

WELLBEING SERIES

## BUILDING MENTAL HEALTH RESILIENCE FOR EMERGENCY PERSONNEL

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**Abstract****Background**

In this wellbeing series we present practical advice for prehospital care providers, responders, and other shift workers. These articles are produced by experts in their field. Many of these topics were presented at the Irish College of Paramedics Wellbeing Symposium in University College Cork in May 2019.

**Keywords:** paramedic, wellbeing, prehospital, health.

### **Introduction**

Understanding the various stressors involved in our lives and our work is a key learning point for staff working in the pre-hospital emergency services. We work in a very rewarding role however it can often involve high exposure to critical or traumatic incidents. We know statistically that this can have an emotional and psychological impact on us and also that other work place stressors can also impact on our stress levels (i.e. shift work, long hours and high demands). Therefore it is imperative that we need to manage our stress and enhance our wellbeing and resilience.

We all experience stress in our lives and we need a certain amount of stress to survive and thrive. Understanding how to manage stress, the various types of stress and how we can enhance our own resilience is key. We can achieve this through education and training, we can practice resiliency and strengthen it – much of which is based on healthy living, coping skills and knowing and using supports available to us.

When resilience is absent it can result in acute stress reactions, our emotions can become less controlled and anxiety, frustration and fear can interfere with our lives. It can also result in impacts on our relationships and job performance. Stress, Resilience and wellbeing are all mediated by moderator variables such as hardiness (of which optimism is a part), coping skills and access to social support. Therefore learning about all of these aspects for us is vital for our own resilience and wellbeing. It is well documented that healthy eating and getting some regular exercise is important for both our physical and psychological wellbeing, which in turn helps build and maintain our resiliency.

Trying to ensure we get adequate sleep, rest and nutrition is important – all of the best guidance on this is available in your CISM Booklet and on the online learning – Stress Awareness programme for the ambulance service. For further information please go to [www.cism.ie](http://www.cism.ie) and <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/healthwellbeing/>

### **Coping with symptoms**

It is very common, in fact quite normal, for people to experience emotional aftershocks when they have experienced a critical incident. If you are experiencing signs of excessive stress – you may find the following suggestions helpful in coping with the symptoms:

- DO express your emotions & feelings.
- DO identify trusted friends and colleagues to whom you can.
- DO talk about what happened
- Do review the experience(s)
- DO look to friends and colleagues for support.
- DO listen sympathetically if a colleague wants to speak with you unless it is too distressing.
- DO advise colleagues who need more support where they can get appropriate help.
- DO try to keep your life as normal as possible.
- DO try to keep to daily routines.
- DO drive more carefully.
- DO be more careful around the home.
- DON'T use alcohol, nicotine or other drugs to hide your feelings or manage your reactions.
- DON'T simply stay away from work – seek help and support.
- DON'T allow anger and irritability to mask your feelings.
- DON'T bottle up feelings.
- DON'T be afraid to ask for help.
- DON'T think your feelings are signs of weakness (NAS CISM, 2018)

The NAS have identified evidenced base guidance on knowing when we need help or support; the following are important to be aware of in the event of knowing WHEN TO FIND HELP: (overleaf)

**When to seek help**

1. If you feel you cannot cope with your reactions or feelings.
  2. If your stress reactions do not lessen in the two or three weeks following the event.
  3. If you continue to have nightmares and poor sleep.
  4. If you have no-one with whom to share your feelings when you want to do so.
  5. If your relationships seem to be suffering badly, or sexual problems develop.
  6. If you become clumsy or accident prone.
  7. If, in order to cope after the event, you smoke, drink or take more medication/other drugs.
  8. If your work performance suffers.
  9. If you are tired all the time.
  10. If things get on top of you and you feel like giving up.
  11. If you take it out on your family
  12. If your health deteriorates.
- (NAS CISM, 2018)

In order to maintain our wellbeing and resilience it is important to seek Social Support, either informally through a colleague, friend, family member, a fellow colleague trained in Peer support or through an appropriately trained Mental Health Profession available to all NAS Staff. We should be cognisant of not wasting emotional energy and knowing who our supports are – see links below for these contacts [www.cism.ie](http://www.cism.ie) or <https://www.hse.ie/eng/staff/workplace-health-and-wellbeing-unit/employee-assistance-and-counselling-service/> These supports are all confidential and come at no financial costs to us.

We should all try to maintain our personal boundaries and learning methods of managing them (relationships, career, family, financial, time management, quiet time, hobbies, relaxation techniques). All of these build our resistance to stress and maintain our own personal resilience. In addition we should be cognisant of and acknowledge our own positive qualities and things we are good at; we need to learn to identify and challenge unhelpful thinking patterns and spend time with supportive people. Being assertive helps us to ensure we don't allow people to treat us with lack of respect.

Most importantly for our resilience we need to engage in hobbies that we enjoy – some fun time – imperative to managing our stress and wellbeing!

**For further information please visit:**

1. <http://www.cism.ie>
2. <https://www.hse.ie/eng/staff/workplace-health-and-wellbeing-unit/employee-assistance-and-counselling-service/>