

How To Cope With Trauma

More than ever, first responders are recognizing and seeking help for job related stress disorders. Yet too many remain afraid to take that first step. A simple phone call could answer a lot of questions and quell the doubt of whether or not help is warranted.

Critical incident or post traumatic stress doesn't have to be dealt with alone; and, say health care professionals, it shouldn't be.

The United States is home to the only two facilities in the world devoted to treating problems related to critical incident and post-traumatic stress disorders. One such organization is the West Coast Post-trauma Retreat, located in rural Inverness, north of San Francisco Bay. The other is in Massachusetts.

Several years ago, various Northern California law enforcement agencies went through the residential program at the On-Site Academy in Gardner, Massachusetts. Though they came for a variety of circumstances, they shared one common thread: debilitating emotional wounds that they had not been able to heal. During their retreat, each had a profound and positive life altering experience. Upon returning home they linked up with one another and, with the goal of providing the same positive life changes to those in need, decided to replicate the On-Site Academy Program on the West Coast. This began a long journey of hard work and the eventual success of the West Coast Post-traumatic Retreat.

The retreat is held every other month, with no more than seven participants in each session. The days begin at 8:30 a.m. and can last until 10 or

11 p.m. Participants include police officers who have been involved in shootings or witnessed the death of partners, firefighters who have survived collapsing buildings and even a diver whose job it was to retrieve bodies.

The goal of WCPR is to return the person to their previous level of functioning, both personally & professionally. This is a confidential, non-profit, all-volunteer, peer driven, clinically directed program for law enforcement officers, dispatchers and emergency responders. San Rafael Police Officer Joel Fay serves as the organization's president.

Fay, a psychologist, said the most popular part of the program is the support offered by peer counselors –

police officers working with police officers and firefighters working with firefighters. "It's about understanding what the officers or responders have gone through and explaining it to them in a way that makes sense in the culture," Fay said.

Emergency service providers and members of the armed forces from across the world are experiencing critical incident stress and post-trauma reactions to the point where their jobs, relationships with loved ones, and the quality of their lives are significantly impacted. These individuals would benefit most from the WCPR program, said Mary Ann Stark, administrative coordinator for the program. These are professionals for whom a debriefing and/or counseling was not enough.

During the WCPR program, emergency workers take psychological tests, meet with mental health professionals, discuss the traumatic events that triggered their breakdowns and learn why they reacted as they did.

The program is reasonably priced, accepts some insurances and includes all treatment, room and board. For more information contact WCPR at (415) 721-9789; or visit the WCPR website at www.WCPR2001.org.

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