



Since 1991

STRESS-TALK
for
EMERGENCY SERVICES
FAMILIES

INTRODUCTION

You are someone who loves and experiences life with an emergency worker. There are many unique facts which contribute to your life and in turn, make demands of you. You lead a different life from your neighbours. You experience pressures and demands on your emotions and your time, which others do not.

You face... the humdrum as well and the crises, aloneness, problems and challenges...

As a spouse or significant-other, at intervals you may have to carry out two-parent roles plus manage home, social and public lives, on your own.

As children, you are special for being who you are and because your parent has a 'special' job in our community. Sometimes you would prefer that other kids did not know or talk about your parent's job ~ asking you about "stuff" or the risks and crises. It would be nice to just blend in sometimes.

As the parent, sibling or friend, you share their world from a greater distance. This 'farther away' position can be lonely and uncomfortable, especially during a personal crisis in your family, or a community crisis where your loved one is active.

Each family (and each individual person in it), is unique; however, there are some common experiences and facts which we hope will be helpful to you and your "emergency-worker family".

STRESS

There are 3 kinds of work-related stress which emergency workers 'share' with their loved ones:

1. Everyday stress that fluctuates with the happenings of everyday life.
2. Cumulative stress (sometimes known as burnout) is prolonged unrelieved wear and tear, this results from having more demands than a person can respond to in a healthy manner.
3. Critical incident stress is incident specific and generates psychological, physical, behavioural and thinking reaction-changes and discomforts (**usually within 3 days and up to minimum of 2 weeks**), after the incident.

THIS IS AN OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH HAZARD FOR ALL EMERGENCY RESPONDERS who are exposed to a traumatic event and re-exposed through renewed traumatization at inquests and court proceedings.

YOU can HELP / BE HELPED by understanding the normalcy of a critical incident stress reaction AND by improving the stress-management and preventative-awareness skills for the whole family.

(If your emergency worker has experienced a critical incident and has attended a support session [defusing, debriefing, peer], he or she has been asked to share this educational brochure with you. Please read it for more details AND recovery strategies.)

FOR SPOUSES AND SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

Hopefully you both are 'enlightened communicators' and have already talked about the expectations, shift work, long hours, unpredictability, safety risks and public scrutiny. Clearer expectations (whether you like them or not), are a good bases for thriving in your **relationships**. It is especially important to communicate (**LISTEN and TALK**) about:

- the job and the organizational culture around it
- the amount OR LACK of control, that a member has over the organizations' demands.
- the absence or presence of career development - AND do you share the same goal.

This kind of open communication is a good beginning for doing the tough stuff... learning, understanding and accepting... your individualities, personalities, styles of coping with stress, short-term and long-term expectations of each other, values and wishes related to relationships, support systems and health.

In reality the emergency worker is a 'member' of a group that is often immersed in 'a job' that takes time, thought, commitment and soul. This makes all the whole family 'charter members'!

In emergency worker relationships, generally, the satisfaction level among spouses is not high. You will benefit from the consideration of both, the characteristics of your emergency worker, their work AND your own personality, work and expectations as you strive for quality in your relationship.

The personality characteristics which emergency services seek to hire may sound familiar to you. The person you and they have chosen is bright, organized, action-oriented, analytical, a problem-solver and goal-directed at work.

- Prefers immediate gratification and NEEDS feedback
- Appreciates the rewards of being successful

Sometimes these expectations from work are superhuman or “god-like” and DIRECTLY OPPOSITE of expectations at home. The work expectations and stressors sometimes become ‘absorbed’ by the emergency worker and it becomes difficult to become ‘an ordinary family member’ at the end of a shift.

Conflict resolution, adaptability and compromise are not easy skills. Therefore when life has problems and dissatisfactions, sometimes the emergency worker will immerse themselves in what they know best or what appears to be clearer... work. It is ironic that even when the partners are ready to adapt and compromise, spend and thrive in human-family time... together... the organization may demand... work.

So here we have an emergency worker, who spends more energy and time to attain goals than most people, who bears the burden of safety and rescue for the public and colleagues, who lives with risk and the vitality of control AND whose intelligence points out his or her humanness and inability to solve everyone’s problems. As well, we have the partner/family who experiences pressures and demands on emotions and time which others do not, leading a life with challenges that are different from neighbours and perhaps your original expectations...

**A PARTNERSHIP AND A FAMILY REQUIRE LIVING,
LOVING, LEARNING AND LAUGHTER!**

**SURVIVING/THRIVING IN AN EMERGENCY
RESPONDER PARTNERSHIP MEANS...**

**HAVING POSITIVE AWARENESS ABOUT GOALS
OF SELVES AND SERVICE.**

DAILY TIPS FOR SPOUSES, FAMILY AND FRIENDS

DEVELOP AND EXPRESS YOUR OWN PERSONAL SENSE OF IDENTITY

This is probably the #1 key to a happy relationship/family. You can and must identify your own sense of self-worth and well-being, and the things that help to create and nurture these feelings.

LEARN TO COMPROMISE

No one can get everything they want, all of the time. Things become more difficult when you take an unbending position. Try to understand the pressures of 'being' the emergency worker (and expect vice versa!), and communicate 'being' yourself.

TRY NOT TO RESENT THE PROFESSION

It is difficult not to have some resentment toward your emergency worker's consuming commitments. However, keeping all the issues in perspective and cultivating your own interests and activities will round-out yourself and your family.

HELP YOUR LOVED ONE LEARN THAT THIS IS A WORLD FOR BEING, NOT JUST DOING

Encourage taking time and pleasure in locating and smelling some of the roses!

BUILD YOUR OWN SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Family, friends, neighbours and other emergency-worker families enhance your sense of wholeness. You have something to offer them and they have something to offer you.

MAKE THE MOST OF THE TIME YOU SPEND WITH YOUR LOVED ONE

Don't let problems, worries and resentments accumulate and fester - acknowledge which problems need work, DO IT NOW and toss the others. Use the time to laugh, love, build and enjoy.

TIPS FOR AFTER A CRITICAL INCIDENT

Accept that a critical incident has occurred and be prepared that it will effect your relationship. Remind yourself that it is not your fault and there are interventions that can help.

Allow your emergency worker a chance to talk if he/she wishes and express your commitment and acceptance of the 'working through process'.

Accept the fact that the stress from a critical incident is a traumatic event and can be damaging to the warmth and intimacy of family life and friendship. It is OK to be angry or disappointed and express these feelings appropriately.

Remember that a critical incident is in the eye of the beholder. Accept that your loved one has been impacted and therefore IS entitled to react.

During and after a critical incident stress reaction, there are many changes which occur in the chemical and electrical productions and functions of the brain and nervous system. These changes will effect thinking, behaviour, physical functioning and emotional reactions for a **minimum** of two weeks.

Old issues and experiences may 'tumble out of the trunk' after a recent critical incident. Linking the 'traumatic present' with the 'traumatic past' is due to the 'memory misfiling' which happens when the newly released chemicals alter brain function.

Remember that the disruption is usually temporary and responds well to intervention.

Focus on problem-solving, rather than assigning blame.

Critical incidents can exaggerate differences between people.

Your emergency worker may tend to feel isolated. Express your commitment and affection. Offer your companionship and hope (that there is life after a traumatic event), this will help in restoring both of your perspectives.

Fight feeling guilty! Take good care of yourself just as you care for and about others. It is a false belief that any one person can prevent or compensate another's pain.

**Do not let a traumatic event hold you
or your family hostage.**

**Have zero tolerance for violence
in your family.**

Avoid substance abuse.

TIPS TO REVIEW WHEN YOUR EMERGENCY WORKER IS IN CRISIS

Get support formally and informally through a family debriefing, EAP program, counsellor, support group, friends and other emergency families. You can talk about your worries and yourself without compromising the confidentiality of your emergency worker and the profession.

Try not to bottle your feelings inside. Pay attention to the clues about yourself and your feelings such as conversations and videos inside your head, as well as your dreams. Be careful with your own use of denial. It's normal to be disappointed, hurt, etc.

Establish realistic and measurable goals for 'recovery' based on your family's usual important ownership factors. For example: "I would like our family to resume activities together. Can we start by going to the zoo this weekend?"

Think about how you are anticipating closure for yourself in this event. For example do you see the conclusion as your spouse resuming their sense of humour or reading bedtime stories to the children again?

Monitor your own self-talk. Negative or positive self-talk (in your head) have a large influence on attitude and self-esteem. The manner in which you interpret a problem is the baseline for your responses and communications. Don't assume negative things... check them out.

Listen to your body. It will often talk for your feelings.

**Don't try to make everything all right.
It isn't yet!**

TIPS FOR HELPING CHILDREN

Explore rather than ignore what your child is feeling. Listen with every sense... carefully. Accept that you won't and don't need to have all the answers. Try to understand the child's issues (they often are at least slightly different from yours).

Explore alternate ways of dealing with feelings. Always start with acceptance of even the worst feeling and encourage the child to communicate solutions. This is problem-solving and it assists the child to feel less helpless.

Reassure the child that, under the circumstances anger, sadness and fear are all normal right now.

Try to provide the child with clear, truthful facts . They do not need all the adult information, but they do deserve respect and factual information about people they love in situations which are dramatic. Be very careful to ensure that your adult conversations are not overheard and interpreted through a child's ears and fears.

Be aware of the media and public exposure (including telephone calls). Protect your children's exposure and encourage their self-protection, when necessary by role-modeling limit-setting and *turning off* media (stations, newspapers) and rehearsing *how to* say "no" when other people express intrusive interest in this event.

Try to stay on an even keel, model stress-management, positive self-acceptance and care.

Families can learn to anticipate, accommodate and appreciate the process of change (even change caused by negative events). Their successes can be partially measured by their ability to accept 'surprises' without undue anxiety. Lives will alter, but individuals and families can still flourish!

THERE IS MORE TO LIFE THAN WORK!

**WHAT IS RISKY IS REWARDING
AND WHAT IS REWARDING IS RISKY!**

RESOURCES

The following is a list of support services which may be helpful, it is not a complete list, but in our experience reflects accessibility (in descending order):

1. Crisis Intervention Teams at Rouge Valley Health Corporation (Ajax site) and Lakeridge Health Corporation (Oshawa site) accessed through their emergency departments or urgent booked referrals via family physicians.

2. Employee / Member Assistance Programs(EAP): Check your agency' coverage and contact information before you need it.

3. Urgent care department and emergency departments.

4. Your family physician.

5. Private Practice Counselling (listed under Marriage, Family and Individual Counsellors in the yellow pages of the Durham Region telephone directory).

6. A representative of your religious affiliation.

7. Mental Health Services at Rouge Valley Health and Lakeridge Health Oshawa and Whitby Mental Health Hospitals. Some counsellors and psychiatrists will offer urgent services to emergency services' members and their families. Request service through consultation/out-patient departments.