



Peer and Supervisor Support may be Critical Coping Strategies

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The preliminary results of a new study show that emergency medical services (EMS) personnel believe they are much more likely to recover from traumatic critical incidents if given brief time-out periods with peers and expressions of support from supervisors.

EMS personnel are two to three times more likely than the general public to suffer from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a disorder that can cause emotional difficulties as a result of dealing regularly with traumatic calls. These difficulties often lead to increased absenteeism, a troubled family life, and increased drug and alcohol abuse.

A team of researchers from Mt. Sinai Hospital, Ryerson University, Sunnybrook-Osler Centre for Pre-Hospital Care, and the University of Toronto, presented the first-year findings of a three-year study at the recent National Association of Emergency Medical Services Physicians, in Tucson, Arizona. The study is funded by The Tema Conter Memorial Trust, an organization dedicated to better understanding the effects of Post Traumatic Stress on emergency services personnel.

Using a qualitative interview method with Toronto EMS personnel, the team found that EMS organizations may be able to facilitate employee recovery by implementing simple and straightforward administrative policies such as allowing for brief periods of downtime immediately after an incident.

"Paramedics are telling us a brief unwinding with peers is critical," says principal investigator Dr. Janice Halpern, of Mount Sinai Hospital. "A simple chance to calm down and decompress, combined with a supportive word or expression of support from a supervisor could relieve a lot of suffering."

Past studies have suggested that the commonly used Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) is not only ineffective in preventing PTSD, but potentially harmful. In those studies, a group intervention was carried out by experts days after a traumatic call or 'critical incident.' The current study aims to develop a new approach to critical incident stress, and the investigators began by interviewing the paramedics themselves.

Dr. Halpern and her co-investigators, Dr. Maria Gurevich of Ryerson University, Dr. Brian Schwartz of Sunnybrook-Osler Centre for Pre-Hospital Care, and Ms. Paulette Brazeau and Dr. Scott Bishop of the University of Toronto, believe these findings could make a tremendous difference in how interventions for coping with critical incidents are structured.

The study's initial findings have been well received by Toronto EMS personnel and administration, and they are committed to participating in the next phase of research, which will build on the initial results using a quantitative approach.

"These results point to the potentially crucial impact of early, relatively simple interventions within the workplace, relying on personnel with whom they are already familiar," added Dr. Halpern. "This makes good intuitive sense, and is well worth studying further. What they're talking about is emotional first-aid for paramedics. What could be more appropriate?"

"Many paramedics have trouble reaching out for help," explains Vince Savoia, founder and Executive Director of The Tema Conter Memorial Trust. "If research like this can help alleviate PTSD, we really are in a much better position to understand and help the EMS personnel who help so many of us."