



### W1 What's Trauma and Stress Got To Do With It? Recognizing the Impact of Trauma on Forensic Professionals and Taking Steps To Mitigate It

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**Learning Overview:** After attending this session, attendees will understand and recognize how stress and trauma are tied to the forensic professions, including in the form of vicarious trauma, and how exposure to trauma and stress impacts the employee's personal and professional performance.<sup>1-7</sup> Attendees will be more aware of the various types of trauma that investigators and investigative personnel routinely encounter and the potential impacts this may have, not only on the individual, but on the investigation and/or service provision. Paths forward and the development of an Evidence-Based Policy (EBP) will also be addressed, so attendees can examine what policies and assistance are available in their own agencies or will be able to aid in policy development.

**Impact on the Forensic Science Community:** This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing attendees with the understanding that the human experience is variable, and trauma exposure and symptoms even more so, leading to behavior patterns that can be complex and abstract. By recognizing the manifestations of a variety of psychological—both behavioral and cognitive—impacts as a reaction to trauma and stress exposure on the job, as well as by identifying whether an agency is trauma-informed and what resources are available to employees, attendees will be better equipped to understand the short- and potentially short- and long-term impacts of trauma, as well as how to adapt investigative approaches and provide resources that will lead to increased chances of not only a positive work environment, but likely a more efficient and cost-effective solution to maintaining employee health and well-being to avoid burnout and decreased cognitive abilities that may impact service provision and job performance.

Cognitive implications after traumatic exposure are varied in presentation and require management but may be difficult for supervisors and forensic personnel to detect. Amnesic complications associated with dissociation, as well as shifts in cognitive schemas following traumatic exposure, have implications on both subsequent cognitive functioning and possible applications of insight-based treatment approaches.<sup>8,9</sup> The cognitive impact of trauma can be seen in both primary and vicarious/secondary trauma exposure (e.g., peers, treating clinicians).<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, some research has suggested a negative impact on executive functioning and memory, which may even be compounded by repeated exposure to trauma.<sup>11-14</sup> These cognitive skills, which are necessary for effective job performance for forensic professionals, are repeatedly being shown in the literature to be impacted by exposure to trauma.

Recognizing and addressing the impacts of direct and vicarious trauma on forensic personnel is especially important as employee burnout can represent not only the loss of an employee, but also a loss of the financial investment the agency or department has made in that individual's training and development, yet again highlighting the importance of striving for well-developed and empirically supported policies that protect both the financial interests of the agency and the jurisdiction, as well as the well-being of agency personnel. Even if the employee impacted by stress and trauma does not leave the agency, he or she may represent a financial loss to the agency in terms of decreased productivity, costs associated with workers' compensation, litigation fees, frequent absenteeism, and other similar costs.<sup>15-17</sup> In the current economic climate of budgetary cuts and a "do more with less" attitude, these statistics suggest that a cost-effective approach, and EBP should involve effective training and preparation, as well as swift intervention to avoid personnel developing long-term symptoms of psychological trauma and/or lingering cognitive deficits in the aftermath of trauma exposures. Thus, there are psychological, training, retention, and fiscal issues that cannot be disentangled from policy and practice and that the development of a comprehensive EBP is necessary.

Many times, professionals may not recognize the psychological impacts, behavioral and cognitive, of exposure or repeated exposure to trauma, and the easiest response may be to identify these impacts as an individual problem. However, as research, Critical Incident Stress Management Teams, Peer Support Teams, and the recognition of the impacts of vicarious trauma have demonstrated, these problems are more pervasive and of a greater magnitude than previously acknowledged in the first responder community. That recognition is slowly broadening to include investigative personnel and support personnel, as well. Based on previous research and work, this workshop provides a multidisciplinary approach that agency personnel, both line level and supervisory, can relate to and use to gain actionable insight.

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## Workshops – 2019

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