

Stress in the emergency services

There was a spate of horrific disasters in Britain in the 1980s, including the Bradford football stadium fire, the Kings Cross Underground fire, the Hillsborough football stadium disaster and the Lockerbie air disaster. Following these disasters, some emergency service organisations, in particular police forces and fire brigades, were faced with compensation claims and law suits from personnel who claimed to have suffered psychological trauma known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a consequence of their involvement in these disasters. Many were awarded substantial sums in compensation either directly, from emergency service organisations, or through courts of law.

Most emergency service organisations, including the police, fire service and ambulance service began looking at how they should respond to the psychological needs of staff both in general terms and, specifically, in the event of a disaster. In one initiative, the ambulance, fire and police service in the same geographical area, jointly funded the appointment of an occupational health psychologist who was to be responsible for investigating how these organisations could best meet the psychological needs of staff and to assess the current provision of psychological support. The following case study presents a number of different perspectives on psychological trauma drawn from those involved in the above initiative. First, a brief history of psychological trauma is presented.

Perspectives on PTSD

The cynics

Across the three emergency services (police, fire and ambulance) there is a group of personnel comprising senior, mid-ranking, and junior officers, as well as grass roots personnel of both sexes that can be characterised as cynical about PTSD. These are some of the views expressed by this group:

- 1) Lazy and/or incompetent staff who want to make money out of their organisation are those most likely to claim to be suffering from PTSD.
- 2) It isn't a 'real' illness. It has been invented in recent years and no such thing as trauma existed in the 'olden days'.
- 3) People shouldn't be working in the emergency services if they can't cope with the job, and they certainly shouldn't be rewarded for not being able to cope by being awarded financial compensation.
- 4) Why should the organisation spend money on services for staff who can't cope with the normal pressures of the work, when there are staff who *can* cope struggling to manage on stretched resources?

The sympathisers

Across the services and among the same groups, is another group of personnel that can be characterised as sympathetic towards PTSD. These are some of their views:

- 1) The emergency services are historically and inherently 'macho', refusing to acknowledge the existence of normal emotional reactions to traumatic incidents. It is this 'machismo' that leads to staff suffering from PTSD because they are discouraged from showing emotions.
- 2) Trauma has always existed but has only recently been understood. In the First World War, soldiers suffering from trauma were treated as cowards and shot.

- 3) In the main, emergency service work does not involve routinely dealing with horrific disasters. While staff may routinely cope with events members of the public would find traumatic, such as road traffic accidents, events of the scale and scope of, say, the Hillsborough disaster or the extreme case of September 11th, invoke reactions that are unexpected in even the most experienced emergency service personnel.
- 4) All organisations should act humanely towards staff and the care needed for such staff must transcend economic considerations.

Questions

1. Use the concept of discourse to analyse the differences of opinion about stress and trauma that the case highlights.
2. How can the perspectives of the two groups be addressed when planning interventions to help the traumatised?
3. What effects might such perspectives have on (i) the effectiveness of interventions (ii) the identity of those who perceive themselves to be suffering from PTSD?