

Operating Guideline # 218

Occupational Stress Injuries – Chaplaincy / CISM

May 1, 2024



PURPOSE:

The purpose of this Operating Guideline (OG) is to raise awareness about Operational Stress Injuries (OSI) and establish guidelines for determining when Chaplaincy Services and/or Critical Incident Stress Management support should be considered.

ISSUE/RATIONALE:

Firefighters are exposed to scenes of traumatic injuries and death on a regular basis. They are also required to respond to emergencies that have very significant impacts on the lives of strangers, neighbours, friends and in some cases their own families. Fires, floods, motor vehicle accidents... all of these can have accumulative effect on the psyche and emotional well-being on anyone. Occasionally, exposure to this type of situation can cause an "Operational Stress Injury" that manifests itself in a variety of ways including sleeplessness, irritability, depression and a variety of other physical or emotional responses.

The emergency services places a great deal of emphasis on physical health and the ability to carry out the physical demands of firefighting, and emotional wellness is an equally important aspect of one's overall personal health. All firefighters are encouraged to be aware of, and make use of the support systems that are in place to protect the emotional well-being of every member of our team.

GUIDELINE:

Operational Stress/Mental Wellness

1. Operational Stress is an all-too real side effect of working in the emergency services field for many first responders and it is important to understand that this is a normal response and not a result of a mental illness or weakness.
2. Members should constantly undertake activities which serve to strengthen their ability to cope with the stresses associated with being a first responder. Physical wellness, social interactions with others and spiritual strength are all ways to ensure that a proper "balance" is maintained.
3. The Muskoka Lakes Fire Department subscribes to the notion that the response to traumatic events actually begins prior to the event. To that end, our efforts focus on:
 - a) Pre-Incident education,
 - b) Intervention (including Chaplain/Peer Support Team/Georgian CISM reactions), and
 - c) Follow-through in the days, weeks, and months following an event.

Chaplaincy Program/Peer Support Team/CISM Support

4. One of the mandates of the Peer Support Team is to provide ongoing training to departmental members on an ongoing basis. The services of the Fire Department Chaplain and the Muskoka Association of Fire Chiefs Peer Support Team (PST) are also an important support mechanism for the members of the department who find themselves dealing with traumatic or difficult circumstances and so the Incident Commander shall ensure that the department Chaplain and the Muskoka Lakes Fire Department members of the PST are notified under the following circumstances:
 - a. a critical injury or death of a firefighter is experienced;
 - b. the incident involves a critical injury or the death of a child;

Operating Guideline # 218

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- c. the incident involves a mass-casualty situation;
 - d. the incident involves a victim that is a relative of a fire department member's family;
 - e. the incident involves a member of the fire department directly;
 - f. the victim or family is highly emotional or unstable;
 - g. emotional care is needed for the family of the victim while the emergency is underway;
 - h. the victim or the family requests the services of a chaplain or clergy;
 - i. any incident which is charged with profound emotion or where the circumstances are so unusual, or the sights or sounds so distressing, as to produce a high level of immediate or delayed emotional reaction that overwhelms or surpasses a person's normal coping mechanisms; and or
 - j. Command feels the presence of the Chaplain would be of benefit to the victim or department personnel.
5. Command shall attempt to contact the Chaplain and/or PST members by telephone. Failing phone contact, Command shall request Dispatch use the radio/paging system to have the appropriate individuals contact Command.
6. Where any incident evokes a strong emotional response from one or more firefighters who attended the incident, the Incident Commander and the Chaplain/PST members shall confer about the need for a Critical Incident Stress **early intervention** and may elect to involve the services of the HOMEWOOD HEALTH Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) Team. Where the services of this team are deemed appropriate, the Incident Commander shall contact the team directly by calling **1-800-663-1142**. Afterwards the Incident Commander will update the Fire Chief or designate.
7. Where the incident involves a critical injury or the death of a firefighter, the death of a child, or a mass casualty type incident, an early intervention shall be conducted.

Employee and Family Assistance Program

8. The Muskoka Lakes Fire Department also maintains access to a confidential Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) for all part-time/volunteer staff through Homewood Health. Services can be accessed by calling **1-800-663-1142** for staff members who are in need of confidential counselling, coaching or support services on a wide variety of issues including grief counselling, addictions, financial issues etc. Web-based services are also available by connecting via www.homeweb.ca.

Referral

9. Any member of the department who suspects that another member of the department is experiencing a strong emotional response to a particular incident or is in need of support as described in this OG should personally remind the individual that Chaplaincy and EFAP services are available to them. Alternately an anonymous referral to the departmental Chaplain is available. Firefighters should also ensure that a supervisor is notified of the situation.

Other Resources

11. An individual's own medical practitioner/doctor should always be involved in any formal course of treatment and individuals suffering from prolonged effects of exposure to strong emotional stimulus should be advised to consult with their doctor.

Operating Guideline # 218

Occupational Stress Injuries – Chaplaincy / CISM

May 1, 2024



12. The Canadian Mental Health Association – Muskoka Parry Sound (CMHAMPS) Branch also has a variety of support programs in place. They can be contacted by calling 705-645-2262 (SEE ALSO www.cmha.ca) or by calling their crisis line 24/7 (1-888-893-8333).

Documentation

13. Staff members experiencing a strong emotional response to any work-related situation as described in this OG are encouraged to document their experience by way of departmental “Exposure Report”. These reports are CONFIDENTIAL and shall not be disclosed in any manner that identifies the individual submitting the report except as required by law.

Follow-Up

14. In the days, weeks and months following an incident as described in sentence 4, the Departmental Chaplain and PST members should conduct post incident follow-ups with all members who have been involved. This is to be done with the consent of the party involved and on an “as may be required” basis.

RESPONSIBILITY:

It is the responsibility of all Emergency Operations Division staff to comply with the provisions of this Operating Guideline.

DEFINITIONS:

“Mass-Casualty Situation” means an incident such as a motor vehicle collision that causes serious injury or death to a large number of persons, generally five (5) or more persons.

“Operational Stress Injury” means a persistent psychological injury (such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance use) that occurs after the stress of one's firefighting related duties.

REFERENCES:

- Occupational Health and Safety Act, RSO (and Regulations)
- MLFD O.G. 230 - Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
- MLFD O.G. 231 - Workplace Hazard, Exposure, Incident and Illness Reporting
- Muskoka Lakes Fire Department PTSD Prevention Plan
- [Peer Support Programs for the Fire Service, Fire Hero Learning Network, NFFF](#)