



OTTAWA FIRE SERVICES  
SERVICE DES INCENDIES D'OTTAWA

Protecting Our Nation's Capital With Pride  
Protéger notre capitale nationale avec fierté

# Mental Health & Peer Support Program

The Ottawa Fire Services Peer Support Team (OFSPST) has been created to provide peer support to the personnel of the Ottawa Fire Services (OFS) through timely proactive educational and reactive methods. This program is intended to provide information, support, and referrals, to normalize common reactions when faced with a critical incident or traumatic event. The Peer Support Team will encourage resiliency and reinforce coping strategies for either an individual or a group

## Objectives

The objectives of the OFSPST are to provide mental health support services to all OFS personnel following best practices for peer support teams. Peer Support will provide a supportive relationship through emotional and social support in a safe, non-judgemental environment. To encourage the first steps towards: recovery and hope, change, self care, self-determination and equality, mutuality and empathy. These objectives will aid in building resiliency and enables OFS personnel to cope more effectively, so they can continue to perform their duties efficiently and with satisfaction.

Peer Support is an important component of prevention and early intervention in situations where PTSD and other Operational Stress Injuries (OSIs) are possible. The Mental Health Commission of Canada research surveys on the subject of peer support point to the "importance of shared

experience" in a peer support relationship. Respondents reported that peer support environments are less threatening or intimidating than some mental health services (MHCC, 2010).

## Reducing Stigma

The careers of firefighters, as emergency services first responders, are stressful. Over time, firefighters may experience scenes of tragedy, destruction and horror that most people never see in their lifetime.

## What is Trauma?

**Trauma** is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, assault, sudden death of a loved one or natural disaster. In our lives, there are certain events that happen to us which are not planned. Sometimes these events will demand more from us than we are used to. It is at these times when we may become psychologically traumatized. Many people recover from trauma with time and through support of family and friend, but for others, the effects of trauma are lasting. While our initial responses to traumatic events are normal, over time this event may have negative effects on your life and day to day function.

Traumatic events can leave you in a state of distress long after the event has passed. Sometimes this may affect your life in other areas such as: relationships, internally triggered anxiety, panic, difficulty concentrating on tasks and a sense of unease or fear which can be debilitating. Individuals respond to trauma in different ways. Trauma can manifest days, months or even years after the actual event. Often, the support, guidance and assistance of mental health professionals is fundamental to healing from trauma.

## Signs of Trauma & Shock

### EMOTIONAL

- Sense of numbness
- Denial
- Anger
- Panic attacks
- Anxious
- Lonely, sense of being disconnected from others
- Persistent sense of fear
- Flashbacks
- Sadness

### PHYSICAL

- Insomnia, nightmares
- Feeling easily agitated or startled
- Paleness
- Lethargy
- Fatigue
- Poor concentration
- Racing Heartbeat

(These symptoms of trauma are common, they are not exhaustive)

## What Causes Trauma?

### GENERAL CAUSES

- Unexpected exposure to a overwhelming situation for which you were unprepared
- You were or you felt powerless to deal with the situation
- You may have been too young to handle the demands of the event
- Your internal psychological resources were not able to address the demands of the situation
- You may have been exposed to a series of stressors and traumatic events over a period of time

### EMOTIONAL AND RELATIONAL CAUSES

- Repeated emotional abuse in a significant relationship
- A relational betrayal / experience of being backstabbed
- Manipulation by a significant other
- Overwhelming shame or guilt
- Being bullied, whether you are a young child, teen or an adult
- Emotional neglect
- Subjected to pervasive passive aggressive relational patterns

## When is it time to seek help?

### It may be time to get professional support if you are:

- Having difficulty functioning your relationships
- Having challenges at work due to the signs indicated above
- Feeling numb and unable to connect with others
- Having difficulty controlling intrusive thoughts or flashbacks
- Unable to concentrate and this is affecting the quality of your work/school/family life
- Are using methods to numb your pain or escape, such as drugs, sex or gambling

## Therapy for Trauma

- Psychotherapy is the most effective form of treatment for healing from the effects of trauma
- develop plans to stay safe,
- learn healthy coping skills
- connect with other resources and support
- can help people heal from trauma even long after the traumatic event took place
- Unresolved trauma is one of the most common reasons people seek counseling or therapy.
- The goal of which is to heal through addressing the existential questions that arise in the aftermath of trauma. In some cases, medications, such as anti-depressants, anti-anxiety medications, and mood stabilizers, are employed to help manage the more challenging symptoms of posttraumatic stress.

## Do I have PTSD?

**Directions:** Read each of the statements below. If you have been experiencing these symptoms for more than one month, mark the box at the beginning of the statement. When you are done, take it to your doctor or share with your supervisor so that they can help you access the support you need. You should call a doctor if you have been experiencing the symptoms for more than one month and you are experiencing at least:

- One intrusive memory symptom
- Three avoidance symptoms and
- Two hyper-arousal symptoms

### Intrusive Memory Symptoms

Select (☐) all that apply. In the last month have you experienced any of the following intrusive memories:

- recurring, unwanted distressing memories of the traumatic event
- reliving the event as if it were happening again
- upsetting dreams about the event
- severe emotional distress or physical reactions (heart racing, hands sweating) to something that reminds you of the event.

### Avoidance Symptoms

Select (☐) all that apply. In the last month have you experienced any of the following avoidance symptoms:

- trying to avoid thinking about the event
- avoiding places, objects, activities or people that remind you of the event
- increased negative feelings about self or others
- feeling emotionally numb or inability to experience positive or negative emotions
- feeling hopeless about the future
- losing interest in activities that were enjoyable in the past
- feeling strong guilt, depression or worry
- memory problems including not remembering important aspects of the traumatic event
- difficulty maintaining close relationships

### Hyper-arousal Symptoms

Select (☐) all that apply. In the last month have you experienced any of the following hyper-arousal symptoms:

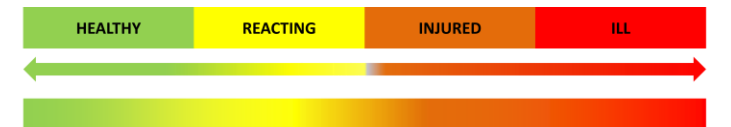
- irritability, feeling tense or “on guard”

- difficulty sleeping
- angry outbursts or aggressive behaviours,
- being on constant guard for danger,
- feelings of overwhelming guilt or shame,
- self-destructive behaviours,
- trouble concentrating or sleeping
- being easily startled or frightened

If you are experiencing an emergency, please go to the emergency department of your nearest general hospital or call 911

Ottawa and the counties of Prescott Russell, Renfrew and Stormont  
Dundas and Glengarry **613.722.6914**

- Leeds & Grenville district **1.866.281.2911**
- Pembroke Regional Hospital Mobile Crisis Team **613.732.3675 ext. 8116** or **1.866.996.0991**
- Youth Services Bureau 24/7 Crisis Line **613.260.2360** or **1.877.377.7775**



Good Mental health Normal functioning	Common, self-limiting distress	More severe and persistent functional impairment	Diagnosable mental illness Severe and persistent functional impairment
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	Normal mood fluctuations Calm/confident Good sense of humour	Irritable/impatient Nervous Sadness/Overwhelmed	Anger Anxiety Pervasively sad/Hopeless	Easily enraged/aggression Excessive anxiety/panic attacks Depressed mood/ numb
Mood	Taking things in stride In control mentally Can concentrate/focus	Displaced sarcasm Distracted/lose focus Intrusive thoughts	Negative attitude Recurrent intrusive thoughts Constantly distracted Can't focus on tasks	Non compliant Cannot concentrate Loss of memory/cognitive ability Suicidal thoughts/intent
Thinking/ Attitude	Normal sleep patterns Few sleep difficulties Physically well Feeling energetic Maintaining a stable weight	Trouble sleeping Lack of energy Changes in eating patterns Some weight gain or loss	Restless disturbed sleep Some tiredness/fatigue Fluctuations in weight	Can't fall asleep or stay asleep Sleeping too much or too little Physical illnesses Constant fatigue/exhaustion Extreme weight loss or gain
Physical	Physically and socially active Performing well No/limited alcohol use/ gambling	Decreased activity/socializing Procrastination Regular but controlled alcohol use/gambling	Avoidance Tardiness Decreased performance Increased alcohol use/ gambling – hard to control	Withdrawal Absenteeism Can't perform duties/tasks Alcohol or gambling addiction Other addictions
Behaviour/ Performance				