

## Before the Fall: Support First Responders in Mental Health Crises

First responders (FRs) face a variety of hazards and trauma on any given day. The impacts of regular exposure to fatal accidents, burn victims, drug overdoses, suicides, murder etc., can take a toll on an individual's well-being and mental health. A 2008 study of mental health (MH) and suicide identified that police officers and firefighters are more likely to die from suicide than from a work-related incident (Heyman, 2018). 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 need to be at the forefront of research to better understand what FRs need to maintain good MH (Joyce et al., 2019).

Support and resources for the mental health well-being of FRs 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.

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, MH apps and resilience.

The topic of MH crises facing FRs is a challenging one, as there is no clear or simple answer to how to solve this issue. Psychological issues for an individual can vary greatly. However, MH is an extremely important aspect of being a FR and must be looked at in-depth in order to maintain a strong workforce for community safety. The positive response from programs focused on peer support, reducing social stigma and encouraging help-seeking are clear from the research analyzed. Gaps still exist that stem from a lack of comprehensive research on the subject matter, thus making the need for further qualitative and quantitative analyses to take place. An evidence and research driven approach could effectively assist FR's in addressing MH crisis.

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## Structured Abstract

**Introduction:** First responders (FRs) face a variety of hazards and trauma on any given day. Regular exposure to these kinds of events such as fatal accidents, burn victims, drug overdoses, suicides, murder etc., can take a toll on an individual's well-being and mental health (MH).

The barriers that affect our FRs who demonstrate bravery and dedication must be brought to the attention of all. These FRs experience traumatic and tragic events as part of their occupations. However, public discourse seldom acknowledges the fact that FRs witness tragedy and traumatic events regularly, if not daily. Constant exposure to death and destruction exerts a toll on the MH of FRs, and yet many do not disclose mental health issues, nor do they access treatment due to the stigmas associated in doing so. Critical studies such as these must ultimately be communicated decisively and implemented departmentally by those in leadership, in leadership authority, leadership education and interdepartmentally.

This research study seeks to raise awareness about the issue of mental health among FRs in order to alleviate stigma and facilitate access to resources.

**Methods:** This research study review selection process includes specific criteria essential to identifying what resources are currently available to address MH crises for FRs. Selection of the studies were accomplished by first, search published studies, 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, MH apps and resilience.

**Results/Findings:** Overall, the data evaluated in this study 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.

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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).

**Recommendations:** This research study illuminates the need to prioritize recognition, resources and treatments of MH issues caused from FRs exposure to trauma(s).

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. The research findings of Smith. et al., 2021, suggest holistic approaches to supporting MH for FRs that encourage organizations to reach-in, rather than placing the full onus of seeking help on the FR. This also supports the idea of the peer-support initiative. A top down supportive culture encouraging open lines of communication for FRs to discuss the stresses associated with their occupations may assist in the management and support for FRs MH in a more proactive manner.

From analysis of the research, further study into the elements of an effective FR MH program or 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. With the high rates of PTSD, self-harming behaviours and trauma induced stresses due to the professions, there is a further need for research into these support areas.

Advancement of technology and accessibility of computers and mobile phones has led to the devices becoming extremely effective communication platforms for service delivery. The utilization of technology provides convenient alternatives to traditional face-to-face interactions.

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