

MANAGING TRAUMATIC STRESS RISK

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A Proactive Approach

By

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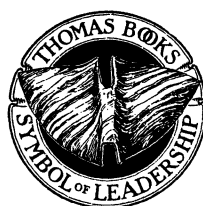
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PREFACE

Traumatic stress has long been thought of as an occupational hazard in protective services professions. This thinking has resulted in such occupations frequently being described as “high-risk” professions. Although such professions may indeed be at risk for traumatic events in their work, this exposure does not necessarily mean that individuals will experience negative outcomes as a result. In this text we argue that the presumption of “risk” as defining negative pathological outcomes due to trauma exposure is misleading. We offer a less prescriptive definition of risk, one that affords protective services organizations a framework within which they can proactively develop strategies to increase the positive and reduce the negative consequences of trauma and disaster work. Indeed, the inevitable, regular, and repetitive nature of traumatic exposure in the professions covered in this book calls for this approach if organizations are to effectively discharge their duty of care.

DOUGLAS PATON
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CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
<i>Preface</i>	xi
Chapter 1	
TRAUMATIC STRESS: PERSPECTIVES ON MANAGING RISK ..	3
<i>Douglas Paton, John M. Violanti, Christine Dunning, and Leigh M. Smith</i>	
Introduction	3
Risk Management	3
Hazard Analysis and Risk Reduction	5
Chapter Content	6
References	8
Chapter 2	
MENTAL HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS FOLLOWING A DISASTER	9
<i>Eugene Schmuckler</i>	
The Nature of Disaster	9
Who Is Affected?	10
Risk and Disaster Exposure	12
Emergency Workers and Their Responses	12
Disaster Phases	13
Effects of Traumatic Stress in a Disaster Situation	14
Post Disaster	19
References	23
Chapter 3	
REDUCING PROTECTIVE SERVICE WORKER TRAUMA THROUGH PREEMPLOYMENT SCREENING	26
<i>Christine Dunning</i>	
Introduction	26
Protective Worker Selection	28
Job Competencies and Risk for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder	34
Risk Factors for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder	36
Personality Tests	39
Screening for Resilience	40
Screening for Emotional Intelligence	42

Conclusion	44
References	44
Chapter 4	
MEASURING PROTECTIVE BEHAVIORS FOR PERCEIVED RISKS OF HAZARDS	49
<i>Leigh M. Smith</i>	
Introduction	49
The Psychometric Approach and Its Weaknesses	50
A Better Approach to Measurement	52
Conclusion	65
References	65
Chapter 5	
POLICE TRAUMA: PAST EXPOSURES AND PRESENT CONSEQUENCES	68
<i>Stephanie Samuels</i>	
Introduction	68
Case Study: Bill	70
Case Study: Sally	74
Case Involving Three Officers	76
Case Study: Steve	84
Conclusion	85
References	86
Chapter 6	
TRAUMA TYPE AND FREQUENCY: RISK FACTORS FOR POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER IN POLICING	87
<i>Anne Gehrke and John M. Violanti</i>	
Introduction	87
Variables	89
Sample	90
Procedure	92
Results	95
Discussion	104
Conclusion	108
References	109

Chapter 7

RISK FACTORS IN EMERGENCY RESPONDERS 111

Douglas Paton and Greg Hannan

Introduction 111

Risk Factors during the Alarm and Mobilization Phase 112

Risk Factors during the Response Phase 114

Risk Factors during the Letdown and Reintegration Phase 120

Conclusion 123

References 124

Chapter 8

INCREASING RESILIENCY THROUGH SHARED
SENSEMAKING: BUILDING HARDINESS IN GROUPS 129*Paul T. Bartone*

Introduction 129

The Nature of Stressors in Modern Military Operations 130

Personality Hardiness and Why It Is Important 131

Case Study: How the Hardy Leader Increases Group Hardiness
on Modern Military Missions 133

Conclusion 138

References 138

Chapter 9

DISASTER RESPONSE: RISK FACTORS IN
AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT 141*Douglas Paton, A.J. W. Taylor, and Colleen McFarlane*

Introduction 141

Deployment 141

Contrasting Conditions 143

Outcomes of the Relief Effort 145

Role Stress 146

Influences on Physical and Psychological Well-Being 148

Support and Team Relations 150

Family and Significant Others 150

The Political Environment 151

Selection and Training 153

Conclusions 155

References 156

Chapter 10	
WORKING WITH TRAUMA: THE IMPACT ON THE THERAPIST	160
<i>Jacquie Bicknell</i>	
Introduction	160
Therapist Transformation in the Traumatology Field	160
Risk Factors for Secondary Trauma in Trauma Therapists	163
Therapist Growth and Resilience in Trauma Work	171
Conclusion	173
References	174
Chapter 11	
THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF WORK ORGANIZATION	177
<i>Peter Sevastos</i>	
Introduction	177
The New Workplace	178
Job Characteristics	179
Work Roles	181
Emotional Labor	183
Job Insecurity	185
Workplace Harassment and Violence	186
Surveillance	188
References	190
Chapter 12	
IDENTIFYING AND MANAGING TRAUMATIC RISK FACTORS EMANATING FROM THE FAMILY–WORK INTERFACE	196
<i>Jane Shakespeare-Finch and Kathryn Gow</i>	
Introduction	196
Work–Family Interface Models	197
Family-related Risk Factors	199
Moderating Factors	202
Organizational Responses and Responsibilities	203
Conclusion	210
References	211

Chapter 13	
TERRORISM AND TRAUMA: THE DIMENSION OF FEAR	214
<i>John M. Violanti</i>	
Introduction	214
Terrorism and Fear	215
Personal Vulnerability and Terrorism	218
Shattered Assumptions of Safety	219
Posttraumatic Stress, Fear, and Terrorism	220
Chemical and Biological Terrorism	222
Psychological Implications of Disasters and Suicide	223
Maintenance of Fear: Terrorism and the Media	224
Conclusions	225
References	227
Chapter 14	
MANAGING TRAUMATIC STRESS IN PROTECTIVE SERVICES: RISK, RESILIENCE, AND VULNERABILITY	231
<i>Douglas Paton, John M. Violanti, Christine Dunning, and Leigh M. Smith</i>	
References	235
<i>Index</i>	237

MANAGING TRAUMATIC STRESS RISK

Chapter 1

TRAUMATIC STRESS: PERSPECTIVES ON MANAGING RISK

DOUGLAS PATON, JOHN M. VIOLANTI, CHRISTINE DUNNING,
AND LEIGH M. SMITH

INTRODUCTION

Traumatic stress has long been recognized as an occupational hazard in protective service professions. Recognition of their status in this regard has resulted in their frequently being described as “high risk” professions. In this text we argue that this use of risk is misleading, particularly in regard to its presumption of an automatic association with negative and pathological outcomes. Here a less prescriptive definition of risk is offered, one that affords protective service organizations a framework within which they can proactively develop strategies to increase the positive and reduce the negative consequences of trauma and disaster work. Indeed, the inevitable, regular, and repetitive nature of traumatic exposure in the professions covered in this book calls for this approach if organizations are to effectively discharge their duty of care.

RISK MANAGEMENT

Although typically associated with loss, risk also encompasses the concepts of choice, anticipation, and resilience (Hood & Jones, 1996). According to this conceptualization, the risk concept is a future-oriented one capable of accommodating perspectives that cover adaptational, growth, and distress outcomes. Importantly, it implies an ability to

make choices in regard to how personnel (through, for example, selection, training, and support) will interact with threatening events to influence the likelihood of their experiencing positive or negative outcomes. It thus represents a comprehensive basis for traumatic stress management in professions regularly and repetitively exposed to challenging and dangerous work.

Risk is a product of the interaction between the frequency of occurrence of adverse events and the consequences of such exposure. It is difficult to influence the frequency of exposure; protective services professionals must respond to events that are unpredictable in regard to, for example, their timing, nature, duration, and location. However, we can make choices in regard to the consequences of this exposure. In the risk equation, consequences are represented by an interaction between hazards (e.g., stressors, operational and environmental demands) and the resilience resources mobilized to deal with them.

In regard to its application to traumatic stress management, risk management is concerned with estimating levels of loss or growth outcomes likely following exposure to a specific event. It does so by anticipating the consequences likely to ensue when the characteristics of personnel (linked to selection, training, experience) and organizational systems and procedures interact with the characteristics of specific critical incidents. From such analyses, risk management policies can be developed and appropriate practices and strategies implemented. Collectively, this will encompass a range of related activities for identifying and assessing risk, developing and implementing risk reduction interventions, and monitoring and evaluating their effectiveness. It is an iterative process that improves planning by contributing greater insight into the implications and consequences of different decisions and courses of action. Risk management affords opportunities for priority setting based on providing the greatest degree of risk reduction using the available resources.

The foundation upon which the attainment of these objectives is based is risk analysis. Risk analysis encompasses risk assessment and risk evaluation. A key element here is risk assessment, comprising hazard assessment and resilience and vulnerability assessment. Risk assessment provides the raw material for evaluating the likely consequences of exposure to particular events. This approach is fundamental to the pursuit of the goal of promoting resilient personnel. Specifically, it is necessary to identify the hazards to understand what people and systems must be resilient to.

Resilience resources were discussed in a previous volume (Paton, Violanti, & Smith, 2003). Here we are concerned with articulating the event and organizational factors that arise when responding to incidents, the psychological hazards. This provides the foundation for the systematic examination of how specific outcomes (e.g., growth, adaptation, loss) arise and, consequently, what resilience resources are required to facilitate positive outcomes. From this analysis, appropriate risk management policies, procedures, and practices can be developed.

In applying a risk management approach to traumatic/disaster stress management, the hazard component of the equation will be represented by the environmental and situational characteristics and demands capable of threatening psychological equilibrium. It is on the identification, analysis and assessment of hazards and the contexts in which they arise that this volume will concentrate.

HAZARD ANALYSIS AND RISK REDUCTION

Psychological hazard analysis is complicated by the fact that hazards are difficult to discern from a consideration of the event per se. The hazard is not the air crash, the hostage situation, or the terrorist bombing. Rather, hazards are the event characteristics and operational demands that can threaten psychological equilibrium. For example, hazards could be exposure to large-scale death and serious injury, handling human remains, being prevented by the scale or complexity of an event from employing one's professional expertise, having to make urgent and complex decisions, inadequate response resources, and so on. Furthermore, the implications of these characteristics will be influenced by contextual factors (e.g., interaction with specific organizational practices, the work-family interface). Consequently, systematic and comprehensive risk management must go beyond the analysis of the demands likely to be encountered in a specific emergency and anticipate how contextual factors (e.g., from family and operational practices and systems) influence traumatic stress risk. Importantly, a focus on articulating these characteristics within the risk assessment process increases the likelihood of personnel being able to adapt to a range of events.

It is important to note that we are not denying the fact that the hazards encountered when responding to a critical incident or disaster can threaten the psychological equilibrium of those who respond to it. We