



Mental Health Support
for First Responders

Staying Emotionally Healthy

*Content adapted with permission from “Staying Emotionally Healthy in the Fire Service:
What You and Your Family Should Know,” prepared by Matthew Johnston, September 2015.*

The nature of the job

As a first responder, you regularly encounter stressful situations. Most people will never have to experience the things you see, hear, or do as part of your job. To perform your required duties, your mind is forced to adapt, and it will gradually alter the way you interpret a traumatic event. Just like a callus forming on your hand due to repeated pressure, your mind thickens and hardens in response to repeated exposure to stress.

As harsh as this process sounds, it's what enables you to "get the job done." Through training and experience, the analytical part of your mind learns to suppress your natural emotional responses while at work. Your brain changes the way it organizes information so that what was once considered traumatic becomes a normal part of your daily reality.

First responders work under a command structure where personal decision making is restricted by industry protocols and guidelines. Training within this structure creates dependable, logic-based behaviour that trumps your personal thoughts and actions in the face of extreme circumstances. In other words, you're trained to respond instinctively with calm and rational behaviour during stressful events.

How our brains construct an emotional barrier

The brain's limbic system largely governs emotions, behaviours, and long-term memory. You're trained to remain calm during potentially traumatic situations so your emotional and behavioural patterns can follow predictable paths. This training is what makes it possible for you to place personal feelings, beliefs, and reactions on hold when you encounter challenging circumstances.

In reaction to stress and anxiety, our limbic systems are programmed to have us respond in one of three ways: fight, flight, or freeze. These responses have been integral to our survival as a species – but they are simply not options for first responders attending to emergency situations. Instead, when you encounter a traumatic situation as a first responder, your limbic system is suppressed so that you can respond calmly and logically.

Over time, as you attend calls of a traumatic nature, you start to develop a strong dissociative barrier between risk and action. This allows you to run into a burning building or provide medical treatment to an injured child in hazardous conditions. In these moments, the needs of the people you're trying to save supersede your own physical and emotional needs. This demonstrates how effectively your well-trained analytical mind can override your natural emotional and behavioural reactions to a dangerous situation.

When to seek help from a mental health professional

Sometimes you go through a stressful encounter and have no problem bouncing back. Other times, you may need extra support to work through it and return to feeling like yourself.

Consider seeking help from a mental health professional if you're experiencing any of the following:

- 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 toward others
- Addiction, such as to alcohol, drugs, or gambling
- Self-insolating behaviours, including a lack of interest in social connectedness
- Frequent feelings of hopelessness, shame, or guilt
- Compulsion to work excessively at the expense of important relationships

Investing in your mental health

It's important to integrate positive habits into your lifestyle to help you mitigate the effects of stressful experiences. Otherwise, your mind can create a dam that interrupts the natural flow and range of your emotions. When enough pressure builds, this dam can break and release raw, intense emotional reactions. These outbursts not only negatively impact your own health, but can hurt those around you.

One way to make healthy habits a part of your lifestyle is to take advantage of the time off shift work gives you. These breaks give you time to recover physically and emotionally from work-related duties. But these breaks only work if you're open and intentional about engaging in activities that help you process your experiences and heal. While spending time on personal interests isn't a replacement for accessing professional mental health services, participating in regular, self-care practices can lead to many of the same positive outcomes.

Techniques for building emotional resiliency

Immersing yourself in healthy activities helps you foster a state of mindfulness, which means your full attention is focused on what you're experiencing in the present moment. Mindfulness is a stress-recovery practice that reduces the dissociative behaviour between the analytical mind and the emotional mind.

Mindfulness activities help to relieve emotional tension spontaneously and naturally. We simply feel better after a mindfulness activity such as spending time in nature, finishing a personal project, or helping others. Keeping up with a variety of mindfulness activities is especially important for first responders who are resistant to accessing professional mental health services.

Examples of activities to cultivate mindfulness include:

- Breathing exercises
- Physical activity
- Hobbies and creative interests
- Connectedness and compassion – spending time with family and friends, volunteering
- Spending time in nature
- Physical healing – massage therapy, yoga
- Spirituality – engaging in a faith community, meditation

Engaging in mindful self-care measures, along with conventional talk therapy, helps you not only to digest the effects of work-related trauma, but to maintain a healthy emotional life.

The challenge moving forward is to find ways to continually engage in healthy activities during the most trying times in your career and life. This process will likely involve accepting a level of vulnerability that may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable. But the emotional stresses you face – and the effect those stresses have on you physically and mentally – underlines just how important it is to invest in your emotional health.