



PHOTO CREDIT: CHUCKFAZIO

STRESS IN THE ECC

How to identify it and where to go for assistance.

By Suzanne Ladd

Emergency communication centers (ECCs) by the very nature of their operations can be identified as stressful work environments. In fact, most job postings list them as such. Most centers, regardless of size or specified center type (police/fire/EMS) take in all types of communication and information from citizens, field responders and the surrounding agencies they serve. The level of technology and responsibility paired with the specific tasks adds layers to the level of stress and complexity within the ECC. Telecommunicators are the first responders responsible for the who, what, where and how an incident is received, dispatched and managed from the very beginning until the end. It all adds up to stress.

The introduction of *Emergency Services Dispatch Support Information Reference and Resource Handbook Edition 1.0* notes the unique stressors telecommunicators confront but that are often overlooked because telecommunicators are not on scene and, therefore, do not or should not affect their work. As this handbook outlines and research has found, telecommunicators deal with a high volume of stress that requires acknowledgment, stress management training and, at times, trauma intervention programs.

Many factors lead to stress in any environment. Of course, life in general is stressful. There are many stresses and pressures we deal with daily that are positive and keeps us driven, motivated, accomplished and out of trouble. Defining and understanding what stress looks like and knowing the warning signs when continuous stress is tipping the scales from daily normal stressors to harmful stress is important because of how it affects our mental, physical and emotional well-being.

For more information on stress, its effects and tips for reducing it visit the Cleveland Clinic website on stress at <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/11874-stress>

Key concepts for assessing workplace stress and its affect on yourself and others include:

Stress: Stress is a normal reaction the body has when changes occur. It can respond to these changes physically, mentally or emotionally.

How does stress affect health? When stress becomes continuous without break, tension builds that can cause a change in the body's reactions (see warning signs of stress below). The bodies autonomic nervous system combats it with a built-in physiological change also known as "fight or flight response."

What is fight or flight response? When the body releases hormones from the adrenal gland in the brain that speed up the heart rate and breathing, dilate the pupils, reduce blood flow to the surface areas of the body causing flushed and pale skin. It increases blood flow to the muscles, brain and extremities to get the job done and react when in danger. The purpose is to prepare the body both physically and psychologically for an "attack" or to react to danger, even when it's just perceived. (Cherry, 2019)

Defining and understanding what stress looks like and knowing the warning signs when continuous stress is tipping the scales from daily normal stressors to harmful stress is important because of how it affects our mental, physical and emotional well-being.

VICARIOUS TRAUMA

The American Counseling Association identifies another form of secondary traumatic stress called vicarious trauma that is usually associated with counselors or persons who experience trauma through their work with patients and hearing continuous stories of their client's trauma, fear and pain. In many ways, telecommunicators experience the same type of trauma, fear and pain with each 9-1-1 caller who looks to the telecommunicator for help and guidance during an emergency.

A telecommunicator suffering from vicarious trauma might experience difficulty discussing feelings, anger and irritation, feeling jumpy, losing sleep over a call, worry they did not do enough, dreaming about the caller's trauma, blaming others, or diminished joy toward things they once enjoyed.

Interpersonal signs may include conflict with coworkers, blaming others, poor

relationships, poor communication, impatience, lack of collaboration or withdrawal from coworkers.

Job performance may be affected by low motivation, increased errors, decreased quality, avoidance of job responsibilities, over-involvement in details/perfectionism or lack of flexibility.

More information on vicarious trauma is at www.counseling.org/docs/trauma-disaster/fact-sheet-9---vicarious-trauma.pdf.

STRESS MANAGEMENT

So how can telecommunicators manage their stress? Of course exercise, eating healthy and meditation all provide a good basis. Making these healthy habits part of their everyday regime has proven effective.

What level of responsibility do individuals, supervisors and co-workers have when they can see themselves, or their teammate, going down the rabbit hole? Everyone must take personal responsibility for their own mental and physical health. Acknowledging the need for help is not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength. Telecommunicators help thousands of individuals every day and often dismiss their own needs and emergencies because of the tough exterior required to do the job. Supervisors have a tremendous responsibility when someone is showing outward signs of stress through their behavior and job performance. Co-workers also have a responsibility to support their teammates and let their supervisor know (not the details) when it appears they need assistance. And everybody has the responsibility to take care of themselves because they are too important to not only their families and loved ones,

Warning Signs of Stress

PHYSICAL

Dizziness; body aches and pains; grinding teeth; clenched jaw; headaches; indigestion; weight loss or gain; muscle tension in the neck, face and shoulders; problems sleeping; cold and sweaty palms; tiredness; upset stomach and sexual difficulties.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL

Depression; anxiety; anger; irritability or restlessness; feeling overwhelmed, unmotivated or unfocused; trouble sleeping or sleeping too much; racing thoughts and constant worry; memory or concentration issues; poor decision making.

For more information and a complete list of signs and symptoms see the American Institute of Stress at www.stress.org/stress-effects.

Workplace Stress Survey From the American Institute of Stress

www.stress.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/Workplace-Stress-Survey.pdf

Enter a number from the sliding scale below, which best describes you.

STRONGLY DISAGREE

1 2 3 4

AGREE SOMEWHAT

5 6 7

STRONGLY AGREE

8 9 10

I can't honestly say what I really think or get things off my chest at work. _____

My job has a lot of responsibility, but I don't have very much authority. _____

I could usually do a much better job if I were given more time. _____

I seldom receive adequate acknowledgement or appreciation when my work is really good. _____

In general, I am not particularly proud or satisfied with my job. _____

I have the impression that I am repeatedly picked on or discriminated against at work. _____

My workplace environment is not very pleasant or safe. _____

My job often interferes with my family and social obligations, or personal needs. _____

I tend to have frequent arguments with superiors, coworkers or customers. _____

Most of the time I feel I have very little control over my life at work. _____

Add up the replies to each question for your TOTAL JOB STRESS SCORE _____

If you score between 10-30, you handle stress on your job well; between 40-60, moderately well; 70-100 you are encountering problems that need to be resolved.

but the citizens, field responders and ECC they serve.

Most agencies today have an employee assistance program (EAP) that offers free immediate counseling with the first phone call that can help de-escalate a crisis and then

offers referrals for counseling visits. Each plan is different, but most offer the first set of visits for free.

Additionally, most EAPs offer counseling to all household members whether they are on the insurance plan or not because of the

direct impact they have on the employee. Programs usually include confidential counseling, financial resources and information, tobacco cessation, legal support and resources, and work-life solution resources such as child and eldercare. Check out



A REWARDING CAREER IS CALLING. WILL YOU ANSWER?



Communications Operators are the initial first responders when you call for help. These unseen heroes provide a calming voice and serve as the critical link and vital lifeline between our community and emergency services.

For more information about requirements, salary and benefits, visit jobs.sheriff.org or call **954.321.4400**.

Follow us



@browardsheriffsoffice



@browardsheriff



@browardsheriffsoffice

your agency's EAP and what resources are available.

Get more information in the Emergency Services Dispatch Support Information: Reference and Resource Handbook (www.jackdigliani.com/page-5-firefighter-ems-and-dispatch-pst-manuals-and-information.html). ●

REFERENCES

American Counseling Association. (2020, 11 30). Fact Sheet #9 Vicarious Trauma. Retrieved from counseling.org: <https://www.counseling.org/docs/trauma-disaster/fact-sheet-9---vicarious-trauma.pdf>

Cherry, K. (2019, 8 18). very well mind. Retrieved from How the fight-or-Fight Response

Works: <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-the-fight-or-flight-response-2795194>

Cleveland Clinic. (2020, 11 1). Cleveland Clinic. Retrieved from Stress: <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/11874-stress>

Jack A. Digliani, P. E. (2020, 12 1). Emergency Services Dispatch Support Information. Retrieved from Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative: <http://www.jackdigliani.com/page-5-firefighter-ems-and-dispatch-pst-manuals-and-information.html>

The American Institute of Stress. (2020, 11 30). Stress Effects; How is Stress Affecting You? Retrieved from Stress.org: <https://www.stress.org/stress-effects>

Special thanks to ECC Shift Supervisor Daniel Raymond of Seminole County Fire/

EMS Emergency Communications who contributed to this article.

Suzanne Ladd, Senior Program Manager of Seminole County Fire/EMS Emergency Communications. Suzanne has over 18 years of public safety service, which includes law enforcement and fire/EMS communications, records and evidence management, criminal investigations, workforce and project management. Suzanne holds many certifications in public safety, human resources as well as a masters in management and HR change management. She can be reached at sladd@seminolecountyfl.gov.

CDE EXAM #58168

- | | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1) Symptoms of stress are all in the mind and don't really affect the physical body.
a. True
b. False | 4) Dizziness and loss of appetite is not a sign of physical stress on a body.
a. True
b. False | 8) Supervisors and telecommunicators should not get involved when they see their co-workers showing signs of being stressed.
a. True
b. False |
| 2) _____ are the first responders responsible for the who, what, where and how an incident is received, dispatched and managed, resulting in a stress filled work environment.
a. Telecommunicators
b. Field responders
c. Information service personnel
d. Command staff
e. None of the above
f. All of the above | 5) When the body is stressed it releases a hormone from the adrenal gland that psychologically prepares the body to react to danger.
a. True
b. False | 9) Vicarious trauma is considered a secondary stress that is associated with persons who experience trauma through their work and hearing continuous stories of their client's trauma, fear and pain.
a. True
b. False |
| 3) Stress can have a positive impact that motivates a person to accomplish their set goals.
a. True
b. False | 6) The term "fight or flight" is when the body is reacting to danger and causes psychological changes such as increased heart rate and breathing, dilated pupils, flushed and pale skin, as well as increases of blood flow to the muscles, brain and extremities.
a. True
b. False | 10) Choose all that are good habits and resources to managing stress:
a. Meditating
b. Eating healthy
c. Exercise
d. Counseling
e. Drinking |
| | 7) EAP stands for emergency assistance placement.
a. True
b. False | |

FOR CREDIT TOWARD APCO RECERTIFICATION(S)

Each CDE article is equal to one credit hour of continuing education

1. Study the CDE article in this issue.
2. Answer the test questions online (see below for online exam instructions) or on the exam page from the magazine article (photocopies are not required).
3. Add/upload your CDE article information and certificate of achievement in the "My Classes Taken" section of APCO's Training Central at www.apcointl.org/trainingcentral.

Questions? Call us at (386) 322-2500.

You can access the CDE exam online!

To receive a complimentary certificate of completion, you may take the CDE exam online. Go to <http://apco.remote-learner.net/login/index.php> to create your username and password. Enter "CDE" in the search box, and click on the "2021 Public Safety Communications CDE Magazine Article Exams," then click on "enroll me" and choose "Stress Management (58168)" to begin the exam. Upon successful completion of the quiz, a certificate of achievement will be available for download/printing.