the biggest lesson you've learned? What was the memory you will most likely hold onto? What do you think God is calling you to do?*

You can also encourage your kids to spend 20 minutes writing in their journals. But even that can be more deliberate—and should be if you've had a particularly taxing day or if the team is facing some internal conflict. Sometimes I've found it helpful to give people a couple hours on their own to simply sit before God. Other times it's wise to gather the group together for a Bible study or circle of encouragement (i.e., pick a person and have everyone on the trip share one thing they appreciate about that person, then move around the circle until everyone has been affirmed).

- **Pre-Reentry** When the hostages were released from captivity in Iran, the U.S. Army flew them to Germany for a week before reuniting them with their families. Why? Because our government learned a hard lesson from the Vietnam War: *People under great stress in faraway lands need places to catch their breath before they're dropped back into everyday life.*

If possible, add a day to your trip and spend it someplace between the field and home. Devote part of the time for fun: Go to a nice restaurant. Visit a museum. Hit the beach. Act like tourists. Give your group a chance to stop thinking and to begin unwinding.

Then gather your students together for an extended time of prayer, sharing, and reflection. If the group needs prompting, ask any of the standard debriefing questions listed above—or others like them. Be careful to facilitate the discussion in a healthy way.

Everyone needs a chance to share. Broad, sweeping promises to God—or others—are to be avoided. Remind your kids that they're emotionally vulnerable and that it'll take time to really sort through everything God is teaching them.

- **Post-Trip** In the days and weeks following your mission trip, there is value in pulling your team together just to talk. The first obvious opportunity is after the pictures are developed—and in some settings you can get away with just a little gathering to look at slides, eat some ethnic food, and retell funny stories. But after other trips—especially longer ones or those that were particularly taxing emotionally—you may need to be more thoughtful.

After one spring-break trip where God had touched a number of students' lives, the group felt that our regular debriefing drill was inadequate. The group wanted more time together, and that led about 60 of them to meet for prayer late into the night—every night—for a week. I didn't know what to do about their meetings and briefly entertained the idea of telling them to phase them out so they could get back to being students. But in the end I simply decided to leave them alone. Eventually they felt God's call to "do something local." The result was the formation of a soup kitchen that continues to provide a weekly meal to the poor more than a decade later.

I realized the importance of mission trip debriefing after hearing a college pastor say that he didn't want any more of his leaders "ruined by summer missions projects."

It reminded me of how close I came to being a short-term ministry casualty myself.

After leading a team of college students on a spring-break trip to inner-city Los Angeles, I returned home so drained and confused that I thought about quitting the ministry. I was exhausted, restless, and depressed—and couldn't bear the thought of returning to the office.

It was only after I reread my journal entries for that same trip—taken a year earlier—that I remembered I felt the same way then and that the feelings left after a few days. Armed with that additional insight, I started to set a different pace on future trips and came home prepared to face the confusion. As leaders we cannot afford to do otherwise.

Some jobs aren't over until the paperwork is finished. Your job as mission trip leader isn't finished until debriefing is over.

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