

# EMPATHY IN FIRST RESPONDERS



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# LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1

1. Identify evidence-based practices for preventing and addressing trauma in first responders.

2

2. Identify benefits and challenges of empathy training for first responders.

3

3. Practice three new tools for trauma prevention and resiliency.

Empathy alone is not the cure for stress and trauma in first responders

## THOUGHTS?

- What does empathy look like specifically for first responders?
  - Other-directedness
  - Lack of strong personal boundaries
  - Unresolved past pain and trauma
  - Over-developed sense of responsibility
  - Impulse to rescue anyone in need (Lamplugh, 2021)

- What is “command presence” (Wyllie, 2017)?
- Why do people think empathy may be the solution?

# WHAT IS TRAUMA IN A FIRST RESPONDER?

- **Stress:** The belief that what is required of you in a situation exceeds the resources you believe you have.
- **Burnout:** prolonged exposure to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job resulting in exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy.
- **Vicarious Trauma/Secondary Traumatic Stress:** being repeatedly exposed to other people's traumas resulting in emotional duress and symptoms of stress similar to those who actually experienced the trauma.

# WHAT IS TRAUMA IN A FIRST RESPONDER?

**Compassion fatigue:** Burnout + Secondary traumatic stress – a state of physical and mental exhaustion caused by a depleted ability to cope with one's everyday environment.

**Posttraumatic stress:** symptoms consistent with posttraumatic stress disorder but not meeting the necessary time requirements

## WHAT IS TRAUMA IN A FIRST RESPONDER?

- **Post-traumatic stress disorder:** a disorder resulting from exposure to a traumatic event that involves symptoms lasting longer than 30 days.
- **Depression:** most common- extreme fatigue, loss of enthusiasm, feelings of guilt and hopelessness; in addition to prolonged loss of appetite, trouble concentrating and lapses in memory, suicidal thoughts, irritability, less interest in hobbies, and frequent headaches and trouble sleeping through the night



# EMPATHY IN FIRST RESPONDERS

Why is it important?

- ⌘ Empathy increases the amount and quality of information gained from suspects in investigative interviews (Baker-Eck & Bull, 2022).
- ⌘ Empathy can help de-escalate a crisis (Childs, 2022).
- ⌘ Empathy builds trust (Childs, 2022).

# WHAT IS EMPATHY? (BARISO, 2020)

**Empathy:** the ability to understand and share the feelings of another

**Sympathy:** A feeling of pity or sorrow

**Cognitive empathy:** Imagining what the person is going through

**Emotional empathy:** Sharing feelings/emotional connection

**Compassionate empathy:** Moved to action

# BENEFITS OF EMPATHY



Allows us to respond appropriately and compassionately in difficult situations



Promotes helping behaviors



Helps us connect to one another



Assists in the ability to anticipate the needs of others

## CHALLENGES OF EMPATHY

Victims often report being additionally traumatized by their interactions with first responders immediately following a traumatic event due to lack of empathy

First responders with higher levels of empathy indicate a higher level of mental health distress and stress reactions.

# CHALLENGES OF EMPATHY

Female first responders with higher levels of empathy are at greater risk for posttraumatic stress symptoms and posttraumatic stress disorder when exposed to community violence (Beagley et. al., 2018).

What other challenges come to mind?

# SO NOW WHAT DO WE DO???

- When empathy is taught without the accompanying skills to deal with that added emotional work, stress, anger, burnout, compassion fatigue, and depression increases (Cocker & Joss, 2016).
- Romosiou, Brouzos, & Vassilopoulos (2019) recommend utilizing a training program for first responders that doesn't just focus on empathy, but also addresses skills of emotional intelligence, stress management and resiliency.

# CONTINUED



Emotional intelligence and stress management skills can assist first responders in identifying exactly what they're feeling so they can then decide which stress management tools would be most beneficial in that situation.



Being able to bounce back after difficult callouts and situations is the very definition of **resilience**.

# SOLUTIONS

1

## **Stress Management:**

a set of skills that help us  
navigate stress and  
problem-solve solutions  
for stress reduction

2

## **Resilience:**

the capacity to recovery  
from difficulties, spring  
back into shape

3

## **Emotional Intelligence:**

the ability to perceive,  
manage, and regulate  
emotions



# EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

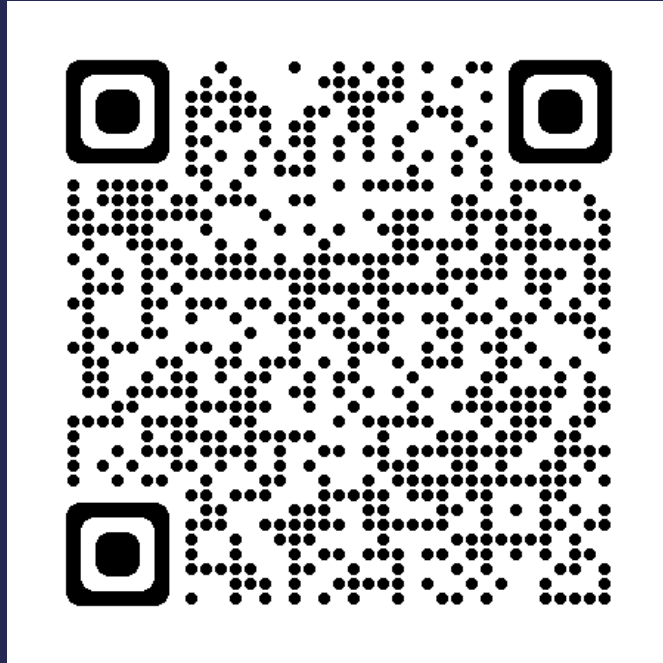


EMOTIONAL  
INTELLIGENCE QUIZ



EMOTIONAL  
INTELLIGENCE VIDEO

# HOW EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENT ARE YOU?



What additional skills need to be added to  
make empathy effective?

# TOOLS FOR TRAUMA PREVENTION AND RESILIENCY

- Transitions from critical incidents to work, and from work to home
- Tetris to prevent replaying the situation over and over in your mind (Conn, 2018)
- Relaxed body/Progressive Muscle Relaxation

# TOOLS FOR TRAUMA PREVENTION AND RESILIENCY

- Maintaining hobbies and activities/relationships outside of work
- Activities that are opposite of typical daily tasks
- [Resilience Strategies - IACP](#)

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