



# Supporting Mental Health in First Responders:

## Staying Emotionally Healthy

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## The Nature of the Job

Public safety personnel (PSP; e.g., correctional workers, firefighters, paramedics, and police officers) are regularly exposed to potentially psychologically traumatic events (PPTE; Carleton et al., 2019). PPTE are experiences that have the potential to cause psychological harm to an individual and include events like major car accidents, sudden deaths, and suicides (Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research and Treatment [CIPSRT], 2019). PSP are able to do their jobs while attending to PPTE with little emotional response due to training and experience (Sanquist et al., 2016). Training teaches the analytical part of the mind to suppress the body's natural emotional responses while at work. PSP work under a command structure where personal decision making is restricted by industry protocols and guidelines (see Sanquist et al., 2016 for a review). Training with this structure creates dependable, logic-based behaviour that trumps personal thoughts and actions in the face of extreme circumstances. In other words, PSP are trained to respond instinctively with calm and rational behaviour during stressful events (Sanquist et al., 2016).

## How the Brain Constructs an Emotional Barrier

The brain's limbic system largely governs emotions, behaviours, and long-term memory (Rajmohan & Mohandas, 2007). In reaction to stress and anxiety, the limbic system is programmed to respond in one of three ways: fight, flight, or freeze (Rajmohan & Mohandas, 2007). These responses have been integral to the survival of the human species – but they are simply not options for PSP attending to emergency situations. PSP are trained to remain calm, essentially suppressing the limbic system, during PPTE so that emotional and behavioural patterns can follow predictable paths (Sanquist et al., 2016). Training makes it possible for PSP to place personal feelings, beliefs, and reactions on hold when they encounter PPTE. In these moments, the needs of the people PSP are trying to help supersede their own physical and emotional needs. This demonstrates how effectively their well-trained analytical mind can override their natural emotional and behavioural reactions to a PPTE.

## When to Seek Help From a Professional Mental Health Care Provider

PPTE affect everyone differently. Sometimes PSP are able to bounce back after a PPTE with no issues. Other times they may require extra support to work through the PPTE and return to feeling like themselves again. PSP should consider seeking help from a professional mental health care provider if they are experiencing any of the following (Mayo Clinic, 2019):

- Difficulty sleeping, including frequent nightmares or night terrors
- Unwanted thoughts or feelings that affect concentration
- Flashbacks
- Chronic fatigue
- Loss of interest in usually enjoyable activities
- Irritability towards others
- Addiction, such as to alcohol, drugs, or gambling
- Self-isolating behaviours, including a lack of interest in social connectedness

Please note that this material is not intended to replace the professional care of a therapist or physician. 1

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- Frequent feelings of hopelessness, shame, or guilt
- Compulsion to work excessively at the expense of important relationships

PSP who are concerned about their mental health but not ready to take the step to see a mental health professional face-to-face, can complete an online, anonymous self-assessment through the CIPSRT website (<https://ax1.cipsrt-icrtsp.ca/>).

## Investing in Mental Health

To help mitigate the effects of PPTE, it's important for PSP recognize that their jobs are emotionally taxing and that the emotions they experience on the job require processing. If PSP do not process their emotions, but instead suppress them, their mental health could be put at risk (Gross, 2002). Suppressing emotions does not actually decrease the emotional experience, has been shown to impair memory, and can increase physiological responses in PSP and their spouses/partners (Gross, 2002). Taking the time to invest in one's mental health can help mitigate these risks. Integrating self-care activities, participating in regular exercise, writing/journaling about emotions, and seeking professional mental health care are all options to help improve emotional processing (Wild et al., 2020).

## Techniques for Building Emotional Resiliency

Mindfulness practice has recently garnered more attention from researchers as a way to build resilience, reduce stress, and improve mental health outcomes (Bergman et al., 2016; Fitzhugh et al., 2019). Mindfulness is a practice in which people bring their attention to the present moment, focusing on what is around them and occurring in that specific time and space (Fitzhugh et al., 2019). Keeping up with a variety of mindfulness activities is especially important for PSP who resist accessing professional mental health services. There are a number of different activities PSP can engage in to foster mindfulness (Christopher et al., 2016; Fitzhugh et al., 2019):

- Breathing exercises
- Physical activity
- Structured mindfulness programs (e.g., <https://positivepsychology.com/mindfulness-apps/>)
- Spending time in nature
- Physical healing – massage therapy, yoga
- Spirituality – engaging in a faith community, meditation

For more information about mindfulness practice, check out these resources:

<https://www.tenpercent.com/podcast>

<https://www.mindful.org/meditation/mindfulness-getting-started/>

<https://positivepsychology.com/mindfulness-exercises-techniques-activities/>

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