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THE RESILIENT TELECOMMUNICATOR

Public safety telecommunicators bounce back from adversity, but supervisors and frontline employees must heed mental health warning signs.

By Dorothy Cave

Starting off at the very beginning, we are now public safety telecommunicators and not “just” dispatchers. We are working hard to make sure those that have been in the industry for a long time, those that are just getting started, and even those that are thinking “this may be something I want to try,” are viewed as telecommunicators because this is a career.

With that said, this article is all about resiliency in the emergency communications center. We must know what resilience or resiliency is first. According to Dictionary.com, it’s “1. the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness. 2. ability of a substance or object to spring back into shape; elasticity.” Both of those definitions describe telecommunicators to a tee!

We are going to break down the definitions and compare them to what telecommunicators deal with, what we are and how they survive. “The capacity to recover quickly from difficulties.” When we read that we think about the things we deal with and hear daily; not just what we hear on the phone, but what we also hear on the radio. There are times we hear things that make us laugh; we play those for the others we work with just so they can understand what made us laugh so hard. Then there are those times that we hear someone take their last breath; those we won’t play back. We really don’t

want to hear that ever again. We answer those calls where, in an instant, we become the negotiators for someone that has taken a stranger or even a family member hostage.

We hear our officers in a foot chase, and, if we know the area they are in, we may or may not fear for their lives. We hear our EMS crew screaming for help, because they are being assaulted. We hear our firefighters asking for more units, because they have lost firefighters in the fire and all they can hear are the PASS devices in the background when they key up. This is stress and it will test your staff.

The resilient part of the telecommunicator is our brain. Think about that. Our brain is what makes us do what we do, think what we think, etc. Our brain is what makes us bounce back, most of the time, from the wife that just called and said her husband just died — then hanging up to take the next call. A telecommunicator is in an ongoing role of “telephone roulette” where we

never know when *that* call is going to happen. We are in a constant state of mitigation and that is what makes us resilient. We keep doing our job, knowing that most people would not or could not do what we do.

When we talk about the capacity to recover quickly, we are talking about what we do daily, hourly and minute by minute. So we talked about being resilient when taking calls. For those who are supervisors, managers or directors — you must watch your staff. The calls will take a toll on your telecommunicators. It may not be after a horrible call, but remember the cumulative effect. These calls build and bend the resiliency of your staff. Because telecommunicators are so resilient, we must watch for PTSD within our staff. While a series of traumatic calls may have no effect, the telecommunicator could exhibit inappropriate responses after a seemingly anodyne call. It might be a small

fender bender, but the caller just can't seem to follow directions. This may be what really taxes your staff's resiliency.

Some of the comments we need to listen for when wondering how our staff is coping are "Don't be stupid!" or "I am about to lose my mind in here!" Now, we all know that we have either heard these phrases, said them, or even said worse. But maybe when we said these phrases, we didn't constantly repeat them. The repetition is a sure sign that our staff's resiliency is being taxed.

The second definition describes resiliency as the ability of a substance or object to spring back into shape. Does this sound like telecommunicators when something huge happens in the center? Of course it does. We are resilient and we have the ability to bounce back. If you don't believe the statement, think back to when your staff had to deal with an active shooting event, the death

of a responder, or something similar. Think about how they handled everything. They handled it professionally. That is the meaning of a resilient telecommunicator.

So how do we build resilient telecommunicators? One of the first things we must do is train. Our telecommunicators can no longer be allowed to become stagnant in their positions. We went for years without training our telecommunicators. They applied, got the job, sat down at a phone and/or console, and voila! You have a telecommunicator. The mindset for a long time, even when I was hired, was that our telecommunicators didn't need to be trained. They didn't need to know how law enforcement, fire or EMS did their jobs. We now know that is so far from the truth.

Let's fast forward to the present. What we do is now a career and we are now telecommunicators. So how does training help your



telecommunicators become more resilient? It teaches them what they can expect, what they may hear and what they may deal with. Now, don't think training in a classroom, training on a simulator or even sitting with your communications training officer (CTO) will prepare them for everything. There are some things we must experience on our own that gives us our individual telecommunication context.

Even though we must experience some things on our own, it does not mean we have to deal with them on our own. We have others in our emergency communications centers

that staff can talk to — to let out the pain of the call and find ways to deal with what we know. If you don't have those people on staff, you need to either find them or train them. You can bring in TERT when your agency experiences something tragic; you should similarly have EAP (employee assistance personnel) as an asset for telecommunicators. They help your staff remain resilient.

Whatever your position in the ECC — telecommunicator, call taker, supervisor or director — you are resilient. How can you ensure that you stay that way? You must take care of not only your physical health but your

mental health. Take time for yourself. Talk to someone you trust about what is going on with you. Talk to a professional if you have intrusive thoughts of a call continuously. We are telecommunicators and this is a career, but we are still family. We must help each other and pick each other up. Work on your resiliency. ●

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CDE EXAM #54562

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Working as a telecommunicator is now a career. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. True b. False 2. In order to be resilient, you must hold everything in and never recover from difficulties. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. True b. False 3. Our brain is what makes us bounce back all the time from difficult situations. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. True b. False 4. Choose the comments we must listen for when determining if our staff's resilience is being taxed: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. I am about to lose my mind in here. b. I can help the caller. c. Don't be stupid. d. I should go shopping after work. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. We never have to worry about PTSD with telecommunicators. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. True b. False 6. Telecommunicators only need initial training to do their job. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. True b. False 7. New telecommunicators hear everything they are ever going to encounter during training. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. True b. False 8. No matter what we experience, we must deal with the effects on our own. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. True b. False | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Choose the group you can bring in for your staff experiences something tragic. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. TCIT b. TERT c. TRAP d. TREND 10. We must always help each other through difficult times; we are family. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. True b. False |
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