

# PETROS

*Resilience for Life*

## **Decompression Sessions**

*Power down to power up*

Some jobs are unique in terms of exposure to potentially traumatic events or material. They are called Critical Occupations (COs). These jobs are critical, not just to the wellbeing of the communities they serve, but also in terms of the critical pressure exerted on the psychological wellbeing of the professionals in those roles.

Most people in COs are pretty good at processing their work-related experiences most of the time. After all, they choose these professions often because they know they can cope. But, the demands and work culture of COs can be very unforgiving. Consequently, people bury, hide or deny their mounting distress, which only surfaces when it becomes too hard to manage. At this point, organisational policies and procedures may kick in to support the individual but it is often too little too late.

There are a multitude of reasons why people experience work-related distress in COs and it is not always to do with the traumatic incidents or materials they encounter. Organisational culture; the responses of managers or colleagues; things going on in personal lives; being physically unwell; changes in personal circumstances; personal history and more can all contribute to an overall sense of distress. What is essential to thriving in a CO role is making sure that organisations establish procedures that **prevent** distress, rather than trying to pick up the pieces of its impact. One such preventative tool is regular Decompression Sessions (DCS), which help to prevent the build-up of pressure and can identify escalating symptoms of distress before they become debilitating.

### **What is the aim?**

To *PREVENT* work related distress and critical impact on psychological wellbeing.

### **What happens in a Decompression Session?**

A DCS is personal, facilitated time for an individual to literally decompress, or unload. Designed to provide CO staff an opportunity to discuss their work and its impact in a safe, non-judgemental and supportive environment.

Imagine that over the last few months you have felt over-worked, have had to manage some really distressing cases, your boss has been away (off-sick, travelling, on leave), the boiler blew up at home, your kids/elderly parents need you more than usual and your partner/best friend is facing their own pressures so you don't want to burden them. What

do you do with all that? Well mostly, we just carry that around with us and get on with it – after all that’s life isn’t it? But, your job requires much more of you than the average job, so not being weighed down by ‘life’ is actually critically important to you doing your job well.

A DCS gives you time to put all that stuff down, process the bits that need processing, let go of the things you can, consider alternative ways of dealing with the pressures and renew your energy to carry on thriving! You can use the time in a DCS to think about any or all of the following:

- Work related issues
- Anything that’s vexing you
- Problem solving
- Learning from success
- Just to take some time out

### **Who facilitates a Decompression Session?**

Ideally, sessions would be facilitated by someone specially trained to help individuals get the most out of the time - someone with professional skills in the human services field would be ideal. It is also possible to train people from within the organisation to take on the role, provided they are outside the managerial line.

### **How often should sessions be held?**

This is largely at the discretion of the organisation. As a guide: not so frequently they become a burden, but not so rarely that they don’t provide the intended support. Experience suggests every three months or so works well, with the option for additional sessions if required.

### **How long should each session last?**

Around two hours per session is optimal. Any shorter and there doesn’t seem to be enough time to explore a range of issues, but any longer can be tiring and unprofitable for both recipient and facilitator.

### **What about confidentiality?**

Facilitators of DCSs who work with Petros are also members of relevant professional bodies, including the Health Care Professions Council (HCPC), the British Psychological Society (BPS), the UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) and the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). These professional organisations require their members to act in accordance with a code of practice stipulating confidentiality. Generally speaking, practitioners are required to keep the contents of sessions confidential unless the recipient is considered a risk to themselves or others.

In practice, this means that a DCS facilitator will not discuss an individual’s sessions with anyone else. However, there are two things we should be aware of. Facilitators are required to have their own sessions to decompress (it’s just good practice) and therefore

might discuss the essence of sessions without identifying the person concerned, with their own facilitator.

Also, there may be an organisational agreement in place to provide an annual thematic report (this is only in place if there is a team of people receiving sessions). This is important in order to identify organisational issues that compromise the wellbeing of employees. The organisation will need to be made aware if this is the case, and therefore any recurring themes will be highlighted. The individuals raising the themes however will remain anonymous.

Concerns about confidentiality, should be discussed with the facilitator or with Dr Jo Clarke, Director of Petros.

### **Why should you participate?**

Your organisation has a legal duty of care to look after you, and you have a complimentary duty of care to look after yourself. DCSs help you and the organisation fulfil that duty of care.

### **Is there any evidence these sessions actually help?**

Anecdotally there is plenty of evidence that people value taking time-out for themselves. In addition, it is a demonstration of their value to their organisation. The value of such sessions also has research evidence to suggest the maintenance of high-quality practice, improved communication, improved self-efficacy, and improved job satisfaction.

There are plenty of organisational benefits too, including:

- Higher employee satisfaction
- Decreased staff turnover
- Lower training and administration costs
- Improved customer service

**In order to look after others, you need to look after yourself.**