

Critical Incident Stress Management: Psychological Trauma on the Job

Tragedies such as recent examples involving the shooting of a psychologist in his home, a paramedic fighting for her life after an MVA, or the death of a police officer, reminds us that in some professions, there is a daily risk of bodily harm or even death. Many jobs also involve emotional risks due to exposure to traumatic events. In the 1980's, firefighters and paramedics began recognizing "Critical Incident Stress" as a potential hazard of the situations that they encounter in the daily performance of their duties. "A critical incident is any situation faced by (emergency service) personnel that causes them to experience unusually strong emotional reactions which have the potential to interfere with their ability to function either at the scene or later" notes national disaster expert Jeffrey Mitchell, Ph.D., EMT. This may include the death of a co-worker on the job, the death of children, mass casualty incidents, natural disasters, rape victims, or other personal traumas, which expose the individual to threats to their personal safety.

"It is important to pay attention to the emotional aspects of trauma as it relates to individuals performing their jobs whether it involves an emergency responder, an event in the schools, a bank robbery, an injury in a factory, or a natural disaster" states Jim Kendall, LCSW, Organizational Manager for the Vanderbilt University/Medical Center Work/Life Connections-EAP and Clinical Director of Tennessee Critical Incident Stress Management (a volunteer program formed in 1989 to meet the needs of the emergency responder community). "Trauma shatters our fundamental assumptions about ourselves and about the safety of our world. The use of techniques such as defusing, demobilization, or debriefings can help the worker exposed to trauma in dealing with the emotional impact of witnessing such events." Traumatic events invoke the most basic threats--that of survival notes author and psychologist Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, Ph.D. in her book Shattered Assumptions. There are occasions when we are forced to recognize the risk and real possibility of serious injury, the randomness of events, and our own mortality.

"Trauma can produce symptoms in individuals including anxiety, fears, depression, nightmares, nausea, memory loss, identification with the victim, flashbacks, fear of repetition, fatigue, and problem solving difficulties. This can be a normal response to the acute stress "adds Margie Gale, RN, MSN, EAP- Nurse Wellness Specialist." Anticipating these reactions through a psycho-educational process such as a debriefing can help reduce the intensity and longevity of stress responses. This is why counselors are made available to students after situations such as the one at Richland High in Pulaski, TN, to industry following employee injury or death on the job, to emergency workers after a line of duty death, and to rescue responders after traumas such as the Oklahoma City bombing."

Often healthcare workers in chronic illness specialties are exposed to less dramatic traumas—e.g. multiple patient deaths--which result in more prolonged levels of stress or cumulative stress, although it is not quite as intense. Paul Ragan, MD, Director of Vanderbilt University Medical Center's EAP Physician's Wellness Program, terms this "Critical Incident Strain." Sometimes acute stresses can be superimposed on chronic strain situations.

It is important to deal with the emotional responses after the physical welfare is insured. Our hearts must go out to those who, in the course of carrying out their jobs, are exposed to events that we are horrified to just read about. Dealing with the emotional impact of such events allows these workers to continue, marked by the memories of the event, yet again able to perform their duties. If you need someone to talk with about your individual concerns or if your department needs a Critical Incident Stress Management Intervention, call the Work/Life Connections-EAP at 936-1327.