

TRAUMATIC STRESS IN CRITICAL OCCUPATIONS

TRAUMATIC STRESS IN CRITICAL OCCUPATIONS

Recognition, Consequences and Treatment

By

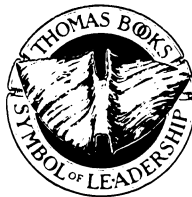
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CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER

Springfield • Illinois • U.S.A.

Published and Distributed Throughout the World by

CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER

2600 South First Street
Springfield, Illinois 62794-9265

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ISBN 0-398-06577-2 (cloth)

ISBN 0-398-06578-0 (paper)

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 95-47069

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*Printed in the United States of America
SC-R-3*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Paton, Douglas.

Traumatic stress in critical occupations : recognition,
consequences, and treatment / by Douglas Paton and John M. Violanti.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-398-06577-2 (cloth). — ISBN 0-398-06578-0 (paper)

1. Emergency medical technicians—Job stress. 2. Police—job
stress. 3. Fire fighters—Job stress. 4. Post-traumatic stress
disorder. I. Violanti, John M. II. Title.

RA645.5.P38 1996

616.85'21—dc20

95-47069

CIP

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PREFACE

There is a growing recognition that the members of many professions may be called upon to deal with disasters and other traumatic events and their consequences. These professions can be described as critical occupations. The use of the collective term “critical occupation” was coined because it encapsulates two general aspects of the work experience of the emergency and helping professions. It describes the critical role they play in protecting communities and their members. In addition, it also describes the fact that, in the course of acting in this capacity, these professionals can encounter traumatic events which may, under certain circumstances, exert a critical impact on their psychological well-being.

All too often, stress phenomena are described from an essentially clinical perspective, with the predominant focus being on the individual. Consequently, the study of stress and trauma phenomena, and the interventions developed to manage the ensuing problems, focus on the individual. While it is important to understand how stress phenomena impact on individuals, a focus at this level will provide an incomplete picture.

The text describes traumatic stress phenomena, not just from the point of view of the individual, but rather in terms of the complex interactions between the person, the traumatic event, and the social and organizational background against which performance takes place. It thus provides a more comprehensive basis for the development of effective trauma management systems.

This text focuses primarily on police officers, fire fighters, and emergency medical service professionals. However, the discussion will be equally applicable to other professional groups (e.g., psychologists, social service professionals) who may find their working lives periodically punctuated by exposure to traumatic events which may exert a critical impact on them.

The narrative provides a comprehensive overview of current theory

in this area and draws upon this to demonstrate its use in developing and implementing practical solutions to the individual and organizational issues that emerge in disaster and other traumatic contexts. It thus provides a resource that will be accessible to researchers and practitioners alike. Strategies designed to promote the recognition and identification of the diverse personal, organisational and event-related factors that contribute to traumatic reactivity are discussed. This information is then used to frame preventative and support interventions that can be utilized to promote the well-being and effective performance of these professionals in disaster and traumatic situations.

Douglas Paton
John Violanti

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TRAUMATIC STRESS IN CRITICAL OCCUPATIONS

Chapter 1

TRAUMATIC STRESS IN CRITICAL OCCUPATIONS

DOUGLAS PATON

INTRODUCTION

This book describes how working in critical occupations can affect the well-being of professional groups such as police officers, fire fighters and emergency medical service workers. It will also discuss the processes and mechanisms which underpin occupational and traumatic stress reactions. The members of these professions not only have to deal with the demands and stressors that typify working life in the late twentieth century, they may also have to deal with highly traumatic or emotionally overwhelming events in the course of performing their professional role. In addition, the members of these professions play a critical and vital role in protecting and promoting the well-being of victims of disasters and traumatic events, and safeguarding communities.

The members of these professions are unique within the general population with respect to the frequency with which they risk exposure to traumatic events. As Violanti states, many police officers can be exposed to more traumatic events in a month than members of the general population can expect to encounter over a lifetime. It would be incorrect to assume that exposure to these events will inevitably lead to dysfunctional or pathological reactions. Indeed, positive outcomes at both personal and professional levels can accompany working in traumatic and disaster contexts (Andersen, Christensen, & Petersen, 1991; Raphael, 1986). However, under certain circumstances, some traumatic experiences can result in the members of these professions experiencing emotional reactions that are significantly different or more intense than those prevailing in routine operating contexts and/or which prevent them from performing their role at the level they would have expected either at the time or later. Moreover, these reactions can sometimes persist for prolonged periods. Under these circumstances traumatic experiences have been defined as critical incidents. Hence, the use of the term “critical occupa-

tions” within the title of this book refers both to the fact that the members of these professions play a critical role in safeguarding the well-being of others and may, themselves, be exposed to events which can have a critical impact on their own well-being.

The origins of this book emerged from concerns felt by the authors that while the members of these critical professions could expect to be exposed repeatedly to highly traumatic events over the course of their working lives, all too often they are expected to be “superhuman” and invulnerable to emotion and stress. They are expected to move from one crisis situation to another without feeling emotion, pain, or remorse. Additionally, the concern was expressed that the implications of such traumatic stress may not have been recognized in their entirety, both with respect to the groups who may be at risk and to the factors that contribute to reactivity. This book is planned with the notion that organizations who employ those who could be considered as high risk should possess a comprehensive understanding of the demands and problems faced by their staff, their implications for well-being and operational effectiveness, and their role and responsibility in managing critical occupations.

While the focus, in this context, has tended to have been on the relationship between a traumatic event and the well-being of the individuals involved, doing so may obscure the role of organizational practices and procedures on traumatic reactivity. Moreover, the demands of the job may, as we shall see, generate significant changes within the person that fundamentally alter their perceptions of society and their capability for adapting to life within the narrow confines of their chosen profession.

This text will discuss the event, personal, and organizational factors that, by virtue of their potential for threatening the assumptions and beliefs of these professionals, result in traumatic experiences becoming critical incidents. It will also explore the implications of this for intervention during and beyond the period of employment within a critical occupation.

In addition to the risk of exposure to traumatic events in the course of performing in their routine role, the demands on the members of these professions may be heightened by the need to respond to major disasters. They may be called upon to deal with the exceptional demands associated with major disasters as a consequence of involvement in the relief operation triggered by natural phenomena such as earthquakes and floods. In addition, within an increasingly complex technological and dynamic

society, the risk of major technological (e.g., building collapse, dam failure, chemical pollution) and human-induced (e.g., large-scale terrorist bombings) disasters is increasing. Further, the growing international recognition of the special disaster relief expertise possessed by Western emergency response groups is increasing the likelihood of their becoming involved in disasters outside their country of origin.

The traumatic demands that may be encountered by the members of critical occupations are thus likely to increase in incidence and complexity over time. Consequently, there is a clear need to develop an understanding of the nature of traumatic incidents and the factors that result in their posing a threat to both the physical and the psychological integrity of these professionals and the services to which they belong. This knowledge will also be fundamental to the task of understanding the nature, role and manner of implementation of interventions that can be used to manage reactions to these events, safeguard the well-being of those who fulfil these roles, and promote the effective performance of their helping role.

While it will make an important contribution to the task of identifying training and organizational development needs associated with promoting an effective response, this book will go beyond a simple description or typology of the traumatic aspects of the working lives of these professionals. It will describe the complex interaction that takes place between the person, their job, and the environment in which they live and work. The more comprehensive overview thus provided will facilitate the process of defining the salient aspects of research and intervention that have to be addressed to put the study of this special group and the development of appropriate and effective interventions on a firm foundation.

In addition to its practical applications, this book will add to the sparse (particularly in the area of work-related trauma) literature available within academic circles on this subject and outline the key issues within one volume. This approach, it is hoped, will facilitate the development of a more coherent field of study and promote the evolution of a common methodological framework. This, in turn, will underpin the consistent and systematic study of the phenomena that comprise this subject area.

This book will address the human side of working in critical or high-risk professions and present information covering proactive training, post-event support and recovery resources, and the ensuing organizational

needs and implications. The contents of this book will be of interest not only to emergency workers and other professionals involved in high-risk professions but also to those responsible for providing support, therapeutic and consulting services to the members of these professions and their employing organizations. Further, the focus on duty-related and workplace aspects increases the relevance of this text for those in organizational psychology, human resource management, and occupational health and safety.

TRAUMATIC STRESS IN CRITICAL OCCUPATIONS

Stressful traumatic events or critical incidents may be described as unusual occurrences involving exposure to events that are sudden, overwhelming and emotionally challenging. Examples would include natural disasters, transportation accidents, violent crime, witnessing violent death, and being taken hostage at gunpoint. The past decade has witnessed a growing recognition that the professionals who are called upon to assist those affected by traumatic events can themselves become secondary victims.

Occupations such as police work, fire fighting, emergency services, hospital, health and social services, mental health professions and rescue personnel may all be susceptible to traumatic aftereffects as a result of either primary or secondary involvement with disasters or other traumatic events. In addition, the members of these organizations who provide administrative, professional support or line functions (e.g., police dispatchers, civilian support personnel, psychologists) may also be at risk.

Perhaps the most important dimension of this trauma, whether direct or secondary, is that, as a consequence of its atypical nature, intensity and duration, workers may be unable to draw upon previous learning, training or experience to help them understand the event and/or their reactions to it. Exposure can trigger feelings and emotions which, though normal in the context of a traumatic experience, can be difficult to understand and manage. If these feelings continue over time, dysfunctional reactions can occur which can affect both well-being and organizational performance.

Unfortunately, much of the traumatic stress that these workers and support groups experience goes unrecognized. This state of affairs reflects the influence of a number of general factors. One relates to a lack of