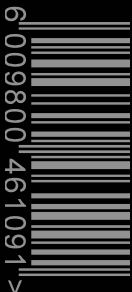


MENTAL HEALTH & KEY FRONTLINE WORKERS' EXPERIENCES DURING COVID-19

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Created by Alpha Leader



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MENTAL WELLNESS PERSPECTIVES FROM KEY FRONT LINE WORKERS DURING COVID-19

Our mental health has suffered a severe impact due to the pandemic. There were preexistent cases of anxiety, depression and suicidal behaviours, to name some of the most spread amongst humanity, and sadly, they have become more acute over time.

This is the most critical time to provide support to frontline workers since they are expected to carry the burden. In contrast, others stay home or in public, not participating responsibility in collective efforts.

Human response and behaviour are the ones that can put a stop to this pandemic for another year. Even if vaccines cover most of the populations in the next three years, the virus keeps mutating, and vaccines could not be one hundred per cent effective.

Whether it is a human-made virus or natural evolution and mutation of viruses, we are here still not having learned the lessons we live with past pandemics and epidemics; we have not taken responsibility for the necessary steps to reduce the burden for frontline workers.

Each of us must reduce risks and start tackling the pandemic's spread even more, and nor expect that FRONTLINE workers are the only ones responsible for taking care of us since the pandemic is not the only challenge they face every day to protect us. Let's work together.

- Alpha Leader



An unstoppable Frontline worker

Stuart Fore, a US Army veteran and US Police Sergeant has decades of courageous and outstanding experience serving the United States of America.

His beginnings of this unconditional service were forged in the military and to continue through the path of a public servant he decided to join Law Enforcement after his retirement; doing so, he extended his genuine patriotism demonstrating with actions how a country, its laws and its people are protected.

Throughout these years of service, he has observed and experienced firsthand the mental health impact on front line workers this is one of many reasons his insights become so valuable for those who have to plan, prepare, respond and mitigate emergencies and crises.

We thank him for his continuous service and we value the insights provided through this interview about "Mental health & key frontline workers' experiences during covid-19". Sharing his knowledge is key to learn from experiences of real heroes through these troubling times.



MENTAL RESILIENCE SEEMS TO BE LOWER...

Stuart, what motivated you to choose your career path?

I have always believed in service to my country and community. Although the term is thrown around loosely these days, I have never considered myself a “hero” but rather someone who is willing to do what others would not or do not want to do. Having been in the military and still in law enforcement gives me a chance to serve in an area not many are willing.

What do you consider are the main reasons that prevent someone at a personal or professional level to admit that has a mental disorder or requires mental wellness support?

Two reasons:

First, they are afraid of losing their job or being removed from their current position.

Second, although the stigma of mental health is lower than ever before, it is human nature for people, especially in jobs such as the military or first responders, to be tough enough not to let things bother them because they do not want their co-workers or families to think they are weak.

Which populations in society, in general, do you consider are the most vulnerable to have their mental wellness affected nowadays? (children, adolescents, youth, adults, the elderly, pregnant women, people with physical disabilities and impairments, people with mental illnesses)

In my Law Enforcement Officer job, I see that many adolescents and young adults have the most difficulties with mental health. The answer to “why this is” is not clear other than resilience levels are lower than they used to be. The world is more technologically advanced than in previous years, but mental resilience seems to be lower in adolescents and young adults now more than ever. Is it due to more and better technology? That has not been answered, but there seems to be a link compared to other generations. In my personal experience, suicides and suicide attempts are higher in those groups.



Based on what you have observed recently, what do you consider is the mental health stigma level? Mild, moderate, or high?

Due to the level of information being put out now, I believe mental health stigma is lower than it used to be. I would say the stigma is mild in today's society. Also, many more industry leaders are getting behind mental health wellbeing of their employees.



MENTAL
HEALTH
MATTERS

PTSD IS THROWN AROUND LOOSELY THESE DAYS...

We are aware that all professions imply a level of risk at some point, but generally speaking which ones do you consider are the most vulnerable to suffer from anxiety, depression, or suicidal thoughts?

Having spent most of my adult life in the military and as a first responder it would be difficult for me to speak on behalf of another profession/industry, but most first responders who have been on the job for several years have some level of PTSD. PTSD is thrown around loosely these days, but most first responders have it at different levels. That is why supervisors need to know their people on both a personal and a professional level.

The stressors within your profession have been always high but they seem to have increased. What do you think is the current mental health status in your field while dealing with COVID-19?

That depends on the part of the country. In the part of the country, I live in (western US) my police department and those agencies we interact with daily have not changed how we conduct business. At first, we took a step back from routine contact, but then after a short time returned to business as usual.

Within frontline workers/first responders, which do you think are the professions who are under more pressure during the pandemic and why (That means dealing with their work plus adding the covid-19 threat)

I would say the medical profession. First responders conduct business as usual, but medical professionals are under more pressure. I was told by a nurse not long ago that they are no longer allowed to test for the flu or other similar medical issues, so getting the proper diagnosis is more difficult for them. However, I have seen the medical profession falling into a “normal routine” since the incident has been dragged out further.



Sometimes we choose to ignore changes in behaviour from people we know because of the stigma. Which signs or behaviours (even if subtle) do you consider we have to pay attention in regards to mental health in any population?

Those who quit caring and fall into a dark place which is evident by a personality change. That is why supervisors need to know their people so that they can spot these changes when they happen.

COPS ARE SAID TO HAVE THE SICKEST SENSE OF HUMOR BECAUSE IT IS HOW WE DEAL WITH THE THINGS WE SEE AND INTERACT WITH...

You have a long trajectory in public service, during this time, have you ever been involved in a mission to prevent suicide?

In the US, we have just finished our biggest holiday season (1 Nov – 1 Jan). Every year during this time, suicides are up.

This year the suicide rate in civilians was through the roof.

In my area, law enforcement responded to people having mental breakdowns and suicidal thoughts/attempts several times a day. How many suicides attempts I have stopped is hard to tell other than knowing it has been many.

I have taken guns and knives off people, talked them down from business rooftops, convinced them over the phone to tell me where they were after taking pills, administered CPR and Narcan to those who have taken pills and talked many down before they attempted suicide. This is why all officers in my department are CIT certified and go through yearly training on mental health issues.

Dealing with people wanting to commit suicide has become almost a daily issue that police responds to because there are not enough social workers, so the police are the ones called for everything.

What was your mental wellness impact after helping others deal with a particular mental health disorder or suicide attempt?

After so many years of responding to mental health or suicide calls, I've become very good at compartmentalizing the incidents. I deal with it and move on to the next call. However, I will admit that it is tougher dealing with the death of a child, whether it is suicide or natural/accidental than for an adult. Cops are said to have the sickest sense of humor because it is how we deal with the things we see and interact with.



One way or other many people around the world have been affected by the current health crisis, but in your case, coming from a resilience culture, how has the pandemic affected your mental wellness and levels of stress?

Honestly, it has not affected it one bit. For me, it is business as usual. I believe I am that way because of the mental resilience which was built into me from the military back in the day when things were tougher, and we were expected to be mentally tough.

**PREVENTION AND
MITIGATION ARE
EXTREMELY
IMPORTANT,
ESPECIALLY FOR
THOSE WHO ARE AT
HIGH RISK FOR
MENTAL HEALTH
ISSUES...**

With so many trending topics. Do you consider there is something specific needed to raise more awareness regarding mental wellness?

Currently, mental awareness is a hot topic. I do not think specific things to raise awareness for it right now is the issue because of the media (traditional and social) that the subject is getting.

I think the issue that needs to be raised is that the mental health system is broken and needs to be fixed. For instance, I once talked a man off an overpass who wanted to kill himself. I took him to the hospital for a mental health evaluation.

His parents told me the man was a risk to society because of his mental health. This information was passed on to the hospital social worker.

Two hours later I saw the man walking down the street. When I stopped and talked to him, he told me the social worker at the hospital said he was not a threat to himself or anyone else because he knew how to answer their questions; This is one of many examples which happen daily.

As a first responder, we try to help or get to help people with mental health issues, but the system is a revolving door. It needs to stop revolving and start helping those who need it without just sticking them on medications.

We realize there are so many people in need of mental health support; what could governments do to support this field and its initiatives?

As stated before, the system is broken. What needs to be done is above me even though I am a cog in the wheel. I honestly do not know how or what needs to be changed to fix the system, but just pumping money into the problem is not going to fix it and that is what the government does.

The system needs an overhaul by people who are willing to think outside the box to change it.



For Mental Health purposes, how important do you consider is Prevention over Mitigation?

Prevention and mitigation are extremely important especially for those who are at high risk for mental health issues. At the same time, we need to have something in place which helps those who could, due to jobs/experiences, experience a mental health issue. Charts, graphs, and matrix systems are not the answer, but understanding the people around you are the key in my opinion.

THE MEDIA (BOTH TRADITIONAL AND SOCIAL) PLAY A LARGE PART IN THE MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA BECAUSE OF THE WAY STORIES ARE SLANTED...

When fighting for a cause, collective efforts have proven to be more effective. What do you consider is required to be done for mental wellness at the community level?

Awareness and understanding are out there and getting more understood by the community, so education is still a large part of mental wellness in the community.

Do you consider conventional and social MEDIA play any role regarding the mental health stigma and why?

The media (both traditional and social) play a large part in the mental health stigma because of the way stories are slanted. The media is never interested in the facts unless they are able to slant the facts to support their agenda. In my opinion, the mental health stigma is a tool which the traditional and social media use in order to create controversy. The more controversy the better the ratings, likes, comments, and/or followers.

Due to the powerful influence they have, what could conventional and social media do to fight the mental health stigma?

Report just the facts without opinions or a slant. I believe if this were done then the mental health stigma would be lessened.



How do you think your profession has improved mental health conditions over the years? (for workers)

Over the years I have been a police officer, I have seen the command level begin to understand that someone who needs mental help should not be ostracized but instead be helped. This has helped change the issues many police officers and first responders face daily.

Which areas do you see as a priority for mental health awareness?

Getting the help someone needs without having the stigma of "being mental".

IT TAKES TIME TO BUILD RESILIENCE AND OFTEN NEEDS TO START AT A YOUNGER AGE...

Being a physically active person for many years. What do you think is the role of an active lifestyle and/or working out to improve mental wellness?

It is huge. I have seen the difference between those who just sit and stare at a TV, phone, or computer all day compared to those who work out and have an active lifestyle. The former tend to have more mentally healthy people.



Do you have any personal routine to stay mentally fit that you would like to share?

Working out (which I need to get back into). Also, I enjoy my quiet time. No TV, no computer, no phone. Sometimes that “quiet time” is on my motorcycle cruising down a backroad with the wind in my face.

What would be five factors that you consider we should develop to become more mentally resilient?

I do not know about five factors, but I believe we need to start teaching our children to be able to deal with situations better instead of protecting them as much (protecting the young is an animal/human instinct).

I believe children need to be taught how to fail, learn from it, and overcome the failures without having a meltdown.

Many who have been through a traumatic event and survived are often mentally tougher than those who have not, but most mental resilience does not happen overnight. It takes time to build resilience and often needs to start at a younger age.

Looking at the differences between my generation and the teenage generation of today, there is a stark difference in mental resilience.

I believe the reason for those differences are because we have not allowed our children to learn to fail and overcome it.

Being knocked down and pulling yourself up, build that mental resilience that seems to be lacking in today's society.

**FEAR OF PEOPLE
JUDGING YOU IS
NORMAL, BUT THE
BOTTOM LINE IS THAT
IT IS NOT THEIR LIFE,
BUT IT IS YOURS...**

With so many mental health risks nowadays. What would be your advice to those who are currently suffering from depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts but refuse to seek professional help out of fear to be judged?

Seek mental health treatment. Fear of people judging you is normal, but the bottom line is that it is not their life, but it is yours.

By getting the help needed you will become a stronger person and the people around you, whom you think will judge you, will see the improvement, and some might be inspired by it.

What do you consider that governments could do for the mental wellness of frontline workers?

Government leaders could set up the counselling needed, but that cost money which is always tight. The government needs frontline workers/first responders who are mentally ready but need to set up the support system to have them at that level. This also needs to be set up after they leave the field because most of the time, once someone retires, they are thrown to the wolves without any help after years of service.

Mental health has been impacted globally. What are the major effects of COVID 19 in frontline elements?

Frontline workers being mentally wiped out. Many are tired due to the overwhelming number of people and new regulations. It takes longer to get in to see a doctor due to more testing, which only piles more work on the frontline workers such as nurses.



WE LIVE IN A GREY WORLD THAT IS DIFFERENT TO EVERYONE...

From your point of view, is there a genuine solution to address the mental wellness of societies in general?

No. First of all, we do not live in a black and white world. We live in a grey world that is different for everyone. There is no “one solution.” Instead, every issue must be taken on case-by-case bases. Second, as mentioned before, the mental health system is a revolving door because of a lack of space, money, and trained workers. There needs to be an overhaul of the mental health profession which is outside the box of what we operate in now. I only wish I had the answer to what that solution would be.

What would be the consequences if we do not solve the mental health crisis that is growing during the pandemic?

In my opinion, the government and media need to stop feeding the “panic fire.” This only adds to the issue of mental health. Currently, we are just putting a band-aid on the issue. Real change needs to be done in the mental field and improvements need to be made, otherwise, without a combined effort from the government, media, and mental health organizations the problem will get worse and fear will continue to spread.



I am grateful for having the distinct pleasure to have interviewed such a consummate professional as Stuart Fore and learn from a fraction of his valuable points of view as a front line worker who works tirelessly and unconditionally to protect his country.

It is vital to remember that our first responders, emergency managers, crisis managers, and humanitarians are also human beings who feel, get tired, have families, worries, fears, and dreams, and can also experience tiredness, burn out and stress when we push them beyond their limits.

It is our opportunity to be grateful and give back every day through civic responsibility; by doing so, we can reduce the burden imposed on them by the pandemic and the hard work they perform for us. - LGC /Alpha Leader