

Operating Guideline # 230

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

September 30, 2019



**PURPOSE:**

The purpose of this Operating Guideline (OG) is to raise awareness about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and establish guidelines for creating a work environment that is supportive for those who might be experiencing the effects of a trauma induced stress injury such as PTSD. It also outlines the individual responsibilities and roles of front line staff, supervisors and management that will serve to prevent and lessen the impact of PTSD on all members.

**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 a cumulative effect on the psyche and emotional well-being of even the strongest of individuals.

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. "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" (PTSD) is a very real mental health injury that can be treated once properly diagnosed.

Any incident that is charged with profound emotion or that is so unusual, or the sights or sounds so distressing, as to produce a high level of immediate or delayed emotional reaction that surpasses the coping mechanisms of an individual is fertile ground for a post-incident reaction.

Mental wellness and conditioning is an 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:**

**PTSD – Our Organizational Perspective**

1. The Muskoka Lakes Fire Department recognizes the importance of good mental health. The wellbeing and psychological safety of its employees as an important part of a productive, effective and healthy workplace. Our department has established a vision for a safe and secure workplace that addresses stigma associated with mental illnesses. This is an organization wide initiative involving all employees.
2. The senior leadership of the Muskoka Lakes Fire Department working collaboratively with the Joint Health and Safety Committee, is committed to building psychological wellness into all aspects of our operations, processes and procedures, particularly as this relates to incidents of traumatic mental stress, operational stress injuries and PTSD.
3. To achieve our goals, together we will:
  - a) increase awareness about mental health issues and create an open dialogue between employees, supervisors/managers, and management/senior leadership;

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b) develop guidelines, programs and services to help all members of our organization that are consistent with the principles of mutual respect, confidentiality and cooperation across the organization;

c) support supervisors/managers to help address the mental health, wellbeing and psychological safety of its employees and provide them resources and tools to address demands, conflict, emotional distress or trauma experienced by our workers; and

d) evaluate the success of our program at planned intervals.

#### **Mental Health Stigma**

4. The Muskoka Lakes Fire Department is committed to fostering a workplace where our employees are protected from stigma associated with mental illness. This organization will ensure that all employees are treated with respect and dignity; this includes those suffering from mental illness and those who support other workers suffering from mental illness.

5. Harassment and acts of discrimination will not be tolerated. Anyone who is found to be stigmatizing another individual may be subject to disciplinary action. Types of behaviour and acts that contribute to stigma include the following: bullying, taunting, and making offensive statements/remarks either verbally or in writing in any medium.

6. This O.G. applies to all current employees and all behaviour that is in some way connected to work including off-site meetings, training and day to day operations.

7. The senior officers of the Muskoka Lakes Fire Department are responsible for providing all employees a healthy and safe workplace, free of stigma, discrimination or harassment. The leadership of our organization will ensure that this O.G. is applied in a timely, consistent and confidential manner, determining whether or not allegations are substantiated and deciding what corrective action is appropriate if required.

8. To support a stigma-free workplace the department's leadership will:

a) provide PTSD awareness training and education

b) regularly monitor organizational practices and systems for barriers to achieving a stigma-free workplace

c) provide an effective and fair process whereby complaints of harassment or inappropriate behavior are investigated.

d) lead by example.

#### **Risk Avoidance**

9. The notion of "risk avoidance" should be part of any incident action plan formulated by an Incident Commander at any fire department response where there is risk of exposure to potentially traumatizing circumstances. Incident Commanders should evaluate any situation for the potential to evoke a strong emotional response from first responding firefighters.

Where it is possible to keep the number of personnel who are exposed to the situation to a minimum, the Incident Commander should engrain this in their plan. The notion of 'not using 12 where 2 can accomplish the same' is at the heart of the risk avoidance strategy.

Similarly, the Incident Commander should carefully consider 'who' will form part of the work group and not expose those who might be less resistant to visual trauma where that option exists.

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### **Supervisors Tips for Reducing Stigma at Work/Promoting a Positive Work Environment**

10. Establishing an effective Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Plan has to take into consideration the organizational culture and the individuals that work within this culture. To be effective it needs to consider the aspects that have potential to cause trauma and stress to workers. As leaders it is important that supervisors communicate the importance of this to the entire organization and share the responsibility of promoting a positive and psychologically healthy and safe work environment.

Following are some tips on creating a stigma free workplace and promoting a positive work environment.

- ✓ Set the tone by treating coworkers with respect and valuing their contributions
- ✓ Engage staff to helping to identify, build and implement the PTSD prevention plan, encourage ongoing input and contributions to improve plan
- ✓ Clearly communicate the PTSD prevention plan and the reasons for new policies, procedures or structures to meet the goals of the plan
- ✓ Recognize accomplishments, and promote staff cohesiveness and dialogue.
- ✓ Resolve conflicts early and quickly.
- ✓ Identify training needs and provide training
- ✓ Acknowledge that work on its own is stressful as well as the exposure to traumatic incidents, explain the importance of self-awareness and awareness of others
- ✓ Promote an atmosphere where attention to one's emotional state is acceptable and encouraged rather than stigmatized or disregarded
- ✓ Explain the options for assistance – Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP), Crisis Lines or other more formal channels if available, encourage active participation in these programs and address any employment concerns.  
(SEE ALSO MLFD O.G. 218 - Operational Stress Injuries; Chaplaincy Program/CISM Support; Employee and Family Assistance Program.)

### **Responsible to Care; Duty to Act – Individuals, Peers, Supervisors, Management**

11. Every member of our department has a responsibility to themselves and their family's to protect themselves from potentially harmful mental health issues by maintaining both their physical and mental well-being. Avoid or minimize exposure to potentially traumatic events as far as reasonably practicable where an event/exposure can be foreseen.

12. Individuals who identify concerns relating to their own mental well-being should raise these concerns with a supervisor and avail themselves of available support as soon as possible after an event occurs. This includes consulting your own family physician.

13. Everyone who becomes aware that a colleague is experiencing a profound emotional response to any situation encountered as a result of his or her employment as a firefighter has a moral responsibility to care – to reach out and provide comfort. In addition, the colleague's supervisor shall be notified as soon as possible.

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14. Supervisors have a responsibility to:

- a) Foster a positive work environment that will create an atmosphere free of stigmatism relating to mental illness.
- b) Assess emergency scenes and limit the number of staff members exposed to extreme trauma (see sentence 9).
- c) Identify situations where individuals have had direct involvement in a potentially traumatic incident and put into motion those responsive support actions that may minimize the potential for an adverse staff reaction (SEE ALSO sentence 16 and MLFD O.G. 218 – Operational Stress Injuries/Chaplaincy & CISM Support/EFAP).
- d) Conduct a wellness check of all individual members under their command immediately following any related incident, and a follow-up check within 24 hours of the event occurring.
- e) Urge staff to complete the appropriate “Exposure Report” in keeping with departmental reporting procedures when appropriate (SEE MLFD O.G. 231 – Workplace Hazard, Exposure, Incident, and Illness Reporting).
- f) When becoming aware of, or are notified of, a staff member experiencing difficulty by one of their peers, to put in place the appropriate support mechanism to ensure follow-up action is taken. (SEE ALSO sentence 16 and MLFD O.G. 218 – Operational Stress Injuries/Chaplaincy & CISM Support/EFAP). Referral to the family physician should always be part of a recommended course of action, and a call to the local mental health crisis line (1-888-893-8333) should be considered where appropriate.
- g) Complete the necessary documentation (including WSIB) where any injury becomes known (SEE MLFD O.G. 231 – Workplace Hazard, Exposure, Incident, and Illness Reporting).
- h) Refer staff to appropriate support services when an individual discloses issues after the fact.

NOTE: An individual’s participation in any post-incident intervention or action is voluntary.

15. Management and the Joint Health and Safety Committee have a responsibility to:

- a) Support all staff by offering peer, other internal and external supports, and by making available/promoting use of an Employee and Family Support Program.
- b) Periodically reviewing all aspects of the PTSD Prevention Program and revising or updating the program and associated resources as appropriate.

#### **Additional Program Resources**

16. The components of the program include the following:

- a) Chaplaincy Program - the Department has in place a Chaplaincy program staffed by Pastor/Firefighter/Engineer Michael Thompson, he will make himself available for incidents that may be particularly distressing for our fire crews (sudden unexpected deaths, serious injuries to children etc.), and he routinely makes himself available for one-on-one counseling on a wide range of issues that affect our members. Accessibility and confidentiality are the hallmarks of his service; these

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have proven essential in terms of building trust and respect amongst the members of the department over the years.

b) Critical Incident Stress (CIS) Defusing's / Debriefings – the Chaplaincy program is viewed as the “first line of defense” in terms of our response to “Critical Incident Stress” and the department has an extensive “Operational Guideline” which defines when a “Defusing” is appropriately conducted by Michael Thompson, and when a more intensive “Debriefing” must occur.

c) Employee and Family Assistance Plan (EFAP) – Beyond the immediate needs of our staff, our part-time/volunteer firefighters and their families have access to our EFAP program which is based out of Homewood Health in Guelph. Twenty-four hour availability to professional services of all kinds is offered through this resource which provides confidential support for mental health, addictions, money management and a host of other issues that impact our firefighters and their families.

d) Mental Health First Aid Program – All of the departments senior line officers (supervisors) have completed this 16-hour course of instruction facilitated by Mental Health Commission of Canada. The course of instruction is intended to raise awareness about a series of mental health issues including depression, substance related disorders, anxiety and trauma related disorders, psychotic disorders, suicide and it teaches appropriate crisis first-aid responses for each.

e) Road to Mental Readiness Program (R2MR) – The Canadian Government first introduced the R2MR program for members of the Canadian Armed Forces several years ago. The program was so successful that it has been adapted for use by first responders in many areas of the country. The ultimate aim of the program is to build resilience amongst participants against stress induced injury.

f) Joint Health and Safety Committee – a proactive and engaged JHSC comprised of both management and worker representatives who are dedicated to the health, welfare and safety of all Muskoka Lakes firefighters.

## **RESPONSIBILITY**

It is the responsibility of all members of the Muskoka Lakes Fire Department to adhere to the provisions of this Operational Guideline.

## **REFERENCES:**

- Occupational Health & Safety Act, RSO (and Regulations)
- MLFD O.G. 218 - Operational Stress Injuries; Chaplaincy Program/CISM Support; Employee and Family Assistance Program
- MLFD O.G. 231 – Workplace Hazard, Exposure, Incident, and Illness Reporting
- MLFD O.G. 1512 – Early and Safe Return to Work
- First Responders First, [www.firstrespondersfirst.ca](http://www.firstrespondersfirst.ca)