



# Composure Under Fire

Developing and Maintaining Emotional and Psychological  
Survival Skills in the Fire Service Office



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# Emotional Detachment



I DON'T CARE



- 1<sup>st</sup> Harm we see is in our Health
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Harm is in our Personal Relationships
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Harm is in our Professional Relationships
- 4<sup>th</sup> Harm is in the Work We Do
  - No longer bringing our "A" game

"When we don't like what is going on  
we reach for consumption."

# High Stress Response



## ■ Physically/Emotionally Demanding



Pictured here is a watch reading of a firefighter's heart rate through an early morning fire.

Firefighters often go from sleeping to on scene of an emergency in just a few minutes.

- The white portion is the sleeping heart rate of 40-50 bpm
- The red portion is the initial alarm wake up where the firefighters heart rate jumped to 141 bpm
- The last multicolored portion is the elevated heart rate throughout the fire where the heart rate consistently stayed over 100 bpm.



# Trauma Exposure



“At least six people died in an east Vancouver house fire early Sunday morning, police said Sunday night”



## SIDS/SUDI

Although fewer than 2,500 infant deaths this year will be classified as SIDS



There are 294,851 emergency medical services-treated out-of-hospital cardiac arrests annually in the United States.



# High Stress Environment



- High Performance Expectation
  - Yourself
  - Organization
  - Public
- Low Frequency/High Risk Events
- High Frequency/Medium-Low Risk Events
- High Cost of Mistakes
- High Emotional Connections
- Working 24 or 48hr Shifts



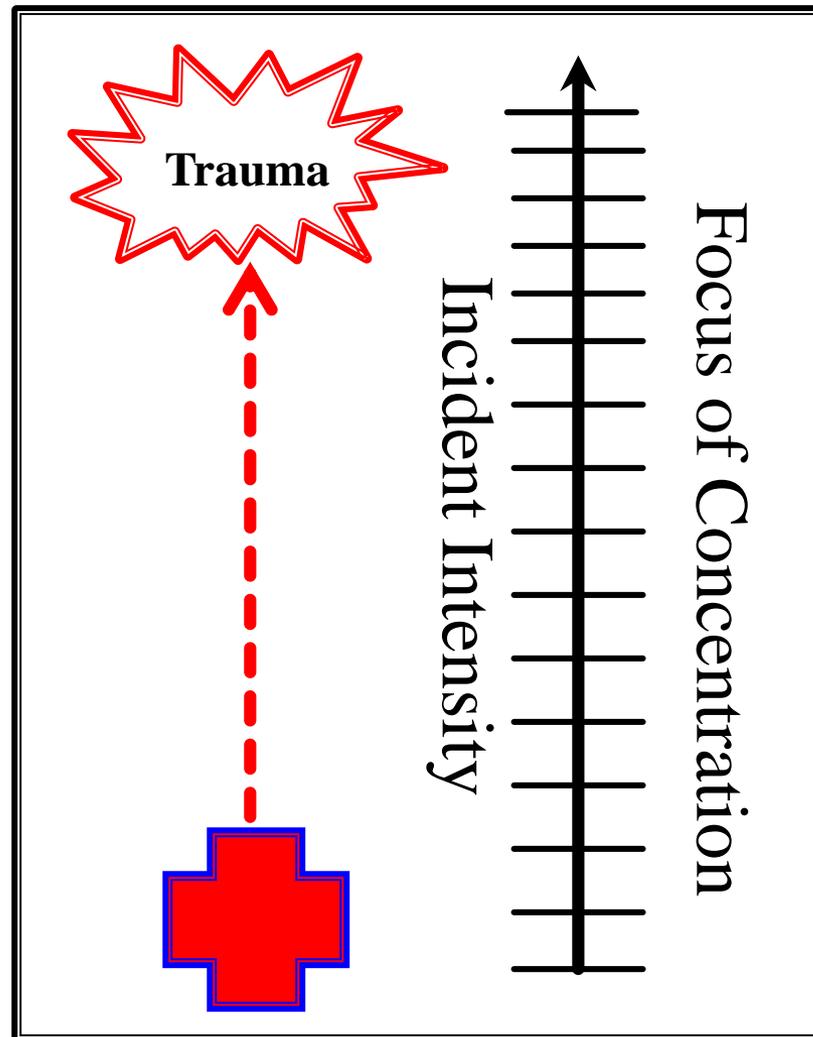
**Forbes Magazine ranked the  
Fire Service 2017's 2<sup>nd</sup> most  
stressful job in the Nation**



# You Pay to Play...

## The Emotional Energy Factor

- Responding to 911 Calls
  - We meet people at their worst times
- Intensity of this “meeting” requires a high Focus of Concentration
- What’s the cost?
  - Emotional Energy



# Physiological Response Trigger



- A Physiological Body Response is triggered anytime you are faced with highly demanding situation
- High Level of Physical Exertion
- Mental Clarity for Quick Thinking
- High Emotional Connection
- Multitasking – Processing of Information at a very rapid pace
- Adapting to rapidly changing Environment
- Knowing what to do without thinking about it



# Physiological Response



- A Physiological Body Response is triggered anytime you are faced with highly demanding situations

- Norepinephrine and Cortisol

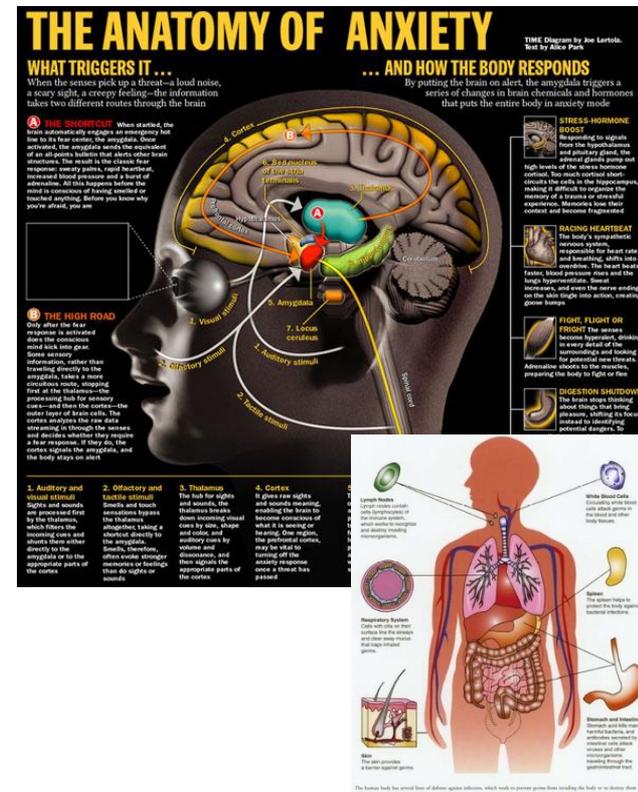
- Moves our system into "high alert"
- Work together to increase blood pressure
- Cortisol narrows the arteries
- Norepinephrine increases heart rate

- Noradrenalin

- Gives you energy

- Dopamine

- An inhibitory neurotransmitter
- Allows you to fight injured





# Long-Term Stress Response

## Physiological Response



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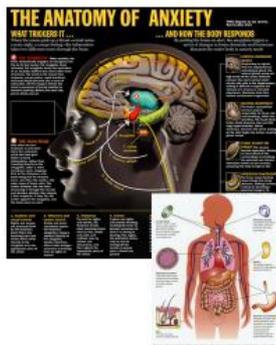
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- An inhibitory neurotransmitter
- Allows you to fight or injure



- Overexposure to cortisol and other stress hormones
  - Anxiety
  - Depression
  - Digestive Problems
  - Headaches
  - Heart Disease
  - Sleep Problems
  - Weight Gain
  - Memory and Concentration Impairment

# The Job Changes Us



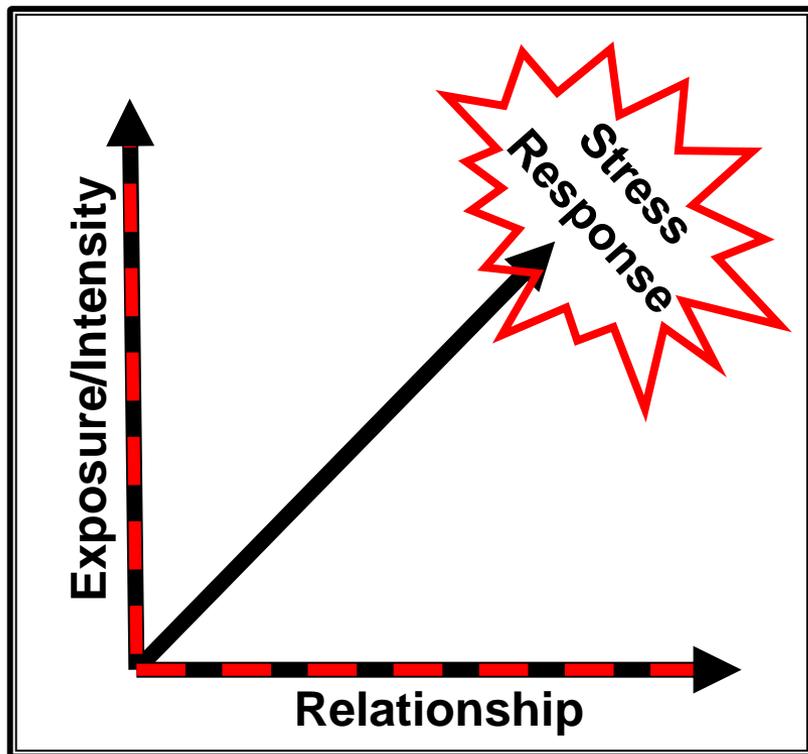
- “I love my work but I hate the person I have become”
- Critical thinking towards others
- Cynicism and Sarcasm
- Hyper Vigilance
- Sleep Disturbance
- A distorted view of life, people, and situations
- I suck at home but I am on my “A” game at work



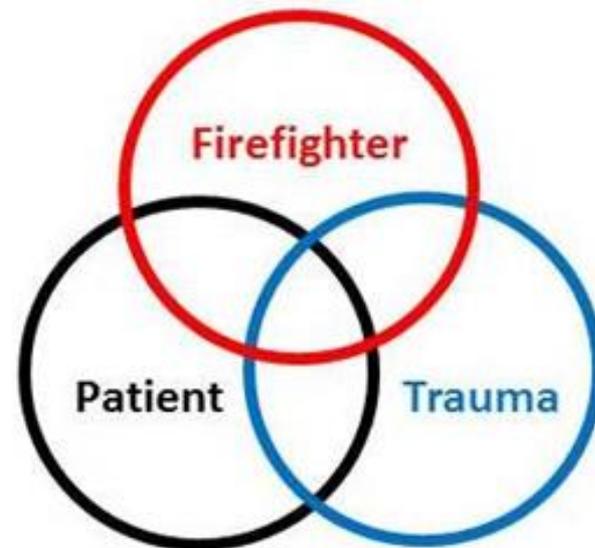


# 2 Stress Response Factors

1. Critical Incident Stress - Stress Response is not based a on weakness, but rather it is a dose response relationship to the exposure.



2. Secondary Trauma Stress otherwise known as Compassion Fatigue



# Exposure/Critical Incident



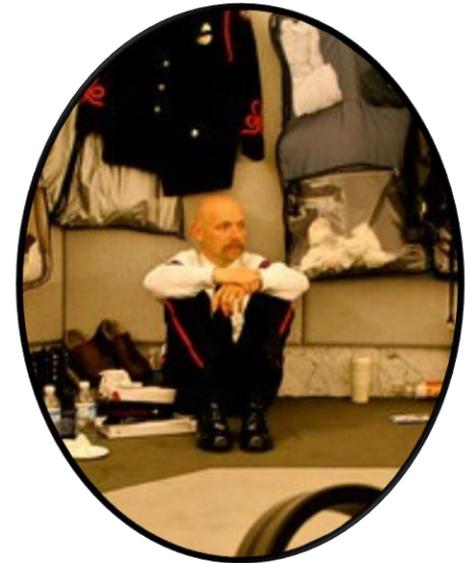
- Involvement in an event that is above and beyond our normal range of experience
- These are situations that require “Qualifiers”
  - What makes it “bad”?
    - You can identify with it
    - Violates the sense of how the world should be
    - Involves high/extreme trauma
- Causes or has the potential to cause significant emotional distress



# Critical Incident Stress



- The feelings and emotions you experience after a tough call
  - Sadness
  - Helplessness
  - Crappy
  - Lack of Emotional Control
  - Out of Sorts
  - Hard
  - Cynical
  - Empty

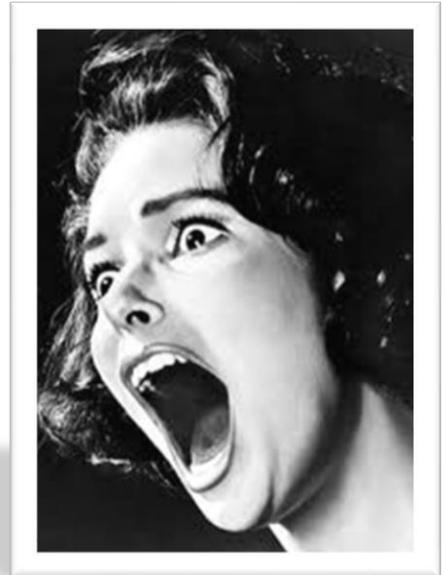


# Critical Incident Stress Impacts



## ■ These feelings and emotions cause you too..

- Isolate/Withdraw
- Pit in the Stomach
- Crying
- Fatigue
- Shaking
- Headache
- Dizzy
- Agitation/Irritability
- Feeling Angry
- Don't want to talk about it
- Do something to take your mind off of it
- Can't stop thinking about it
- Don't want to go there
  - Don't think about it
  - Don't dwell on it
- Hyper-Vigilant
- Rapid Heart Rate
- Poor Attention Span



# The BAD Sunburn....



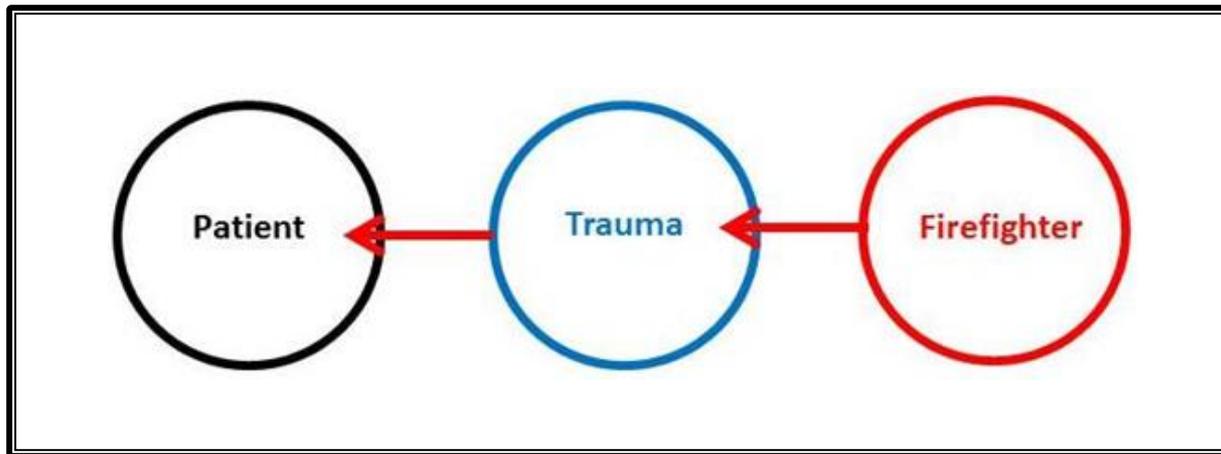
- Post-Trauma-Stress
  - The negative emotional experience that can occur following the involvement in or the witnessing of a traumatic event.
  
- Exposure
  - Intense Fear
  - Helplessness
  - Horror
- Symptoms
  - Intrusive Memories
  - Avoidance/Numbing
  - Hyper-Alertness
  
- Symptoms go away over a short period of time but you never forget



# Linear Problem Solvers



- The hero complex built in to our personalities makes us good problem solvers
- How we see situations...

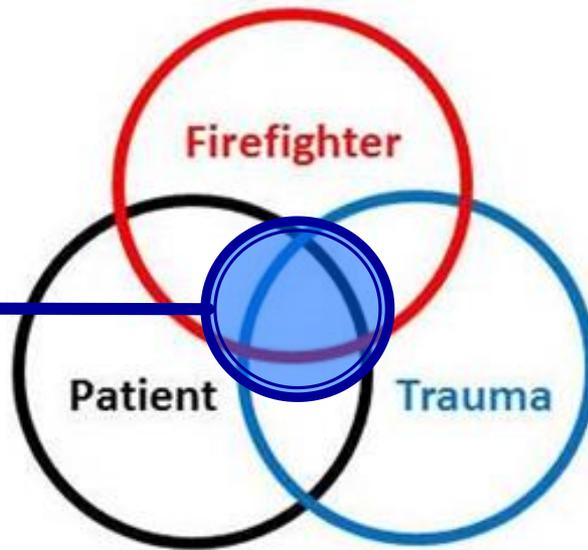


# Secondary Traumatic Stress



- Everything I experience becomes a part of who I am, a part of the time line of my life.

This goes with us and becomes a part of who you are



- The emotional residue from working with those suffering from the consequences of traumatic events.

# Compassion Fatigue



“We have not been directly exposed to the trauma scene, but we hear the story told with such intensity, or we hear similar stories so often, or we have the gift and curse of extreme empathy and we suffer. We feel the feelings of our clients. We experience their fears. We dream their dreams. Eventually, we lose a certain spark of optimism, humor and hope. We tire. We aren’t sick, but we aren’t ourselves.” C. Figley, 1995



And over time  
you feel you've  
got nothing left  
to give.

# Compassion Fatigue



- Compassion Fatigue is an interruption of your emotional connections
- It gradually erodes what makes us healers:
  - Our Hope
  - Our Empathy
  - Our Compassion



# It's a Process not a Diagnosis



“First, you should understand that it's a process. It's not a matter of one day, you're living your life with a great deal of energy and enjoyment, and the next, you wake up exhausted and devoid of any energy – both physical and emotional. Compassion fatigue develops over time – taking weeks, sometimes years to surface. Basically, it's a low level, chronic clouding of caring and concern for others in your life – whether you work in or outside the home. Over time, your ability to feel and care for others becomes eroded through overuse of your skills of compassion.”

When Helping Hurts by F. Oshberg, MD



# Admin Staff is Not Immune



- Trauma by Osmosis
  - A subtle or gradual absorption or mingling
- Constant Background Exposer
  - Radio
  - Dispatching
- Singular Sensory Input allows for your imagination to create the scene



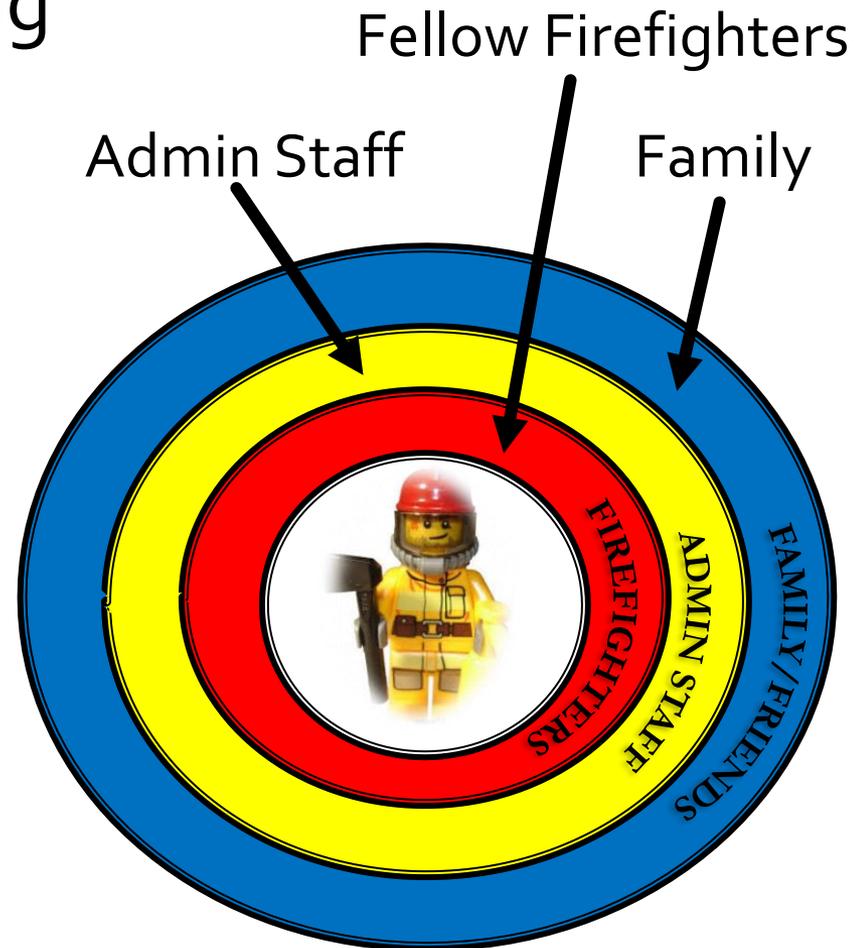
# Firefighters



## Levels of Trust/Understanding

- For Emotional Support
- Help Manage Uncertainty
- Help Find Clarity
- Refill the Emotional Energy Tank

Admin Staff are far enough away yet close enough to understand



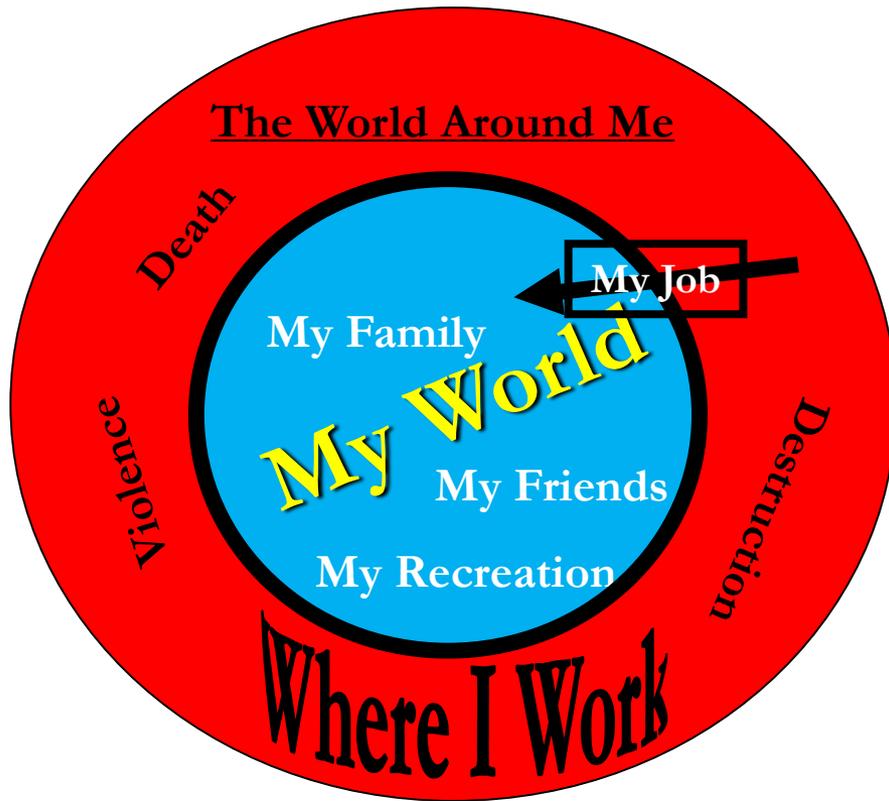
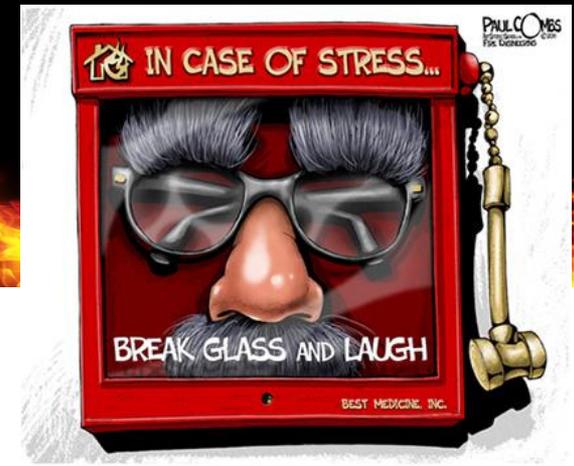
# Your “Normal’s” Change



- Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue are evident in the shift of how you view the world
  - Emotional Blunting
  - Increased Cynicism, Sarcasm, and Hyper Vigilance
  - Projecting work experience on to others
  - Critical Thinking towards others
  - Sleep Disturbance
  - Reduced sense of personal accomplishment or meaning in work
  - Bullshit meter stuck “On”



# Stress Management



“A truly ‘tough’ person in the healthiest sense of the word is not the one who avoids all stress but the one who knows how to adapt to the different levels of stress and crisis as it is occurring.”



# Emotional Speed Bumps



- The career path of a firefighter is full of Emotional Speed Bumps that “CAN” leave Emotional Impacts
  - Bad Calls
  - Discipline
  - Critical Incidents
  - Compassion Fatigue
  - Personal Life Issues

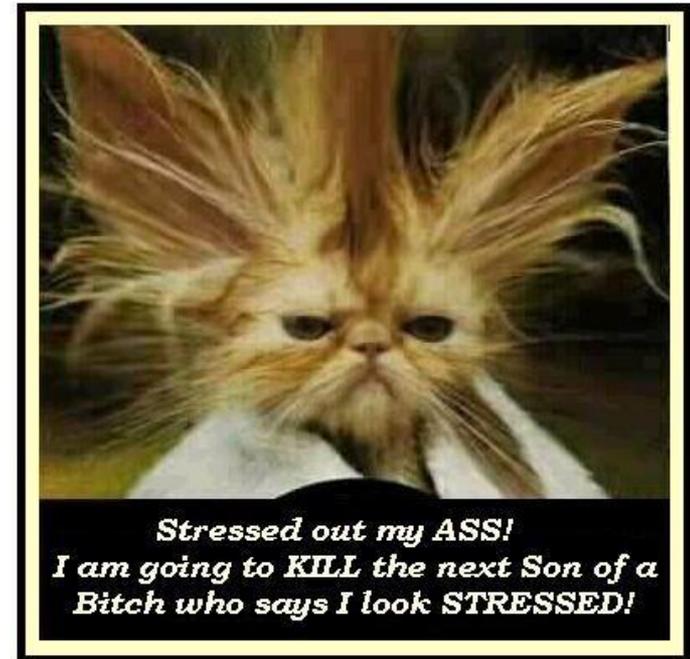


**CAUTION  
SPEED  
BUMPS  
AHEAD**

# Emotional Impacts



- Lower Job Satisfaction
- High Divorce Rate
- Burnout
- Depression
- Panic Attacks
- Health Issues
- Post Traumatic Stress Injuries
- Addiction
- Suicide



# Psychological Body Armor



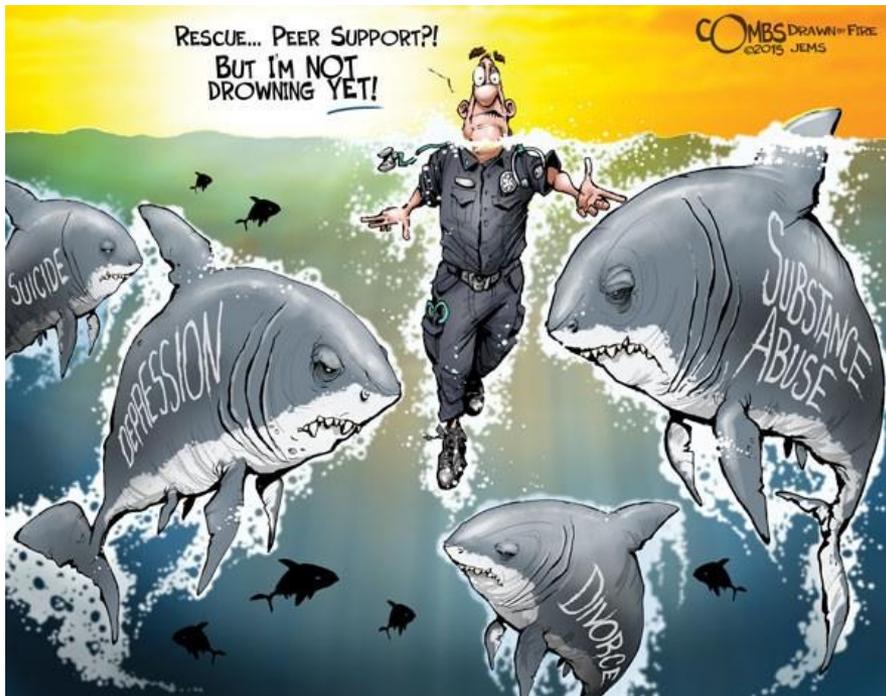
- The goal of Stress Management is Stress Resilience **NOT** Stress Resistance
- Psychological Body Armor
  - Just as you would wear body armor at a scene of violence where danger to your physical well being is present, you should also be mentally prepared for the situation where your mental and emotional state are in danger.



# First Line of Defense



- Talking is your first line of defense
- You are not alone – Please don't choose to be
- We are ALL in the together



# A Listening



## BUILDING RESILIENCE

- Telling someone
- Being believed
- Accessing information to understand what happened
- Receiving support
- Finding safety

## COMPOUNDING FACTORS

- Keeping it secret or not being able to tell anyone
- Not being believed
- Being punished
- No support
- Further trauma

It's not always about getting or giving advice. It's also about having a safe place to get things off your chest and occasionally sharing a laugh about it all!

# Talking It Out



- Talking to people who have been through similar challenges may:
  - Help you to talk about what you are feeling and experiencing
  - Help you with suggestions for coping techniques and support options
  - Introduce you to ideas and approaches that have been helpful to others
  - Reassure you that you're not the only person who has felt like this
  - Provide a sense of belonging to a community of people with similar experiences
  - Give you a safety net to turn to at difficult times or if you're at risk of crisis
  - Help you to find support that's right for you



# Crisis Hotline

- Confidential
- RCW Protected
- Peer to Peer
- Counseling Referral
- “Thrive”
- Treatment Center Referral

[www.code4nw.org](http://www.code4nw.org)

**425.243.5092**

24-hour Crisis  
Referral/Response Hotline



# Other Resources



- Friends, Family, Co-Workers
- Chaplain or Clergy
- Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
- “Qualified” Mental Health Professional (MHP)
- Spouse
  - How much do they really want to know?

“Getting help is not a sign of weakness,  
it is a sign that you know your limits”



# Preventative Maintenance



Technique-oriented

- Physical Exercise
- Proper Nutrition
- Relaxation Techniques
- Hobbies Not Related to Work
- Cognitive Reframing
- Your Belief Systems
- Your Core Values



# Biological Early Warning System



- Depressed Mood
- Insomnia
- Irritability/Withdrawal
- Suicidal Ideology
- Fatigue
- Feelings of Guilt or Worthlessness
- Lack of Interest or Concentration
- Changes In Weight
- Everyone around you becomes a A\$%#&^\$

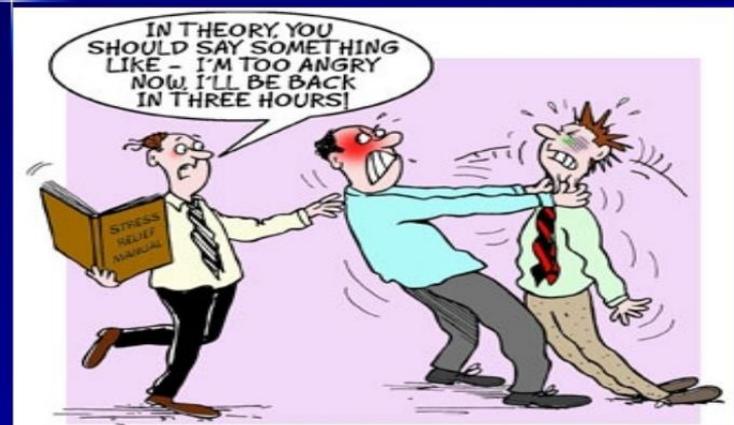


# Know Your Outlets



- Coping Skills
  - Internal skills that enable a person to respond rapidly to stressor
- Balance
- Regaining Control

## Coping with a Stressful Event



# Perspective

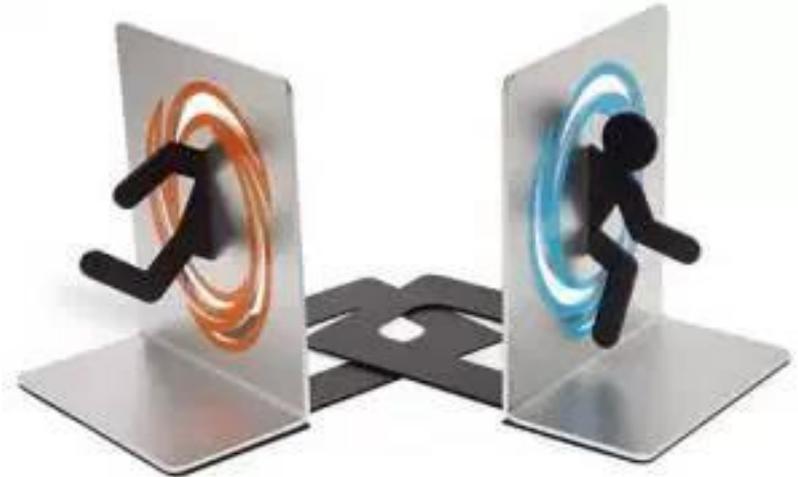


# “Being” Home



## Bookend Your Shift

- Purposely Engage
- Purposely Disengage
- When you get home – Purposely Re-Engage



# Guard Your Heart and Mind



- The essence of who you are
  - The core of your being
    - Where all your dreams, your desires, and your passions live
- The source of everything you do
  - Overflows into thoughts, words, and actions
  - If your heart is unhealthy, it has an impact on everything else
    - It threatens your family, your friends, your career, and health
- Work in an emotional combat zone

# Guard Your Heart and Mind



- Cognitive Control Strategies
  - Thought Stopping
  - Cognitive Restructuring
  - Positive Affirmations
  - Task-Relevant Self Instruction



The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings, by changing the inner attitudes of their minds, can change the outer aspects of their lives.

– William James (1842–1910)

# Things to Remember



- You are not immune to the impacts of trauma
  - Admin staff are close enough to understand
- You have to take care of yourself
  - Your memories of what you hear do not have to be
- Guard your heart
  - The “wellspring” of life
- If you need help get help





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