

Before the Fall: Support First Responders with Mental Health Crises

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Introduction/Background

First responders (FRs) face a variety of hazards and trauma on any given day. A 2008 study of Mental Health (MH) and suicide showed that police officers and firefighters are more likely to die from suicide than from a work-related incident (Heyman et al., 2018). Increases in MH issues, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and rates of suicide have prompted research into what FRs need to maintain good MH (Joyce et al., 2019).

Support and resources for the mental health well-being of first responders have been in practice for many years. Continual improvement by FR organizations is required if the de-stigmatization of those seeking support is to be achieved. The purpose of the research study is to determine if there are adequate resources for first responders in mental health crisis and to determine how we can improve the resources. The information gathered regarding mental health crisis and resource availability will be utilized to support further research on this topic. We need to minimize avoidable deaths, mental health crisis incidents and the social consequences in these professions.

Methods

The research studies selection process includes specific criteria essential to identifying what resources are currently available to address mental health crises for FRs. Selection of the studies were accomplished by first, examining all titles and abstracts, then reviewing the remaining content to identify key information that supports the research question. Some of the main inclusion criteria were: studies conducted after 2010, peer-reviewed literature, research-based on statistical data or surveys, subject matter that focused on first responders, prevention, assessment, treatment, stigma(s), peer support, exercise, training and resilience.

Results/Discussion

Overall, the studies evaluated in this paper provided a positive scope of results in studies of pre-emptive resilience building and harm reduction programming. As for deficiencies, there is a need for more understanding and funding from leaders in both legislative and departmental oversight, so that resources that FRs truly need and require can be provided.

FRs such as police, firefighters and paramedics are exposed to potentially traumatic stressors as expected variables of their occupations (Rudieger, 2021). These exposures are unavoidable due to the nature of responding to emergencies linked to psychological distress, which many frontline workers experience on a daily basis (Joyce et al., 2019). Increases in MH issues, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and rates of suicide have prompted research into what FRs need to maintain good MH (Joyce et al., 2019).

Conclusions/Recommendations

From analysis of the research, further research into the elements of an effective FR MH program and training is needed. While programs such as The Working Mind (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2022), Here For My Peer (Horan, K. et al., 2021), and the online delivered Mental Health First Aid (Chowdhary et al., 2019) education programs have shown to be effective ways that agencies can support their FRs. The high rates of PTSD, self-harming behaviours and trauma induced stresses support the need for further research.

Education and training both for FRs and for their organizations is critical to the success of the implementation of these programs. Further research into and more funding of program development based on research and study results is required. For FR agencies to address stigma appropriately, there should be a collective sense of security, where FRs feel as though they can disclose the issues they are experiencing, without fear of repercussions to their personal lives and/or career. From analysis of the study, further research into the elements of an effective FR MH program and training is required.

The benefits of exercise are positive in most applications and could be seen as an appropriate method of resiliency and recovery for FRs. A key takeaway from the studies reviewed are the benefits of exercise as a key component of maintaining a FRs mental health fitness. This would be an excellent initiative for FRs because it not only benefits psychological health, but also physical health, which in turn would inherently improve work performance.

References

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