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# Addressing & Preventing PTSD in Civilian Emergency Services

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# **Addressing & Preventing PTSD in Civilian Emergency Services. Window to the Soul**

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The face and eyes of police and first responders provide a window into the internal world of thoughts and feelings. When exposed to danger, adversity or traumatic events, they learn to cope, over time, by presenting a mask of calmness, strength, and resiliency.

The event that has summoned the officer requires them to take charge and bring order to disorder. They confront danger and endure each event as a silent witness to yet a more human tragedy. No tears will fall, and no emotions are seen. The Officer's physiological and psychological systems quickly acquire probable responses as anticipation, decisions and actions are acquired. Over time, the accumulated adverse effect of these encounters takes a toll on the individual's emotional and psychological well-being.

The effects of accumulating stress and adversity intensify until the organization steps in to correct the individual's behavior. At that point, proactive steps may be replaced with discipline and imposed sanctions.

Available prevention programs provide a positive approach to long-term employee health and well-being. As with body protection gear and devices, the internal emotional and psychological aspects of humanity require safeguarding as well.

## **1. Steps to Reduce and Prevent Negative Outcomes<sup>1</sup>.**

The following information is an excerpt from Lumb's book listed below.

What can be done to address stress and adversity that are encountered by an organization's employees? Dependence on individual discipline or strict adherence to policy does not always provide the best outcome when discovering a problem. There are current methods in use, and they include:

A. Training and professional development. Not often required of every employee are topics areas that help an individual understand how stress and adversity can impact job performance. They include:

1. Living a healthy lifestyle
2. Health-related oversight programs

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<sup>1</sup> Lumb, R. (2014). The Silent Killer of Police and First Responders: Building Endurance to Manage the Effects of Accumulated Stress, Adversity & Trauma. ISBN-10: 1492114618

3. Duty related warning signs of stress
4. Intervention and follow-up to traumatic events
5. Warning systems that alert when pressure is present
6. Accountability to duty as a tool to manage oneself
7. Learning resilience to moderate stress, adversity, and trauma
8. Steps to address employee needs and reduce the impact of stress

B. Supervisor Responsibility to Address Performance Manifestations.

1. What is the key focus and why it must change?
2. Knowledge in observing, identifying and addressing dysfunction.
3. Overseeing the individual with a problem.
  - a) Recognition that an issue exists and that action is necessary.
  - b) The first contact with the individual is needed and the the manner in which the discussion initiated must be with care and sensitivity to the individual.
  - c) Establishing communications; do so in person and at the time that is convenient to the individual.
  - d) Fact finding is critical as all relevant information must be known and applied to the decision. Do not gloss over or hope you have it right. Be sure.
  - E) Establishing a plan and eliciting compliance is done with the individual and should not occur without collaboration between supervisor and employee. No buy-in will be achieved if the person you are working with feels isolated.
  - f) Developing a plan leads to implementation. This stage is critical and must include a timeframe for all parties involved.
  - g) Monitor and coach and do not think that once a plan is Implemented that it will work as designed. Collect Information and pay attention. Keep your communications with the individual at the forefront.

h) The path to Wellness is fraught with speed bumps.  
Work to minimize them.

i) Once the change effort is over, prevent slippage and encourage growth.

## 2. Aspects of Durability:

Individual endurance consists of numerous skills and abilities that a person can use as strategies to assist in recovering from stress, adversity or trauma. Understanding what endurance is enables us to build a reservoir of strengths that we can draw on when faced with a situation that's hard, stressful and requires personal fortitude and endurance. Endurance can be described as the measure of a person's stamina or persistence.

A. The power to adapt to adversity.

- When everything around you is in chaos, you can see clearly and assess the situation, leading to decisions that are appropriate and provide a safer position, which eventually points the way to recovery.
- You understand that a return to normal that was present before the event is probably not possible. However, you are determined to overcome the issues, determine next steps, and make the necessary changes.

B. To manage stress, grief, and adversity.

- When others are fleeing or hunkering down, withdrawn and not accepting that an incident has happened, you begin an assessment to understand what has happened and what can be done to move forward.
- While experiencing worry and concern, you continue to function and to map out positive changes.

C. To return in a planned way to renewed personal balance, productivity, and well-being in life.

- Realizing that there are no guarantees in life, you accept that personal balance is a matter of vision and reality allowing you adapt to the current situation and move forward.
- Forging a plan that addresses the significant barriers allows the individual to find balance in what must be done and reduces a confused and unproductive effort.

D. To reduce negativity, anger and other maladies that disrupts normal life.

- One of the first steps is to recognize that ailments are present and to acknowledge they are not normal and can be combated.

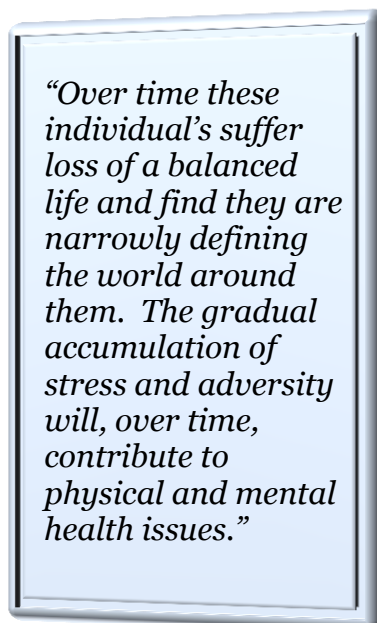
- The second step is to determine what can be done to change things, turn them around and begin recovery.

E. Promotes regaining control of your life as it relates to family, friends, work, community and other commitments.

- Create a new vision for yourself. Cast aside the burden you have shouldered and accept that change is possible, will happen, and set your mind to beginning that climb back to emotional and physical health.
- Include those others with whom a more balanced lifestyle is desired.
- Provide personal skills and leadership when the situation presents itself, and you can contribute.

### 3. Using Durability Techniques to Moderate Negative Outcomes

Strengthening durability, resiliency, and personal grit, include, but not solely resulting from encounters on the street. The adage “tough it out” may sound good in the locker room but it does not serve justice when the result of exposure to continuous trauma leaves the individual stressed and suffered all manner of manifestation. Police and first responders should receive training that begins in the academy that is designed to meet the needs of the individual, his or her organization, and the larger community, to address encounters with adversity, trauma, and life-changing events. Such a program specifically addresses teaching police and first responder requisite skills to manage personal, departmental and community stress inducing events.



It is no less important than other types of training to strengthen a person’s resolve and prepare them to reduce the harmful effects of job-related stress. Training provides individuals with the ability to manage stressful situations, adversity, and trauma to address issues and problems emerging without lasting adverse effects. The constant threat of danger, the potential for injury, threatening situations, death, dangerous encounters, required engagement in events that others avoid and many other stress-inducing situations, leads to various physiological, psychological and sociological issues.

The list of adverse outcomes includes frayed emotions, anger, impatience, divorce rates that are twice that of the general population, high levels of suicide, alcohol and substance abuse, high-risk lifestyle, intimacy problems, and aberrant behavior. When stress catches up, we often observe disciplinary issues occurring. Supervisors are aware that change has happened, but often do not address underlying causes resorting to the

threat, warning or discipline as treatment. Not only does the individual suffer, but it also has an equally negative impact on family, friends, and colleagues. Also, work performance diminishes. Over time these individuals suffer loss of a balanced life and find they are narrowly defining the world around them. The gradual accumulation of stress and adversity will, over time, contribute to physical and mental health issues. They include respiratory, heart, over-weight, back trouble, higher mortality cancer, anger issues, substance abuse, promiscuous behavior, high-risk taking, relationship problems, lack of humor, suspicion of people factor, and other problems. Experiencing social dysfunction, deviance, and social harm, will in time, take its toll on the individual.

Police and first responder officials additionally experience the pressure of constantly being on guard and anticipating extreme situations. For firefighters, it is the inherent danger of building or car fires with lethal chemicals, explosion, and structurally unsafe structures. Police encounters can turn violent and life-threatening with no warning. There is the constant pressure of dealing with people and issues that are difficult to resolve. Correctional officers work near inmates, whose behavior can turn deadly with little to no provocation, raising stress levels to their highest rating even when everything is seemingly calm. Emergency management, emergency medical and a host of other agency specialties have numerous examples of inherent and associated danger that over time leads to stress and related illnesses.

We are by nature resilient people, able to step up and meet adversity with courage, inner strength, and determination to resolve problems. There are times when extraordinary or persistent issues occupy our thinking, leaving us anxious, angry, frustrated, and with other accompanying emotions. A person with grit can recover from and adjust to misfortune, disaster, or undue change by drawing on internal strengths and abilities, forging a positive outlook, managing strong feelings and impulses, and ultimately solving the problem.

Capacity to manage and diminish the effects of adversity and trauma is critical to physical and mental wellness, well-being, and a balanced lifestyle. Understanding the factors of resilience and strategies for strengthening our ability to withstand extraordinary and high-risk situations results in improved life balance, ability to assist others and fulfill the expectations and obligations associated with one's job, organization and community service.

Police and first responder personnel and agencies must address the cumulative effects of encountering violence, dysfunction, catastrophic events and numerous other stress-producing incidents that are prevalent within the duties and service role of this occupational group. Resilience skills are an integral component of planning in life and used to oppose and reduce "risk factors" that threaten or endanger a person, an organization, or a community's well-being and security. The ability to withstand pressure, to react with confidence, and to effectively continue to carry out one's duties, while others are incapacitated, emerges from a person's inner resilience.

4. Fourteen Points to Strengthen Durability<sup>2</sup>:

Identify issues that are potentially harmful or distracting with strategies that might work for you.

Issue	Understanding and Awareness
<p>1. Learning skills to address stress and adversity.</p> <p>Health issues.</p>	<p>The “<b>Strengthening Durability and Personal Grit</b>” training program for police and first responders officials are designed to meet the needs of individuals, organizations, and community to address encounters with adversity, trauma, and life-changing events. This program specifically addresses teaching police and first responders’ skills to manage adversity and stress inducing events appropriately. Long-term exposure to adverse reactions and situations is harmful to physical and mental health.</p> <p>The nature of the work performed is fraught with all manner of human misery and harm. A person is capable of love and cruelty, and it is the cruel acts inflicted on others to which our first responders go and encounter deviant and inflicted harm that is sometimes difficult to reconcile. Over a period of years, we may find ourselves immune to what we witness, but it imprints in our psyche, adding to the darkness of thought and, sometimes action.</p> <p>It manifests itself with changes in our behavior. We may get angry quicker or find our tolerance to situations frayed thin. Suspicion, lack of trust, caution and a wait and watch attitude when meeting people, leads to further isolation, much of it within our heads. It is harmful and has a deleterious effect on those others who share our lives; family, work, friends, and associates.</p> <p>We can work through it, not twenty years from now, but as a parallel wellness approach to work and life. Like treating a physical illness, we must address the psychological as well as bodily harm, the two being mutually entwined and inseparable.</p>
<p>2. Self-management techniques to overcome job-related stress and trauma</p>	<p>No less important than other types of training, “Strengthening Resolve and Durability” can help reduce harmful effects of job-related stress. Training provides individuals with the ability to manage stressful situations, adversity, and trauma by overcoming issues and problems emerging without lasting negative effects. The constant threat of danger, the potential for injury, threatening situations, death, dangerous encounters, requires engagement in events that others avoid. Numerous other stress inducing situations leads to</p>

<sup>2</sup> Adapted by Lumb to this text from earlier work on the topic of resilience.

	<p>various physiological, psychological and sociological issues.</p> <p>Particularly in youth, we believe we are invincible, tough and able to survive to whatever may come our way. That is not a bad attitude, for fortitude begins within. Self-management assists with supervisor attentiveness and care. Aware that acts of inhumanity imprint on the mind and subtly shove normalcy to the side, we must also acknowledge that years of these events soon take up substantial space both consciously and subconsciously. We must not allow ourselves to move forward believing in the myth of invincibility blindly. We need to learn the many ways to help ourselves and, when necessary, to help others as well.</p>
<p>3. What we see with stressed individuals.</p>	<p>Negative emotions, anger, impatience, divorce rates that are twice that of the general population, high rate of suicide, alcohol, and substance abuse, high-risk lifestyle, intimacy problems, and aberrant behavior top the list of negative symptoms. This exposure has an adverse impact on family, friends and colleagues and impacts work performance. Durability training provides tools that assist individuals in finding balance in their lives.</p> <p>If our employee, peer or colleague will not accept that changes are happening, what to do about it? We wait for their return and hope for the best, usually saying, “Ole Paul, give him some time and he will be okay!” Perhaps or perhaps not!</p> <p>It is not easy to step up to the plate and confront an employee, friend or colleague, but it is preferable to ignoring the situation until the meltdown occurs or the individual finally does something to hurtle him or herself over the cliff. Suggestions and methods to approach and assist someone are available. Reference is made to an earlier published resource for this purpose: Breazeale, R., &amp; Lumb, R. (2013), <i>Building Resilience: Peer Coaching Manual</i>. Amazon Publishing.</p>
<p>4. Physical, psychological &amp; emotional harm</p>	<p>The gradual accumulation of stress contributes to physical and mental health issues that include respiratory, heart, obesity, back trouble, higher mortality cancer, anger issues, substance abuse, promiscuous behavior, high-risk taking, relationship problems, lack of humor, suspicion of people factor, and other problems. Working for years in high-stress occupations often results is a diminishing lifestyle, attitude, humor, and health. Seeing the worst that society can offer, the accompanying tragedy takes its toll.</p> <p>We expect changes in our physical and mental functions as we age,</p>



	<p>but when hastened by exposure to work-related trauma, understanding that it is happening is the first step. Not easy for any of us to consider that perhaps, just maybe, we are collecting images and experiences that can be harmful to our physical, psychological and emotional well-being. With awareness comes the realization that we can do something positive to counteract the outcome of negativity, but it first requires a willing attitude to do so.</p>
<p>5. The environment of danger and accumulating discouragement</p>	<p>Police and first responder officials additionally experience the pressure of constantly being on guard and anticipating extreme situations. For fire personnel, it is the inherent risk of fire with lethal chemicals, explosion, and buildings that are structurally unsafe. Police encounters can turn violent and life-threatening with no warning. There is the constant pressure of dealing with people and issues that are difficult to resolve. Emergency management, correctional officers, emergency medical and a host of other agency specialties have numerous examples of inherent and associated danger that, over time, leads to stress and related illnesses.</p> <p>The work environment is often predictable since the same events have happened for decades, in different situations, involving different people and victims, but with similar outcomes. Murder is murder whether in the first century or the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Carnage is carnage regardless. Dealing with it then were people like us. This knowledge can be helpful when combined with a statement like, “You will encounter the following situations. When they are over, here are things you must do to self-help and things the organization must do to assist you in this step. We must not ignore it, as it is a weakness in today’s world. Additional work is needed in prevention and strengthening our employees with resilience and endurance skills, knowledge and attitude building.</p>
<p>6. Addressing harmful high-risk job situations</p>	<p>Police and first responder personnel and agencies must address the cumulative effects of encountering violence, dysfunction, catastrophic events and numerous other stress-producing incidents that are prevalent within the duties and service role of this occupational group. Durability skills are an integral component of planning in life and used to oppose and reduce “risk factors” that threaten or endanger a person, an organization, or a community’s well-being and security. The ability to withstand pressure, to react with confidence, and to effectively continue to carry out one’s duties, while others are incapacitated, emerges from a person’s inner durability.</p> <p>It begins with an acknowledgment that what we see and encounter is not normal to most of the society, yet in doing our jobs, we will find ourselves immersed and cannot easily walk away. That awareness</p>

	allows us to take follow-up steps to put the event into perspective and rescue our thoughts from negativity to optimism.
7. Calling on personal grit to overcome adversity	<p>We are, by nature, durable and resilient people who can step up and meet adversity with courage, inner strength, and determination to resolve problems. There are times when extraordinary or persistent issues occupy our thinking, leaving us anxious, angry, frustrated, and with other accompanying emotions. A person with grit can recover from and adjust to misfortune, disaster, or undue change by drawing on internal strengths and abilities, forging a positive outlook, managing strong feelings and impulses, and ultimately solving the problem.</p> <p>While it sounds contrite, we are capable of turning our thoughts from negativity to a more positive focus. Our thinking will often take its direction without our conscious permission. A young person, lying in bed at night, the room dark, and he or she imagines there is something under the bed. The thought builds and fear emerges, the body assumes a high level of awareness amplifying sounds and another movement. Flight is possible, crying out another reaction or remaining still until sleep takes over and we wake in the morning, all memories erased.</p>
8. What is a balanced lifestyle?  Turning the corner.	<p>The ability to manage and diminish the effects of adversity and trauma are critical to physical and mental wellness, well-being, and a balanced lifestyle. Understanding the factors of durability and strategies for strengthening our ability to withstand extraordinary and high-risk situations results in improved life balance, ability to assist others and fulfill the expectations and obligations associated with one's job, organization and community service.</p> <p>Several strategies are offered in this book, and reference is made to those sections. What feels right for you probably is. The next issue, number 9, is a strategy that has worked for others as well. Selecting one or two that feel right for you and writing down what you think they mean and how they can work for you, helps to ground them for personal use when needed.</p>
9. Strategies for a change.	<p>Key strategies to strengthen personal Durability and coping skills include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Establish and map out strategies to achieve goals.</li> <li>▪ Maintain open communications with family and friends.</li> <li>▪ Acknowledge that change is normal, and that adaptation is</li> </ul>

	<p>possible.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ When confronting the crisis, you are confident in bringing it under control.</li> <li>▪ Maintain a positive view of yourself and trust your instinct and ability.</li> <li>▪ Be decisive in your actions and address problems in a straightforward manner.</li> <li>▪ Manage your outlook, be optimistic, and visualize where you want to be and how to get there.</li> <li>▪ Take care of your physical and mental health by managing stress and engaging in activities that you enjoy, and that are relaxing.</li> <li>▪ Establishment of an active peer coaching program in organizations with sufficient backup resources to maintain an effective program is critical.</li> </ul>
<p>10. Protecting <u>internal</u> body systems</p>	<p>We take exceptional care to outfit our police and first responder officers with all manner of equipment and tools to protect their physical well-being. We do not provide skills and tools that are equally powerful in protecting the psychological and emotional welfare of our personnel. Durability training assists in addressing this issue in a planned and thorough manner.</p> <p>The challenge is to make this a primary goal of the organization, a routine and mandated step that is as important as the other tools we need to do the job.</p>
<p>11. Addressing cultural job inhibitors.  Demanding change.</p>	<p>We must address the cultural and isolation that eventually takes place among our first responder community.</p> <p>1. One of the suggestions, as an outcome of this training, is to suggest that you take the lead and form a discussion group within your agency. This group will form the core of individuals interested in promoting emotional health, undertake planning to address issues, and educate themselves on the effects of stress, adversity, and trauma as it affects lifestyle, health, work performance, and relationships.</p> <p>22. Education and knowledge can lead to the formation of a sophisticated program that is designed to help fellow officers who are experiencing stress and other debilitating pressure.</p>

	<p>33. It will not be easy given the culture and the protective silence that officers or first responders wrap themselves in. If you review history, we have lost a lot of good men and women because of the effect of accumulated stress, resulting in dysfunction and the onset of problems.</p>
<p>12. Don't wait for someone else to set the standard; you do it!</p>	<p>Organize a peer emotional health help group.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Schedule a "Building Durability meeting in a place offering comfort and privacy.</li> <li>2. Have refreshments available.</li> <li>3. Have a designated facilitator (can/should be one of your group).</li> <li>4. Have an agenda that list one or two items. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) General discussion of stress and encountering adversity</li> <li>b) List steps to reduce and lessen the effects and ask if anyone will discuss if he or she have used any of them.</li> </ol> </li> <li>5. Schedule a second meeting and select one of the 'Building Durability' topics that the group will discuss and explore how it can be applied using specific examples from past encounters.</li> </ol>
<p><u>Note:</u> Police and first responder organizations should host similar informal meetings for the purpose of addressing stress, adversity and challenging conditions and calls.</p>	
<p>13. Employees are leading the charge.  Taking responsibility for self and peers.</p>	<p>Employees can also conduct meetings and develop programs the needs of those who are experiencing high levels of stress and emotional dysfunction. Employee meetings should take place in an informal and comfortable environment leading to a discussion about emotional and performance issues and concerns that are more often than not ignored and buried while still alive in one's psyche.</p> <p>Discuss emotional and psychological health of employees in a non-threatening and information gathering session. Solutions will emerge to existing problems if the group is tenacious and long-standing.</p>
<p>14. Overcoming personal trauma</p>	<p>This discussion provides an overview of the effects of stress and adversity and presents techniques and strategies to help overcome personal trauma. It is all for naught if left on the shelf and ignored.</p> <p>Like physical health and well-being, it is our conscious effort to remain well that allows a visit to a doctor for an annual physical, to eat right, not to ignore warning signs that something is wrong. These same needs surround our emotional and psychological balance. Do not</p>

ignore this aspect of your being. To do so is to invite disaster.
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Taking appropriate steps to ensure one's durability is an important consideration of a police department. It is not a one-time event; it must be ever present across the individual's career. Supervisors and administrators should be particularly attentive given the nature of the work and their close observation of employees. There is no excuse for ignoring or pretending it cannot happen, for it does and it can be debilitating.

Use the tools available to assist, maintain current knowledge of sources of stress and trauma and seek to address them, if only to help employees to understand what constant exposure can do allowing them to take steps in prevention.

Employees of police and public safety agencies are fraught with danger. Recognizing that and making it a priority to work with individuals is a positive step, one that has resounding outcomes.