



Journal Club Summary July 2018 "Relationship Strain"



Expert Opinion : Stephanie Barwick

"The 'elephant in the room' can derail a debriefing because the elephant draws its power from the fact that it lurks in the shadows and loses its power as soon as the light is turned on"

The Article :

"Difficult Debriefing Situations : A toolbox for simulation educators"

V. J. Grant, T. Robinson, H. Catena, W. Eppich & A. Cheng (2018)

[Medical Teacher, DOI: 10.1080/0142159X.2018.1468558](https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2018.1468558)

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Simulcast Journal Club is a monthly/ series that aims to encourage simulation educators to explore and learn from publications on Healthcare Simulation Education.

Each month we publish a case and link a paper with associated questions for discussion.

We moderate and summarise the discussion at the end of the month, including exploring the opinions of experts from the field.

The Case :

It was a conversation that Nimali had been avoiding but coming home to a filthy kitchen and a frying pan full of cold, day old rice had pushed her conflict avoidance tendencies out the window. She strode resentfully down the hall to find Joe and her son cuddled up on the couch. Her husband cheerfully raised his glass in a casual welcoming gesture and turned back to his phone.

"I'd like to talk about what's going on in the kitchen." She said icily. "Is an ounce of cleaning too much to ask when you've had the whole day off with the kids?"

"Not now mate." sighed Joe. "I'm tuckered out. This one had me up since 4am." He patted their son as he lay half asleep in his lap.

"I think that's a bit dismissive." countered Nimali. "We've had this fight a number of times and it's a real trigger for me. The dynamic seems to be that I ask you to step up and then nothing has changed. I'm working full time again now, I need you to pull your weight!"

"It's not my fault I got retrenched, Nimali." Joe scowled. "And it's not lazy of me to leave some housework till after he gets to bed."

Nimali sighed and sat down next to him on the couch. She reached over and took the wine glass from his hands. "I get it, hun. I do. I know it's been hard finding new work, especially when you loved that team so much. And I'm sure it's not uncommon for men to struggle with their identity a bit after losing work. But I've taken on more hours to support this family. If we're really honest you're being a great Dad but I'm still doing most of the housework on weekends, and when you don't follow through, it makes me feel like you don't respect how hard I'm working to keep us afloat."

Joe didn't answer at first, but Nimali let the silence hang. Calmly, without any anger, she held his gaze.

A few more seconds passed, and then he leaned impulsively forwards in the couch and kissed her on the cheek. "I hear you." He said. "And I'm glad that we could have a discussion without any damn debriefing techniques for once."

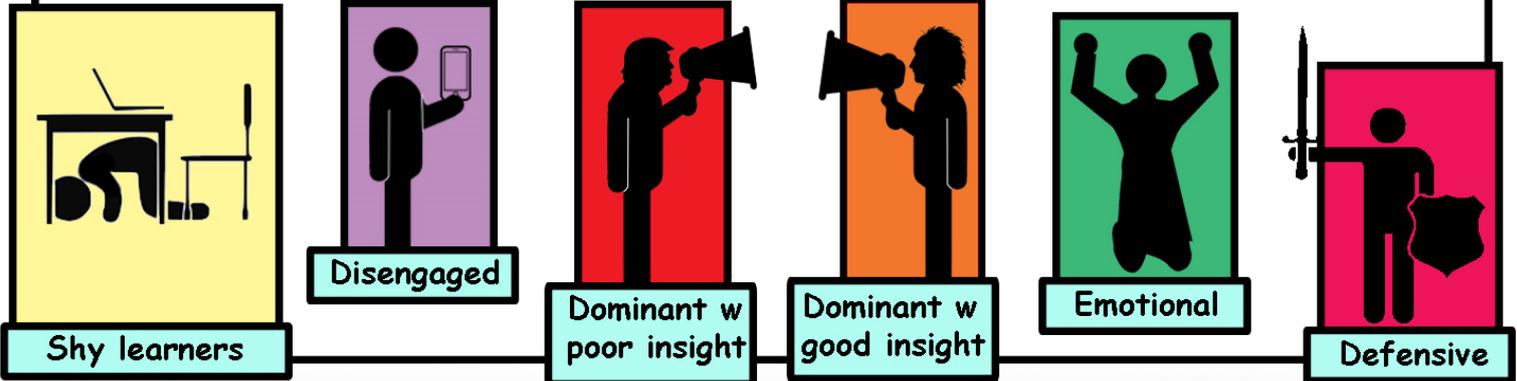
Nimali smiled.

Discussion :

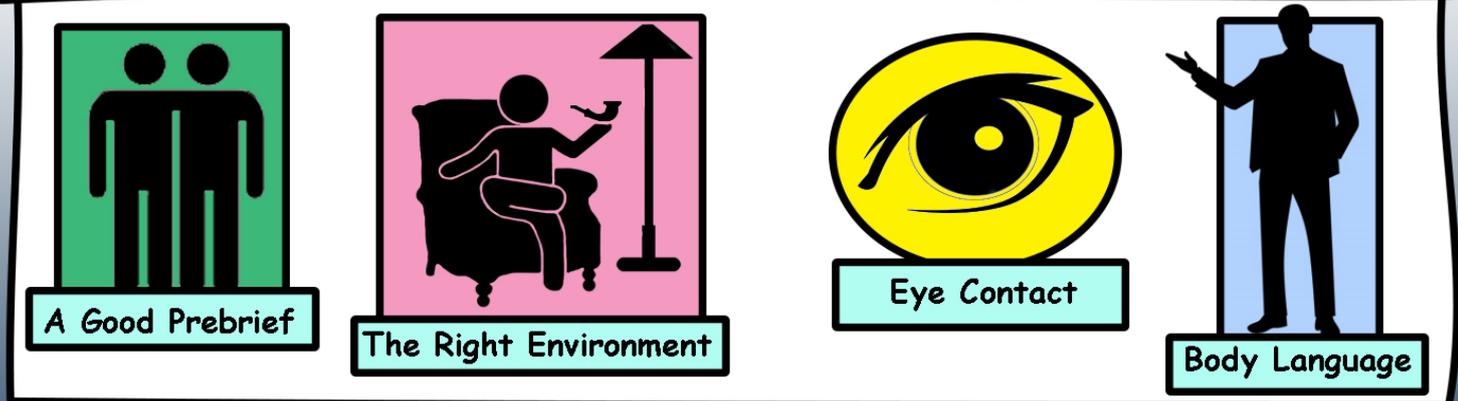
In the case study today, Nimali faced a reluctant, dismissive encounter at home. While she and many of us may feel we have mastered the basics of debriefing, most of us could name similar times in our lives when a conversation was uncomfortable or difficult. In this open access paper by Grant et al, the authors provide us with a list of common debriefing conundrums while simultaneously providing useful verbal and non verbal techniques to approach them.

For our bloggers this month, what did you think of the paper? Do you think it will help your practice? Are there any challenges you experience commonly?

Firstly, Grant et al identify 6 common types of challenging debriefing situations :



They then identify some proactive strategies to use that might prevent those problems :



And then move on to some reactive strategies :



Some useful tools for your debriefing utility belt!

Expert Opinion: Ms Stephanie Barwick



Steph is both a Registered Nurse and Registered Midwife and is the acting Director of Simulation at Mater education in Brisbane. She has a combined passion for critical care nursing and simulation-based education and has successfully implemented a sustainable organisational wide in-situ simulation program at the Mater. Since returning from her simulation fellowship at the Centre for medical simulation in Boston, she has been leading the educational development of the Speaking With Good Judgement Program.

Steph is undertaking research looking at methods to better implement in-situ simulation and its impacts upon the healthcare consumer who may be exposed to this type of training.

I remember after a particularly difficult debriefing I had, I did what every reputable educator would do and googled 'difficult debriefings' in the hope that I would find some debriefing self-help magic. I was disappointed, like the authors of this paper mention, I couldn't find anything specific to help in my time of need. I was ready to return the 'debriefing license' that CMS had handed me a year earlier but was lucky enough to have a fabulous team around me and together we discussed strategies for the future. A few of those strategies are discussed in this paper which shares with the reader contributing factors to difficult debriefing as well as proactive and reactive strategies that can be implemented into practice.

As educators we know that for successful learning to occur the debrief needs to be conducted in a way that facilitates discussion and reflection, and the difficult debrief can threaten this experience for both the learner and the debriefer. This paper shares insights, experiences and strategies from well-known experts with many years of experience in the field. I really love that papers like this are published as it demonstrates how valuable our experiences are and how helpful they can be when shared with the simulation community.

The types of difficult debriefing situations discussed in the paper give a clear picture of what to be aware of before and during debriefings. A difficult debrief may also be pre-empted by the presence of these types of behaviours in the prebrief or during the simulation. I quite liked the way the contributing factors were categorised into learner-specific and situation-specific factors. I would love a third category, debriefer-specific factors, with further discussion about how what the debriefer brings to the table can contribute to difficult debriefings. Interestingly, I found myself reflecting on some of the learner-specific factors and thinking that sometimes I have demonstrated these behaviours as the debriefer as well. I have at times found myself internally defensive when learners push back on a case I have developed, through experience I have learnt to self-regulate in the moment, but I wasn't always like that and would find myself responding with defensiveness in the debrief. Sometimes debriefings become difficult because of the feelings we have had or the debriefing moves we have chosen.

As we don't always have complete control over how our learners experience the simulation or debriefing or what they bring with them, the 'toolbox' of solutions presented in this paper gives us a number of useful strategies in preparation for and management of difficult debriefings and is my favourite part of the paper. A lack of debriefing training amongst those who conduct debriefings is common; Fey and Jenkins (2015) demonstrated this in a study looking at debriefing practices of prelicensure nursing programs in the United States. They found that only 47.5% of educators conducting debriefings had received debriefing training, and so I think papers like this one are extremely important (Fey & Jenkins, 2015).

It was really useful to separate the strategies into proactive strategies and reactive strategies and want to highlight what Mary said about the importance of the proactive strategies. If you get this right, you are less likely to need the reactive ones. Proactive strategies like the prebriefing and creating psychological safety can negate the need for the reactive strategies. Congruence between how the debriefer conducts themselves day to day and in the debriefing is essential. I believe this is the same for using body language as a proactive strategy in debriefing. If you aren't open

and inviting with people outside of the debriefing, learners may perceive an action opposite to this as inauthentic and not engage openly and honestly. Like Mary and Susan mentioned in the comments, I would have also liked to see some narrative around rapport building between debriefer and learner as a proactive strategy. I would also suggest that a well-designed and pre-tested scenario is also a proactive strategy that can help mitigate the risk of being at the helm of a difficult debriefing.

Considering the debriefing environment as a proactive strategy is a great inclusion. Many of the debriefings I have conducted have been after an in-situ simulation and so the debriefings occur in the clinical environment. This adds to the challenge of ensuring an environment where learners feel comfortable and safe enough to engage in a debriefing. The regular work activity continuing on the other side of the door can be distracting for the learners which can impact their engagement and contribution to the conversation. Being transparent about this is important, I will often say, I recognise that there is a busy clinical environment outside and so I ask if we can put that to the side for the next 15 minutes while we spend some time reflecting on the experience we just had. I find this gives learners permission to focus in that moment on the conversation we are all engaging in.

In the reactive strategies, like Eve and Rebecca, I particularly appreciated the specific communication tools for difficult debriefings and the sample wording provided. Figure 1 will definitely be something I will be referring back to and sharing with fellow debriefers. Of the reactive strategies described in this paper, I'd like to touch on 2 that really resonated with me; Naming the dynamic and Learner follow-up. Like Mary and Farrukh mentioned, when challenging situations come up in a debrief we have the dilemma, do we avoid, or do we lean in – the best option is to lean in and name the dynamic. The 'elephant in the room' can derail a debriefing because the elephant draws its power from the fact that it hides in the shadows and loses its power when the light is turned on (Zerubavel, 2006). **Name it to Tame it** is my mantra when faced with this situation. Drawn from psychology, this mantra, links to the concept of affect labelling whereby an emotional state that is experienced can be disrupted by the simple act of labelling the emotion (Lieberman et al 2007). In other words, naming a negative emotion or dynamic has the power to tame it.

I have followed up with learners many times after a difficult debrief so was extremely happy to see this included in the paper as a one of the reactive strategies. This kind of follow up acknowledges that learners may need time and space to process information and emotions, as mentioned in the comments from Vince. I have also checked in with learners' post debrief if I am worried about how their emotional state was during and after the debrief as I feel a duty of care as the debriefer to ensure my learners are not damaged by the experience. Every time I have checked in with a learner it has been a really positive experience.

My final thought would be that debriefing is a two-way conversation, so I would suggest there are some proactive and reactive strategies that could also rest with the learners. Some responsibility to an effective debrief, lies with how well the learners are engaging, reflecting and receiving feedback. I think this means training our learners in how to reflect and receive feedback well. Stone and Heen (2014) state that receiving feedback well means 'managing your emotional triggers so that you can take in what the other person is telling you, being open to seeing yourself in new ways'. This is a skill that takes practice but could be a proactive strategy, as a learner, that could help reduce the occurrence of the 'difficult debrief'. The Role of receiving feedback is a topic one of my colleagues, Melanie Barlow, is studying PhD and a focus of education in our at the moment.

Overall, I found this paper very helpful and really believe it will be one of the 'go-to' papers for both novice and experienced debriefers. It will certainly be one I share with colleagues and refer back to regularly.

References:

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- Stone, D., & Heen, S. (2014). *Thanks for the Feedback: The science and art of receiving feedback well*. United Kingdom: Portfolio penguin.
- Zerubavel, E., & ProQuest. (2006). *The elephant in the room : Silence and denial in everyday life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Summary of this Month's Journal Club Discussion :

Blog Contributors :

- Mary Fey, Eve Purdy, Ben Symon, Farrukh, Jafri, Susan Eller, Rebecca Smith, Vic Brazil, Vince Grant

The responses to this month's article were markedly positive, and unsurprising given the calibre of the authors. It was with some relief however, given the paper's pedigree, that our group felt comfortable enough providing some small critiques as well.

The theme of the responses overall, could be condensed into :

- Appreciative thirst for more depth or inclusion of other strategies
- A sense that the paper gives permission to the debriefer to engage in difficult conversations.

Mary Fey started the conversation :

What the Grant et al paper provides are practical strategies for "leaning in"; helpful to novice and experienced debriefers. The phenotypes they describe are all situations we've dealt with: disengagement, domination by one who has poor insight, domination by an expert, defensiveness, etc. I find the most helpful section of the paper to be the "toolbox", in which the authors describe both proactive and reactive strategies. It's been my experience that, with difficult debriefing situations, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. As my prebriefings have gotten better over the years, my debriefing difficulties have decreased proportionately. – Mary Fey

Eve Purdy offered some critique regarding the cognitive strain of Figure 2, which was echoed by multiple responders who argued it was complex to the point of being difficult to use. Vic Brazil discussed how useful it would be to view some multimedia that actively demonstrates the use of the techniques outlined in the article.

Other bloggers shared their appreciation of various techniques either mentioned or not discussed within the paper. In particular the use of Rapport in and out of the sim lab, the use of the environment to establish safety, and engaging in post debrief follow up with learners.

Tackling 'the elephant in the room' is daunting when you are a beginner and it's often tempting to avoid uncomfortable conversations for fear of eliciting a strong emotional response or causing harm to your learners. I'll still be taking my co-facilitator with me but I'm looking forward to trying some of these strategies and pushing myself as a debriefer. – Rebecca Smith

Many responders reported that the paper encouraged them to address the elephant in the room. By providing concrete strategies for doing so, it's possible the paper has made what seems previously an insurmountable challenge to now be of an achievable difficulty. Rebecca Smith stated :

Ben Symon and Susan Eller raised the importance of considering how the debriefer contributes to unexpected challenges as well, with Susan pointing out that one critical strategy she uses is 'listening' :

I found that one of the things I needed to do in pre-brief to avoid challenging debriefing sessions was to listen to participants concerns or experiences with simulation. To be mindful, but not focused, on their experiences or triggers regarding simulation. – Susan Eller

Acknowledgements :

Thank you to Steph Barwick for her expert commentary this month.

Thank you to all commenters this month for sharing your thoughts and allowing us to learn from you.

Simulcast would like to thank the creators of the ALiEM MEDiC series for the inspiration for the journal club's blog format and their ongoing support and contributions to the project.

References and Further Reading :

1. [V. J. Grant, T. Robinson, H. Catena, W. Eppich & A. Cheng \(2018\): Difficult debriefing situations: A toolbox for simulation educators, Medical Teacher, DOI: 10.1080/0142159X.2018.1468558](#)
2. [Center for Medical Simulation \(2018\). Name it to tame it. \[podcast\] DJ Simulationistas. Available at: <https://soundcloud.com/medicalsimulation/episode-020-name-it-to-tame-it> \[Accessed 8 Jul. 2018\].](#)