


Promoting Mental Health Among First Responders

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Article Info

Article type:

Letter to Chief Editor

How to cite this article:

Qiu, H. (2024). Promoting Mental Health Among First Responders. *KMAN Counseling and Psychology Nexus*, 2(2), 1-3.

<http://doi.org/10.61838/kman.psynexus.2.2.1>



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ABSTRACT

First responders, including emergency medical service (EMS) personnel, firefighters, police officers, and rescue workers, are frequently exposed to traumatic events and high-stress situations. Work-Life Balance Initiatives: Encouraging work-life balance through organizational policies can help mitigate stress and prevent burnout. Flexible scheduling, adequate rest periods, and access to recreational activities are essential components. First responders perform a crucial role in society, often at great personal cost to their mental health. Addressing their psychological needs through comprehensive support systems, resilience training, and structured debriefing can enhance their well-being and effectiveness. As the challenges facing first responders continue to evolve, it is vital to prioritize their mental health, ensuring they receive the care and support they need to continue their invaluable work.

Keywords: *Psychology, Mental Health, First Responders.*

First responders, including emergency medical service (EMS) personnel, firefighters, police officers, and rescue workers, are frequently exposed to traumatic events and high-stress situations. This exposure often leads to significant psychological strain, contributing to a range of mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and burnout (Soravia et al., 2021). As these individuals are vital to public safety and health, it is imperative to address their mental health needs comprehensively.

The nature of first responders' work inherently involves regular exposure to trauma and crisis situations, which

places them at a high risk for developing mental health disorders. Research by Schwab (2020) indicates that PTSD symptoms vary among different types of first responders, with ambulance personnel and firefighters reporting particularly high levels of distress (Schwab, 2020). This is supported by Soravia et al. (2021), who found that PTSD symptoms are prevalent among police officers, firefighters, and EMS personnel, necessitating targeted interventions (Soravia et al., 2021).

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the mental health challenges faced by first responders. Liu, Zhou, and Chen (2022) highlight that medical staff, including EMS personnel, experienced heightened levels of

stress and anxiety during the pandemic due to increased workload and the fear of virus transmission (Liu et al., 2022). The study by Laukkala et al. (2021) further reveals that the psychological well-being of hospital personnel, including those working in emergency settings, significantly declined during the pandemic, with lasting effects observed in follow-up assessments (Laukkala et al., 2021).

Resilience plays a crucial role in mitigating the psychological impact of trauma on first responders. According to Cao et al. (2023), resilience can significantly influence the mental health outcomes of military personnel during crises, with coping styles and regulatory focus being key factors. This finding is relevant to first responders, suggesting that enhancing resilience through appropriate coping strategies can be beneficial (Cao et al., 2023).

Ebrahimian et al. (2021) explored the effect of psychological hotwash, a debriefing method, on the resilience of EMS personnel. Their results indicate that such interventions can bolster resilience, highlighting the importance of structured psychological support systems (Ebrahimian et al., 2021). Similarly, the work of Hastuti, Noerhidayati, and Warsiyah (2022) emphasizes the role of psychological support in controlling anxiety among medical personnel during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hastuti et al., 2022).

Psychological support and debriefing are critical components of mental health care for first responders. O'Toole and Eppich (2021) advocate for appropriate psychological debriefing, noting that it can provide significant benefits when conducted correctly. This process allows first responders to process traumatic experiences and reduce the likelihood of long-term psychological distress (O'Toole & Eppich, 2021).

In addition to debriefing, ongoing psychological support is essential. Vogel et al. (2004) describe a collaborative effort between a psychiatry department and an EMS center to support EMS workers and their families after terrorist attacks. This collaboration proved effective in addressing immediate and long-term mental health needs, demonstrating the value of integrated support systems (Vogel et al., 2004).

The stress associated with first responder duties can lead to occupational burnout, which negatively impacts both mental and physical health. Witczak-Błoszyk et al. (2022) examined the relationship between work-related suicide exposure, occupational burnout, and coping in EMS personnel in Poland. Their findings underscore the importance of developing effective coping strategies to

mitigate burnout and its adverse effects (Witczak-Błoszyk et al., 2022).

Presenteeism, or the act of attending work while unwell, can exacerbate psychological distress among EMS personnel. Liao et al. (2023) identified presenteeism as a mediator between PTSD and psychological detachment in EMS workers, suggesting that addressing presenteeism through appropriate mental health interventions could improve overall well-being (Liao et al., 2023).

To effectively promote mental health among first responders, several strategies should be implemented:

Enhanced Screening and Assessment: Regular mental health screenings, using tools such as the MMPI-2, can help identify at-risk individuals early (Butcher et al., 2006). This allows for timely intervention and support.

Resilience Training: Programs designed to enhance resilience, such as those focusing on coping styles and regulatory focus, should be integrated into training for first responders (Cao et al., 2023).

Structured Debriefing and Psychological Support: Implementing structured psychological debriefing sessions and ongoing support mechanisms can significantly reduce the risk of PTSD and other mental health issues (O'Toole & Eppich, 2021; Vogel et al., 2004).

Peer Support Programs: Establishing peer support networks can provide first responders with a platform to share experiences and receive emotional support from colleagues who understand their unique challenges (Witczak-Błoszyk et al., 2022).

Work-Life Balance Initiatives: Encouraging work-life balance through organizational policies can help mitigate stress and prevent burnout. Flexible scheduling, adequate rest periods, and access to recreational activities are essential components.

First responders perform a crucial role in society, often at great personal cost to their mental health. Addressing their psychological needs through comprehensive support systems, resilience training, and structured debriefing can enhance their well-being and effectiveness. As the challenges facing first responders continue to evolve, it is vital to prioritize their mental health, ensuring they receive the care and support they need to continue their invaluable work.

Authors' Contributions

Not applicable.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Not applicable.

Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

Declaration of Interest

The author reports no conflict of interest.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

Ethical Considerations

Not applicable.

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