First to Respond, Last to Seek Help: Mental Health and First Responders

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First Responder Mental Health

FR Context Today:
- Pandemic, Civil Unrest, -isms
- Economy, Disasters, MCEs, etc.

First Responder Culture
- High Risk/Self-Reward
- (Transformational)
- Change or Die

Big T’s and Little T’s:
- Acute and Chronic Trauma
- and Daily Burnout

Barriers to Acceptance
- ‘150 years of Tradition Unimpeached by Progress’
Line of Duty Deaths & Suicide
(high probability underreported)

34.6% higher rate of suicide than the general population (2018)

First Responders: 2nd highest rate by Professional Occupation

2018: LE: 159 Suicides; 145 LODD
2019: LE: 228 Suicides; 132 LODD
2020: LE: 172 Suicides; 378 LODD

2018: FF/EMT: 103 Suicides; 64 LODD
2019: FF/EMT: 139 Suicides; 62 LODD
2020: FF/EMT: ~110 Suicides; 96 LODD
In U.S., Confidence in Police Lowest in 32 Years. 1 18% of Americans have very little or no confidence in police.

More than 8/10 of police officers say the public does not understand the risks & challenges of their job. 2

2/3 of officers perceive that the fatal police shootings that prompted demonstrations are isolated incidents. 2

48% Confidence in Police: Lowest ever measured: Dominated by higher highs & Lower lows 3

3. Forbes/Gallup Poll 2020
Law Enforcement Today

Seattle: 1400 Sworn down to 1080: 180 left in 2020, 66 YTD 2021

- **Resignations**: Up year over year\(^2\)
- **Dramatic decreases** in hiring for large departments; **dramatic increases** in smaller departments
- **45% Increase in** Retirements\(^3\)

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3. Forbes/Gallup Poll 2020/policeforum.org
The Annoying Nine

Fire, EMS, Dispatch

- Shift Work
- Sleep Deprivation
- Inadequate Training
- Technical Problems
- Bad Crews
- Malicious Coworkers
- Inconsistent Policies
- Those Bad Calls
- Poor Leadership

*Linda Willing*
Inside Versus Outside

Inside:

- Hair-Raising Sensations
- Cold Sweats
- Spinning Eyes
- Hostile Radio Traffic
- Gnashing Teeth
- Quivering Lips
- Racing Heart
- Butterflies

What COMMAND can FEEL LIKE

Outside:

- Calm, Cool and Collected

What COMMAND should ALWAYS LOOK LIKE
The Terrible Ten

- Line-of-duty death
- Suicide of colleague
- Serious line-of-duty injury
- Disaster / Multi-casualty incident
- “Not saving” Someone
- Significant events involving children
- Prolonged incidents especially with loss of life
- Personally threatening situations
- Events with excessive media interest
- Any highly distressing event
Overworked And Underserved (Continued)

- Protective service occupations have the highest incidence rate of occupational injuries and illnesses than any other occupation.

- For police officers and sheriff’s patrol officers: violence accounts for over 50% of occupational injuries and illnesses (including mental health and trauma).

- For firefighters, over 55% of incidents are caused by overexertion and bodily exhaustion.¹

Dispatchers and Telecommunications:

- 24.6% of 808 telecommunications from through the US acknowledged symptoms consistent with PTSD.

- 54.7% of 911 TCs are obese

- 24% acknowledge symptoms consistent with a diagnosis of Major Depression.²
The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association, Fifth Edition (DSM-5, 2014) defines a traumatic event as a stressor in which:

A. The person has experienced, witnessed, or been confronted with an event or events that involve actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of oneself or others.
   I. Experiencing, witnessing, close friend/family, repeated/extreme exposure to aversive details

B. Intrusion Symptoms

C. Avoidance Symptoms

D. Negative thinking and mood

E. Arousal & reactivity:
   I. Irritability/anger outbursts, reckless/self-destructive, hypervigilance, startle response, problems with concentration, sleep issues

1st Responder Job Description?
Post Traumatic Stress Injury

Are an unconscious, automatic, physical and emotional reaction(s) brought on by a delayed reaction to severe physical and psychological experiences that are outside the normal human range of emotions.

✔ Veterans of combat are the most publicized group of sufferers.

✔ ANYBODY can be affected by PTS(I): Law enforcement officers; firefighters; emergency medical personnel; survivors of life-threatening accidents, fire, flood or natural disasters; victims of violent crime; and victims of domestic, child or sexual abuse can and do suffer from PTS(I).

✔ Even family members and friends of those who have PTS(I) can suffer from what is called Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder (STSD). It is believed that 7-8% of the population have PTSD at some point in their lives, while 20-30% of First Responders experience it.

✔ Signs and symptoms of PTS(D) usually show up within 3 months of a traumatic event. However, for some, PTS(D) signs may not occur until years afterwards. Symptoms may come and go.

✔ Usually, more symptoms become apparent during times of higher stress or when experiencing symbolic reminders of the event(s). These reminders might be something remembered, something seen, something heard or even something smelled.
I brought home more frustration baggage from the firehouse. Where should I put it?
First Responder Families: When The Protector Is Gone

Police Family Identity

- Negative Stereotypes
- Don’t tell them I’m a cop...
- Tell them we’re Canadian

Secondary Trauma

- Trauma experienced by the first responder is passed to spouse and children, tough culture brought into home
Brain signals and chemical reactions used to keep someone safe can be toxic for the brain!

**STRESS INCIDENTS ICS:**
- **Amygdala** – Lookout in the field → Dispatch →
- **Hypothalamus** – 1st Alarm
- **Pituitary** – Verification with the Chief – Quality Control (Committees)
- **Adrenals** – Station/Team - Stress Chemicals – Responders, Tools, Tactics

**STRESS CHEMICALS:**
- **Adrenaline** – 1st Alarm. (Amygdala → Hypothalamus → Adrenals)
- **Norepinephrine** – 2nd Alarm
- **Cortisol (stress hormone)** – Ambulance, Hospital Stabilization, and Discharge (Amygdala → Hypothalamus → **Pituitary** → Adrenals)

- **Adrenaline** - the mega surge increases encoding of implicit memory, which is: emotional memory (fear of dog attacking me), perceptual memory (imprinting of the perception) and procedural memory (encoded actions) and bodily sensation (feeling in the body of the bite)

- **Cortisol (stress hormone)** - blocks the hippocampus (memory and emotion regulation center) and shrinks it when released over extended periods of time. Is neurotoxic for a developing brain and can inhibit making new synaptic connections, destroys healthy synapses, kills neurons and damages the region overall.
PTSD Brain-Diamond Pattern
Healthy Versus OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder)
Post Traumatic Stress Injury

The following behavior/reactions are some effects of PTS(D) (not a complete list, each person reacts differently, and reaction differ due to the source of the trauma):

✔ Flashbacks, or reliving the traumatic event(s) for minutes or even hours
✔ Feelings of shame or guilt
✔ Having upsetting dreams about the event(s)
✔ Trying to avoid thinking or talking about the event(s)
✔ Feeling emotionally numb
✔ Irritability or anger
✔ Poor relationships
✔ Self destructive behavior - use of drugs or drinking too much
✔ Feeling hopeless about the future
✔ Having trouble sleeping
✔ Memory problems
✔ Trouble concentrating
✔ Being easily startled or frightened
✔ Not enjoying activities that once were enjoyed
✔ Hearing or seeing things that aren't there
On duty the First Responder presents as: alive, alert, energetic, involved and humorous

Off duty the First Responder presents as: tired, detached, isolated and apathetic, or needing excessive stimulation

The failure to cope in a healthy way leads to finding unhealthy coping mechanisms, of which substance use and substance abuse is most common.
ABCDE’s of Addiction: I See it Daily – Doesn’t Look like me.

Addiction is characterized by:

a. Inability to consistently Abstain;
b. Impairment in Behavioral control;
c. Craving or increased “hunger” for drugs or rewarding experiences;
d. Diminished recognition of problems;
e. A dysfunctional emotional response.

✔ BioGenetics: In the blood: Frequency, Pattern, Quantity

✔ Psychological Self-Medication

✔ Socio-Cultural Norms (Imperatives?!)
Mental Health in the US Workplace

Current State

- 40% of working-age adults experience a mental health challenge each year
- 80% of employees state that workplace stress affects their personal relationships
- 60% of adults don’t seek treatment
- 2 in 5 adults in America experience a mental illness
- 2 in 3 people worldwide suffer from depression or anxiety
- More days are lost to absenteeism due to mental health than to other illness or injury. It is the leading cause of disability.
First Responders experience more acute stress and trauma than the general population.

- 85% of First Responders experience symptoms of Mental Health Issues.
- 50% are prevented from seeking treatment due to culture and stigma of their job.
- First Responders have twice the rate of alcoholism as the general population.

*University of Phoenix, 2017*
Culture & Stigma Of First Responders (Continued)

- 55% say their supervisor will treat them differently if they bring up a MH issue at work.
- 45% say talking about MH at work will make them appear “weak” to peers.
- 34% say bringing up MH concerns at work will prevent being considered for promotion.

*University of Phoenix, 2017*
Barriers To Seeking Assistance

“Suck it Up”
The overall culture of First Responders is to be tough. Historically first responders have been encouraged to get over things quickly because they have duties they need to perform.

“Feelings: The F Word”
It’s a sign of weakness to bring up trauma, talk about how a traumatic day at work has affected them. Many First Responders fear losing face.

Distrust in the Community
Many First Responders fear seeking help due to the distrust that exists between the media, the public and first responders (specifically Police officers).

Fear of criticism, confidentiality and other negative consequences
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<th>Leadership Mental Wellness Challenges</th>
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Leadership & Wellness: 

The Chief Mantra

The City Council, Board, etc.

Get the Job Done Safely

✔ Remove Roadblocks

✔ Provide a Clear Path

✔ Obtain & Direct to Appropriate Resources

✔ Reduce Injuries & Liability

✔ Self Assess, Improve, Continue

Public Perception

Fire Culture

Stigma

Trust

The Union

Head Count

Trust

Liability

Funding/Budget

Fire Culture

My Own Beliefs

Fill in the blank
Leadership & Wellness: How Do We Get Our People Help?

- Wellness Adoption/Cultural Change:
  - Use Informal Leaders/Influencers for department buy-in

- All Stakeholders Participate

- Behavioral Care System in Place:
  - Peer Support (Trusted & Effective)
  - CISD/CISM
  - Time Off, Benefits Treatment Options
  - Culturally Competent EAP & Clinicians
  - Behavioral Care Helpline
  - Normalized Health & Wellness Program
    - Train on Brain Health vs Mental Health
    - Include the family
    - Maintain Awareness
Needs in First Responder Communities

Training for FR organizations
- Mental Health Symptoms
- Change in culture
- Opening the door for communication
- Designing Behavioral Health Access Systems

Internal Process Groups and Debriefs
- Critical Incident Groups
- Support for Dispatchers, too...
- Resiliency building
- Peer support

Therapists and Programs need to be proactive
- Intentional with building reputation
- Meet FR where they are
- Immerse in FR culture
Current Resources For First Responders

- Peer Support Groups
- Critical Incident Debriefings
- Culturally Competent EAPs. (III-A)
- FR (Only) PTSD & Substance Abuse Treatment
- Departmental Peer Support
- Associations
First Responder Wellness: Mind, Body, Spirit and Family

First Responder Consulting & Training:
   Behavioral Health Topics Include:
   PTSD, Resiliency, Alcohol/Substance Abuse, Mental Health, Leadership, Families, Suicide Prevention & more

   Behavioral Care Access System Development

Sage Retreats: First Responder Spouses/Partners
R&R Retreats: Peer Support Teams
Janus Retreats: Trauma & Resilience

www.shiftwellness.com
949.287.3369

First Responder (Only) Treatment
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Post Traumatic Stress | Depression | Anxiety | Alcohol and Other Substances

DETOX INPATIENT/RESIDENTIAL
INTENSIVE OUTPATIENT

IN-NETWORK WITH MOST PAYERS, INCLUDING WORKERS COMPENSATION

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