



Huron County Board of Mental Health and Addiction Services

2 Oak Street • Norwalk, Ohio 44857 • 419-681-6268

Trauma and PTSD Awareness

Treating the First Responder

The nature of a first responder's occupation continuously puts them in harm's way as well as regularly exposes them to others who have been injured or harmed. First responders are often first on the scene to provide emotional and physical support to traumatized survivors. The responsibilities that first responders have are very important but over time can put their well-being and overall health at risk.

Responding to emergencies can be both rewarding and challenging work, however, repeated exposures to traumatic events, coupled with the immense stress of the role in emergency services, can lead to an increased risk for adverse behavioral health outcomes such as anxiety, distress, disturbed sleep or concentration, alterations in work function, difficulties with interpersonal relationships, increases in substance use, and depression. First responders' risk for developing stress-related health problems is greater than the general population. It is estimated that 30% of first responders develop behavioral health illnesses including, but not limited to, depression and PTSD as compared with 20% of the general population.

What is Trauma and PTSD?

Trauma is the response to a very distressing, disturbing, or life-threatening event that overwhelms the individual's ability to cope. These occupations subject individuals to a great deal of traumatic events, resulting in a higher risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depressive disorder, panic disorder, and generalized anxiety disorder. Exposure to multiple traumatic stressors could also exacerbate other pre-existing conditions.

PTSD is characterized by, "exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence" either directly or indirectly. Symptoms associated with PTSD must last longer than one month, cause clinically significant distress in social or occupational functioning, and not be attributed to other conditions or substances.

Stigma and Underreporting

According to a 2015 national survey of over 4,000 police officers, paramedics, emergency medical technicians and firefighters, emergency workers are 10 times more likely to attempt suicide on average than another person. Unfortunately, due to the stigma associated with seeking help among first responders, individuals at these jobs tend to under report symptoms to avoid judgment by peers and supervisors, demotion, or a decrease in responsibilities at work. On average, about one in three first responders experience stigma regarding mental health. In a 2017 University of Phoenix survey of 2,000 first responders, nearly 40 percent said they would face negative repercussions at work for seeking mental health services. Other barriers associated with under reporting are a lack of knowledge of where to receive treatment, scheduling concerns, and fear regarding confidentiality.

How Trauma and PTSD affect First Responders

Sounds, sights, smells and thoughts trigger symptoms of PTSD by bringing back memories of the trauma experienced. Fire fighters, police officers, EMTs, nurses and other first responders are faced with horrors most of us will never encounter in our lives and in many cases, all that trauma leads to PTSD. Unfortunately, this is the risk that first responders face. But by knowing the signs of PTSD, you have a better chance of identifying what you or your loved one is going through sooner and can access the help that is needed.



Huron County Board of Mental Health and Addiction Services

2 Oak Street • Norwalk, Ohio 44857 • 419-681-6268

If you or your loved one is exhibiting the following symptoms, it possibly may be PTSD:

- Flashbacks of the traumatic event
- Feeling emotionally numb
- Detachment from family and friends
- Difficulty sleeping
- Easily irritated
- Partaking in destructive behavior (alcohol or drugs)
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Nightmares related to the event
- Physiological reactions when reminded of the event
- Loss of interest in activities
- Anxiety or depression
- Difficulty concentrating

However, it's not all bad news. According to studies, specialized training, consistent education, peer support services, and assurance of team support act as protective factors, enhance resiliency, and are associated with reduced stress for first responders. Stress prevention and management is critical for responders to stay well and to continue to help in the situations they face. There are important steps responders should take before, during, and after an event. To take care of others, responders must also take care of themselves.

Coping With PTSD

Although, PTSD is not something that just will go away, recovery is possible and the symptoms of PTSD can be managed in a healthy way. Some of the treatment options for managing PTSD triggers include:

- Peer Support Groups
- Mindfulness and Relaxation Strategies
- Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)
- Prolonged exposure therapy
- Group therapy
- Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR)
- Medication

It's important for first responders to remember that it's normal to have a mental and emotional response to traumatic situations. We are all human, we all have emotions, and we must break the stigma surrounding mental health so people aren't afraid to talk about their struggles and get the help and support they need.

Recently, MHAS hosted a clinician training "Treating the First Responder" where local clinicians were trained in first responder care. Below is a link to the list of local clinicians who were trained and are available for services:

https://3b478ae1-1f29-4214-a5cb-6e3a87cc0823.filesusr.com/ugd/635161_e30b4d29ea0d42a08934f6452de4f384.pdf

NAMI of Seneca, Sandusky and Wyandot Counties recently received a grant, allowing them to train numerous local clinicians in EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing). EMDR has been extensively researched and is an effective, relatively non-verbal type of treatment. There is extensive research which suggests EMDR is an effective therapy for front-line workers and meets the unique needs of law enforcement officers. As part of this grant, recently trained clinicians are required to provide this service to first responders at no cost to the responder. Please contact NAMI SSW at 419-334-8021 to find a local clinician trained in EMDR.

For more information on services and supports available for first responders, contact MHAS at 419-681-6268 or visit our webpage www.hcbmhas.org/fw.



Huron County Board of Mental Health and Addiction Services

2 Oak Street • Norwalk, Ohio 44857 • 419-681-6268

Sources: <https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/responders.asp>

<https://www.fountainhillsrecovery.com/blog/ptsd-effects-first-responders/>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trauma_and_first_responders

<https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/dtac/supplementalresearchbulletin-firstresponders-may2018.pdf>

<https://www.jems.com/news/>