

Post-traumatic stress disorder: How can it be prevented?

By Mike Webber, counselling psychologist

Prevention is always better than the cure

In this third part of a series on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) we examine the 'good news' of PTSD and acute stress disorder (ASD): it can, to a considerable extent, be prevented or reduced in intensity. It requires the development of resiliency in emergency services workers. Resilience is the ability to bounce back or adapt well in the face of adversity, trauma, threats or stressors. It's not some sort of superpower or extraordinary skill; it's an ordinary ability that can be developed. The development of resiliency requires a multi-dimensional approach involving both organisational and individual levels. There needs to be 'buy-in' from the fire and emergency services senior management, middle management and individual fire fighters, emergency care practitioners, police, law enforcement and traffic officers.

But the most optimistic part of this proactive, preventative approach is that we do not need to wait until staff break. When they're already angry, abusing alcohol (or worse), suffering from depression, PTSD or are dysfunctional, it represents a psychopathology that needs to be

treated and healed. This is where most employee assistance programmes (EAP) fail; they only intervene when it's too late and the person has broken and needs to be put back together but never the same as before. That's just simply too little, too late and unethical. The approach advocated in this part of the series represents a 'positive psychology', or psychofortology, literally meaning strength psychology, approach that builds on individuals' strengths and skills to move their breaking point further out. In this way risk and vulnerability are reduced.

The organisational level

There are several steps that can be taken at an organisational level, where the primary responsibility for policy implementation lies with senior management. Such measures may at some point in the future become mandatory. Section 7.9 of the draft White Paper on Fire Services circulated by the Department of Cooperative Governance for comment in March 2014 obliges fire services to take steps to implement programmes that will support and maintain the mental health of their staff. But there's no need to wait for this

draft to progress through the statutory processes; there's already an ethical and legal requirement to protect staff from injury (and PTSD is a brain injury), so fire and emergency services could just as well begin developing such programmes right away. The European Guidelines: Psychosocial Support for Uniformed Workers maintain that emergency services have a moral duty to provide some form of psychosocial care for their staff.

Steps that can be taken include:

Personnel selection

It would be nice if applicants for the emergency services could be tested and individuals at higher risk of developing PTSD could be identified but there are no psychometric instruments that can reliably do so. However, screening applicants for emergency services posts for a history of predisposing factors, such as previous trauma, history of mental illness or abuse may prove useful.

Monitoring during training

In spite of the lack of instruments to evaluate pre-trauma risk factors, there are certain personal

characteristics that may render certain individuals more prone to developing PTSD. These include attributional style, resilience, anxiety sensitivity, coping style and social support. A study carried out on newly recruited paramedics in training in the London Ambulance Service was able to identify trainees at higher risk of developing PTSD within one week of commencing their training. Whilst this may sound like a complex process, the science seems to suggest that this approach works. There's still work to be done in this regard but it's a concept that emergency services could start looking at.

Research the problem

The extent of the mental disorder problem in most South African emergency services is unknown. The prevalence and incidence of PTSD, depression and alcohol abuse is unknown because it's so well hidden, both by the individual and the organisational culture. We need data. Emergency services need to start developing research initiatives at departmental, provincial and national level to quantify the problem. However, whilst emergency services management need to be the catalysts for this investigation, it cannot be carried out by the services. It can't be an in-house 'DIY' project. The emergency services do not have the skills to do so and may not have the trust of participants to be honest and open about their mental health challenges. External mental health researchers need to carry out the enquiry to ensure confidentiality, anonymity for participants and carry out a scientifically reliable and valid analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data that emerges from the study. In this way the challenges can be quantified, made explicit and put to use in developing programmes to support staff.

Psychoeducation to develop resiliency

Education about stress, stress management, PTSD, resiliency and mental health care need to be developed and integrated into fire service training right from Fire Fighter I level with ongoing update training on a regular basis as part of any service's daily routine. Whilst there are South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA)

unit standards on stress management that are a part of over 50 NQF Level 4 and 5 qualifications, it is not registered as part of any fire service qualification. The unit standard as it currently stands is also lacking in many respects regarding specific challenges that face emergency services personnel and needs substantial revision to be of more value to emergency services. However, the point is that there is a unit standard available and could form the backbone of emergency services training on stress management.



*Meditating fire fighter
Artwork by Alexi Torres*

Offer mindfulness and meditation training

Yes, meditation. It's not some form of heathen or unGodly practice. Meditation and mindfulness practice is no longer seen as much as a Buddhist practice but is practiced in a more secular context. It's an integral part of mindful-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) and formal stress reduction programmes like the eight-week stress reduction programme developed by Prof John Kabat-Zinn at the University of Michigan Medical School. It's mainstream psychology. It's also being adopted by emergency services around the world. Police officers in Peel, Ontario, Canada, have been undergoing meditation training to develop their resilience. The Hillsboro Police Department in Oregon, USA and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police have initiated mindfulness training as a preventative intervention to assist their officers to develop their resilience. Readers that may have an interest in this approach can read more at the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Gazette at the web site listed in the references. These interventions could be developed

and implemented by departments with little effort of expenditure

Peer support programmes

Peer support programmes need to be developed and implemented as described in part 2 of this series of articles on PTSD. Psychological first aid presented by colleagues, pastoral counsellors (chaplains of various faiths) and volunteers. However, the peer counsellors need to be rigorously screened and evaluated to ensure that they possess the necessary resiliency, empathy and skills to do this type of work. A psychologist would be most useful in this screening process. They then need to be trained in an evidence-based programme, such as the Trauma Risk Debriefing Programme (TRiM) referred to in part 2 of this series on PTSD. A model to establish a peer support system is already used in Europe and is described more fully in the European Guidelines: Psychosocial Support for Uniformed Workers. Copies of this document are available free of charge or can be requested from the author.

Destigmatising PTSD and 'help-seeking behaviour'

Policies and directives should be adopted by the services to break down the stigma of needing help and seeking help. Emergency services personnel need to understand, through departmental policies, that it's safe to seek out help when one is not coping. This holds true not only for PTSD but other challenges such as depression, alcohol abuse and feeling that one is at the end of one's tether. Encourage staff in distress to seek out professional help if peer counselling isn't going to be enough.

The individual level

Every individual in all the emergency services have a duty of care towards themselves. It's not only the departments' duty. Each emergency services worker has a responsibility to take steps to develop their own resiliency. It just seems that many don't know how to. Here are some steps to improving resiliency.

Psychosocial support

Having friends and family are vital to mental health. They're a critical ►

Post-traumatic stress disorder Part 3

- ▶ part of developing resiliency as well as overcoming PTSD should one be unfortunate enough to develop it. Engaging with family and friends produces oxytocin (the 'cuddle hormone') in the right fronto-orbital part of the brain and engenders a sense of well-being. Accept the care and support that good friends and family that care about you.

Make friends outside the emergency services. I know and understand that historically emergency services workers have socialised within their services due to the constraints of shift work and the sense of family and community that exists within these services but it's not altogether healthy. Continual contact with colleagues at work, living together and then socialising together restricts opportunities for new friends and can lead to tensions, mistrust and even conflict. It also reinforces the identity or persona of being an emergency services worker. It defines one's personality but it's an impoverished personality. Make some friends outside the emergency services. Who are you when you take the uniform, protective gear or rank markings off? Realise that you're much more than a fire fighter, paramedic or police officer. Find out who you are apart from this fire fighter/paramedic/police officer person and you can do this with friends from outside the emergency services. Learn about yourself, discover who you are and celebrate who you are;

Develop your sense of identity

Develop a positive view and sense of yourself. Go back and re-read the above section.

Remind yourself why you're in the emergency services

Remind yourself of what value you bring to your town or city. Remind yourself that being an emergency services member isn't just about the job or getting paid at month end; it's a calling and it takes a special type of person to do it. It's a dirty job but communities absolutely have to have people like you. Take pride in what you do and remind yourself of that

through a sense of pride and positive self-talk or self-affirmation.

Defuse stress

Stress is part of everyday life. Life will always hold challenges. But take time to defuse stress. Take up a hobby such as model-building, craftwork, woodwork, drawing, music, tai chi, build a remote control aircraft, gardening, glass art, learn to fly a kite, photography, astronomy, stargazing, etc; start a sport even if its walking, cycling or running around the block, bowls, archery, fishing, swimming, golf, hiking, surfing, yoga, Pilates or whatever suits your interests or engage in recreational activities like walks in the veld or on a beach, take a drive, go out and have a cup of coffee or anything that will get you out. Within your means. Be wary of expensive toys like 4x4s that can be fun but burn a hole in your pocket and add to your stress levels. Living within your means reduces stress.

But be wary of addictive behaviours. Whilst gambling, on-line gaming, computer games or even shopping may seem like healthy distractions, they tend to become addictive and an escape from reality. When they start to impact negatively on your social functioning, family life and suck up too much time, they're a problem behaviour.

And meditate (again)

The district police chief in Surat, Gujarat and who is responsible for over 3 500 police officers, strongly encourages his officers to meditate to both defuse stress and improve their performance at work]. There's no reason to wait on your department to implement a mindfulness and meditation programme. Find a meditation class or group in your town or neighbourhood. There are a lot of them out there. Practice mindfulness and meditation to reduce stress, develop patience, reduce anger and develop better emotional self-regulation.

Find a stress management course in your area. There are many stress management courses in most

major centres. Some might even be covered by medical aid if you're diagnosed with anxiety.

Participate in religious or cultural practices

Whilst running a stress reduction seminar for recruit fire fighters at the East London Fire Station during 2004, one of the trainees was kind enough to share with me how he, within his culture, defused stress. When a member of his extended family was experiencing some form of significant distress, which in his case could be work-related stress or a traumatic incident, the extended family would draw together and participate in an indigenous religious ceremony that held a deep meaning for them. In this way he felt part of a close-knit community and experienced spiritual healing.

This doesn't only hold true for indigenous religious and cultural practice. It doesn't matter if one is Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist. There's a large body of research evidence that indicates that there is a strong positive association between faith and spirituality and improved resiliency and physical health. People with some sort of faith also tend to fare better than those without a faith-based belief in the treatment of many illnesses, including cancer, gastro-intestinal disorders and PTSD.

Avoid information overload

Television, tablets, smart phones, internet and social media are addictive. They also bombard one with huge amounts of useless information, information overload, most of which is negative, catastrophic and depressing. They'll seduce one into following themes, stories and trends that have no personal relevance. They then take you away from being present in the moment, take you away from healthy relationships and interfere with healthy activities.

Take a tech break. Turn all digital devices off for part of the day. Don't watch too much news. Limit social media to an

allowance of less than one hour per day. Reduce the info overload.

Avoid self-medicating

Do not attempt to use alcohol or any substance, whether over-the-counter or prescription, legal or illegal, to attempt to cope with stress and emotions. It never turns out well and then you may well end up as a candidate for substance abuse treatment somewhere down the line that only complicates the whole picture and your life, not to mention your health. It could even increase your chances of developing PTSD. This is not to suggest that this author is anti-alcohol. It needs to be consumed, if one must in moderation. The World Health Organisation guidelines stipulate two units per day for males and one unit per day for females. They're not cumulative, so one cannot 'bank' what one hasn't consumed through the week and hang one on over the weekend. Drink socially, drink responsibly and do not drink to cope with stress.

Change what you can, accept what you can't

Many people worry and stress about things that could be changed that adds to their 'stress-load'. Change them. Act decisively to change these stressors and resolve them rather than worrying about them, trying to ignore them and hope that they'll go away. Most often they won't. If your relationship is a stressor, go for marriage counselling. If your finances are a stressor, see a financial advisor or figure out a way to make a part time income. Learn to live within your means and halve your stress-load. If your weight, lifestyle, health or alcohol consumption is a worry, join a gym, see a medical practitioner, dietician or psychologist for coaching. If you're burning out, go back and re-read section about defusing stress above and do something about it.

Dear Lord, please give me the strength to change the things that I can, the Grace to accept the things that I can't and the wisdom to figure the difference between the two.

Nurture a positive self-image

Build a positive self-image, be proud of oneself and the work that you do and develop confidence in your ability to solve problems. Trust your instincts.

Do not 'catastrophise'

Do not blow things out of proportion and make a catastrophe out of a moderate event. Don't always look for drama, crises or catastrophes. Don't make mountains out of molehills. Take a step back and see things in perspective; look at the bigger picture.

Be an optimist

Even when things look bleak, try to take a broader perspective. Don't ruminate and catastrophise about a challenge or difficulty. Try to take the broader perspective and see that there are a lot of positives in your life, even in the midst of difficulties. Count your blessings. It's the power of positive thinking at work.

Learn from your past

Look back at your past and see how you dealt with previous crises, challenges and difficulties. What did you think? What did you do? Who did you reach out to for help? Who reached out to you? How did you overcome the challenge? Learn from those previous experiences.

By following the above guidance, one develops resilience and makes one more resistant to suffering from PTSD. However, in spite of the above preventative measures some workers will unfortunately go on to develop PTSD after an extremely traumatic exposure; seek professional help.

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