



OUT OF ORDER

STRESS

IN THE 9-1-1 CENTER

CAN YOU IDENTIFY STRESS IN YOUR TEAM MEMBERS?

By **Dan L. Lewis, ENP**

Reedy Creek Emergency Services, Lake Buena Vista, FL

A quick Internet search for the term “stress” returns thousands of links and articles that attempt to define, diagnose, and even offer treatment options for stress, but none agree completely on the real definition. This paper uses the broad definition provided by Alia Crum, Peter Salovey, and Shawn Achor (2013): “Stress can generally be considered as the experience of anticipating or encountering adversity in one’s goal-related efforts.”

The “adversity” can take many forms in 9-1-1 centers. Call takers and dispatchers deal with critical incidents on a daily basis with an overarching goal of saving lives and preventing situations from deteriorating. When faced with challenges that either complicate or impede the process of achieving the desired goals, the call takers and dispatchers experience stress. According to the Mayo Clinic (Mayo Clinic Staff 2012), stress can impact your

body, affect your mood, and change your behavior in the following ways:

On your body:

Headache
Muscle tension or pain
Chest pain
Fatigue
Change in sex drive
Stomach upset
Sleep problems

On your mood:

Anxiety
Restlessness
Lack of motivation or focus
Irritability or anger
Sadness or depression

On your behavior:

Overeating or under eating
Angry outbursts
Drug or alcohol abuse
Tobacco use
Social withdrawal

In addition to the listed symptoms, some researchers argue that 9-1-1 dispatchers and call takers are at risk for suffering the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder due to the nature of the job and the severity of the calls that they take (Dallas, M. 2012). On-scene responders have long been included as potential victims of post-traumatic stress disorders due to the visual and physical proximity to the severe incidents, but many are making the case for call takers and dispatchers to be screened for these disorders as well (Brian, B. 2012). While responders face the emergencies in person, dispatchers and call takers are remote, and fail to receive any closure on the incidents, which can exacerbate the issues they may deal with in the aftermath.

Much of the stress placed on personnel in a communications center is psychological in nature. The impact of intense calls, frustrations with co-workers or supervision, and the rigorous demand placed on the individual to be mentally prepared for the next call all cause reactions that, if not dealt with appropriately, could overwhelm the individual and affect their performance.

Even when the personnel claim to be in control and fully prepared to carry out the responsibilities of their job, when a simple mistake is made, the response could be disproportionate, indicating that the individual may be under a much higher level of psychological stress than normal (Sapolsky, R. 2004 pp. 268).

Identifying Stress in the Communications Center

Working with the same personnel daily may pose challenges for identifying changes in behavior and responses to stressful situations, but with some attention to detail and persistence observation, it is possible to identify extraordinary reactions versus the normal instances of "letting off steam." Stress can manifest itself in many ways as indicated in the previous section, but in groups of individuals working in close quarters, such as a communications center, it's important to recognize those manifestations not only in one person but also in the overall group and group dynamics. Individuals may display increased agitation, memory problems, changes in diet, and extreme fatigue. Management may notice these on a case-by-case basis, but when dealing with the group as a whole, recognizing that a moderate increase in the turnover rate, higher sick leave usage, decreased team work, more mistakes, and a challenging interpersonal relationship within the group are all signs that something could be wrong (Health and Safety Executive, n.d.).

With the increase in responsibilities related to advancing technology, call takers and dispatchers face higher levels of oversight with less time to recuperate from stressful incidents. In the last 10 years, wireless call processing and VoIP implementation has added increased difficulties in finding the exact location of the emergency. On the horizon, text messaging to 9-1-1 and all aspects of Next Generation 9-1-1 technologies have the potential to deplete the time needed to "shake off" the last call and move on to the next one. The financial crisis of the last six years has also played into higher stress levels due to many municipalities freezing pay rates and halting planned

ABSTRACT

With rapidly advancing technology, increased responsibilities, shrinking budgets, and high priority calls, the effects of stress on 9-1-1 telecommunicators should be a real and immediate concern of agency directors, managers, and supervisors. Identifying the signs of stress early and providing an outlet for employees to deal with stress in an effective manner is important to creating a healthier and more productive work force. This paper seeks to identify common signs of stress, causes and effects of high stress levels on a consistent basis, and offer options for dealing with stress in a 9-1-1 center.

staffing increases, placing more work on the communications team as a whole. In order to maintain approved staffing levels and ensure the service being provided meets the expectations, identifying increased stress levels will help managers plan work flow and schedules while possibly alleviating some factors that cause problems later on. To help identify stress early on, management may try the following:

- Make it a priority to speak to team members every day, whether as a group or individually. This shows that management sees their employees as a priority and will allow management the opportunity to look for changes in personality and behavior.
- Offer a true "open door" policy. Allowing employees to feel comfortable venting their frustrations without fear of repercussions will build trust and keep the lines of communication open.

OFFER A TRUE “OPEN DOOR” POLICY. ALLOWING EMPLOYEES TO FEEL COMFORTABLE VENTING THEIR FRUSTRATIONS WITHOUT FEAR OF REPERCUSSIONS WILL BUILD TRUST AND KEEP THE LINES OF COMMUNICATION OPEN.

- Accept feedback from the team in a constructive manner. Using suggestion boxes or a dedicated email account to receive periodic feedback can help the employees feel that they have participated in improving their work environment and that someone is truly listening to them.
- If you do accept feedback through either means, respond to the feedback, no matter the type. A quick email back or a note acknowledging that the suggestion or feedback was received shows that management has taken the time to consider any feedback or suggestions, even if they are not implemented.
- Seriously consider implementing staff suggestions. Not all feedback will be positive, but not all negative feedback is useless. You can find gems in many places, so don't write off suggestions just because they came from the “trouble maker.”
- Track call volume statistics for individuals; a lower call volume from a normally high performing employee may signify an issue that is affecting their concentration or motivation.
- Use the resources available to you. Audio recordings of call or radio traffic can be a great tool to identify abnormal conditions in the communications center. Tone of voice can tell a great deal about a dispatcher. If the dispatcher exhibits a tone that is excited or nervous during high call volume periods, that may be normal, but if this same tone is consistent throughout all time periods, this could be an indication of increased stress.

Coping Mechanisms from a Management Standpoint

There are many articles and research papers on how to best deal with stress. They all offer opinions and options for

reducing stress from the onset and techniques to cope effectively. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) says that regular exercise, adequate sleep, and eating healthier are all ways of dealing with stressful situations in the short and long term (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013), but how do these techniques translate to a busy 9-1-1 center where each call and radio transmission is a potential life-changing incident? The 24-hour environment has its own challenges, and the CDC suggestions are a great start, but it's important to identify specific options available in the industry:

- Instead of suggesting an increased exercise regimen for employees, offer access. Work with local fitness centers to negotiate a group rate for 9-1-1 communicators and, if feasible, consider offering memberships as part of the overall benefits package.
- Build a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) team, or know the location of the closest team that can be activated. The trick to using a CISD team is to actually use it. If you have an overwhelming incident, don't hesitate to ask for help from this type of team; they are trained to deal with the immediate aftermath and offer suggestions for long-term coping mechanisms.
- Allow “down time” in the communications center. This doesn't mean pulling an entire shift off of the schedule to watch television, but it could mean allowing personnel to read magazines, bring their e-readers to work, or do activities such as crossword puzzles during their shift to give a much-needed break in the action.
- Remove the stigma of stress and stress-related issues. Open conversation about the factors that stress communicators is not always a “gripe session.” Sometimes it allows the

communicators to feel more connected to the team, knowing that their co-workers feel the same way that they do about certain incidents or situations.

- Allow time away from the console. Whether it's during the day or night, call takers and dispatcher need to get up and walk away from time to time. If you identify that someone is overly stressed, seek them out to run errands, work on projects outside of the communications center, or simply take an extended break period. They may come back more energized and will appreciate the time to recuperate and recharge.
- Get the “buy in” from the entire team if you can, but don't force it. Whether you are offering extended breaks in extenuating circumstances, allowing non-communications related reading materials, or open discussions to vent, include everyone; however, some people deal with stressful incidents in their own way and forcing participation in group activities may exacerbate the situation.

Conclusion

9-1-1 personnel are facing stressful situations on a daily basis. Increased technology, decreasing budgets, higher call volumes, and demanding schedules all play a part. In order to meet the needs of staffing the communications centers for the next generation, management teams need to develop comprehensive plans that include a stress management model that lowers turnover rates and improves performance. Expectations continue to rise, and visibility for call takers and dispatchers increases with each technological development. The more that can be done to retain great employees and transition stressed employees to a healthier work environment will improve the industry as a whole. Management should be open to new ideas. Take the time to research wellness plans and talk to stress management professionals that may be able to assist in creating an environment that, while not stress-free, is at least, stress-resistant. ●