

PTSD

Bonus Section

What is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?

We have recognized the condition that creates a disconnect with the grief and sadness of others and called it Compassion Fatigue. There is another condition that can be a very real part of the Telecommunicator's life and that is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is an anxiety disorder that can occur after a person has been through a traumatic event. This need not be YOUR event, it could be handling a traumatic 911 call or being involved in a terrible tragedy in the agency — something horrible and scary that you see or that happens to you can affect you for a long time — and that means emotionally, mentally and physically. During this type of event, you think that life or is in danger or you are a part of the loss of a life or a potentially critical situation — regardless if it is resolved. You may feel afraid or feel that you have no control over what is happening or what will happen in the future. It matters not that you have been in similar circumstances, handled similar calls, worked on the job for 20 years or one. This event could involve a responder, a child, a family member as there is no formula as to who or why or where — but we know PTSD is the result of a person's mental result of experiencing an event or a series of events. There is no predictor but there are very clear signs that you have somehow crossed the line from OK to unhealthy.

When you learn more about this condition you can recognize it in your own work life, with peers, responders, family or callers.¹

PTSD symptoms could start soon after the traumatic event, but they may not appear until months or years later. In fact they may start after a series of difficult events — for example — call after call after call. Symptoms also may come and go over many years. If the symptoms last longer than 4 weeks, cause great distress, or interfere with work or home life, suspect PTSD. For wellness to happen agencies must take purposeful steps to ensure there is training and processes to recognize and deal with the very real consequences of PTSD — loss of health, loss of ability to do good work or even loss of the job.

There are four types of symptoms: reliving the event, avoidance, numbing, and feeling keyed up.

Reliving:

- Bad memories of the traumatic event can come back at any time. For example a certain type of call may trigger the stress felt when the event took place. There may be nightmares. The person may feel like they are going through the event again or fear going through it again when going to work. This is called a flashback. Sometimes there is a trigger: a sound or sight that causes him or her to relive the event. Or this could be simply a thought.

Avoiding:

The person may try to avoid situations or people that trigger memories of the traumatic event. The person may even avoid talking or thinking about the event. As you can imagine, this would certainly affect the work.

- Avoiding call taking, avoiding radio dispatching, avoiding certain agencies, avoiding working with certain people
- Avoiding working a certain shift, a holiday, a date.
- Refusing or missing CISD on the event
- Refusing to talk about the event or watch any news or follow up.

¹ This information is from the National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorders.

Feeling numb:

He or she may find it hard to express feelings. This is another way to avoid memories.

- The person may increase negativity, complaining about people and not show positive or loving feelings toward other people and may stay away from relationships, gatherings or complain about fun events.
- He or she may not do activities once enjoyed or quit previous outside things like fairs or community events
- They may forget about parts of the traumatic event or not be able to talk about them.

Feeling keyed up (also called hyperarousal):

May be jittery, or always alert and on the lookout for danger. This is known as hyperarousal. It can cause:

- Suddenly become angry or irritable
- Have a hard time sleeping
- Have trouble concentrating
- Fear for safety and always feel on guard
- Be very startled when someone surprises

What are other common problems?

People with PTSD may also have other problems. These include:

- Drinking or drug problems
- Feelings of hopelessness, shame, or despair
- Employment problems
- Relationships problems including divorce and violence
- Physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach ache, weight loss or gain

Arizona State Trooper Wins Precedent-Setting Court Case on PTSD Claim

An Arizona state trooper has won a precedent-setting court case that affects police officers, firefighters, and other emergency services workers throughout the United States.

On January 20, 2000, Department of Public Safety Officer David D. Mogel killed a shotgun-toting car thief wanted for bank robbery after the suspect attempted to shoot him.

Because of the trauma in taking a human life, Mr. Mogel was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and could no longer function as a police officer. When he applied for Workers' Compensation benefits, he was denied. The Arizona Department of Public Safety and Workers' Compensation (State of Arizona, DOA Risk Management) claimed that shooting suspects was part of the job, and not an "unexpected" event as required by Arizona law.

Mr. Mogel's attorney, Robert E. Wisniewski, says, "The state raised the defense that working in police work everyday was not a substantial contributing cause of my client's post traumatic stress disorder because police are exposed to such hazards everyday so that is routine."

PTSD BONUS SECTION

In her Findings and Award of December 19, 2002 awarding Mr. Mogel Workers' Compensation benefits, Administrative Law Judge Karen Calderon states, "I find that shooting and killing another human being in the line of duty is an extraordinary stress related to the employment."

The implications of this decision are far-reaching. A police officer's claim of PTSD has not won a court case in Arizona before, and rarely succeeds in other jurisdictions. Mr. Wisniewski says, "This case made a great difference in establishing that post traumatic stress disorder is a cognizable claim for a police officer involved in such a life threatening event."

If Mr. Mogel had lost his case, the decision may have prevented not only police officers, but also firefighters and other emergency workers from collecting Workers' Compensation benefits if injured psychologically on the job.

5 Steps for Helping CF or PTSD

In the event you feel or you believe someone may be heading for one of these conditions, here are some helpers.

1. Let Go

Strive for Realistic Control. Talk about the feelings of loss of control. Discourage the person from trying to achieve an absolute sense of control of his or her external environment – it doesn't work. The Serenity Prayer is relevant here:

Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.

2. SOS

Seek Out Support. Encourage the person to find sources of support when you recognize signs.

As a leader for your agency make sure you know the supportive/nurturing resources available at home, at work, through church, with friends — in person, over the phone, on the Internet; is there an online or offline support group available?

Create a WHERE TO TURN booklet.

3. Take Steps

Take Some Action Steps. Encourage the person to focus on two or three actions steps that would help the individual feel a small but significant degree of enhanced feelings of effectiveness. For example – play a tape of someone who saved a life at 9-1-1.

Example of a SAVE.

4. Don't Be A Counselor

Explore the Need for Counseling. Let people know about the counseling option. If in the next few weeks the person feels stuck in one of the grief stages or the post-traumatic or compassion fatigue symptoms are not subsiding, professional guidance can be suggested (or in some agencies required).

Listening is not counseling. If listening seems to result in zero relief, more is needed.

5. This Too Shall Pass

Communicate Optimism. Reaffirm that post-traumatic stress and compassion fatigue are natural. Also make sure the person knows that to do this work, they must be at peak performance.

Reassure the 'this too shall pass' with support and action. Remind the person that crisis can heighten a person's problem solving capacity, enhance a person's circle of support.

PTSD self-quiz

Have you experienced, witnessed or learned of an extremely traumatic event, events, call or dispatch that seemed to affect you more than usual?

After the traumatic event:

o Did you avoid being reminded of the experience by staying away from certain places, people, or activities?

- o Did you ever avoid a particular console, radio, day or work for fear of a similar event?
- o Did you lose interest in workplace activities that were once important or enjoyable?
- o Did you begin to feel more isolated or distant from other people?
- o Do you avoid social events at work?
- o Did you find it hard to have love or affection for other people?
- o Are you negative about others more now?
- o Did you begin to feel you don't want to go to work on certain days?
- o Did you have more trouble than usual falling asleep or staying asleep?
- o Did you become jumpy or get easily stressed by ordinary noises or movements?
- o Do certain calls bother you more than others, do you try to avoid handling certain calls?

If you have experienced trauma and has answered 'yes' to some of these questions, discuss them with your supervisor and possibly a doctor.