



E35 Examining the Impact of Trauma and Stress Across Forensic and Investigative Contexts

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand contemporary literature and research with regard to trauma and stress in the world of forensic professionals, as well as the outcome variables subsequent to trauma exposure, which pose many risks for personal wellbeing.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: The emotional and cognitive impact of trauma is of great concern for forensic professionals, who are at a significantly increased risk of exposure, but for whom there is a paucity of research understanding and even less on managing how individuals are impacted. This study seeks to elucidate these concerns as well as discuss a groundbreaking, comprehensive research study aimed at increasing not only our understanding of trauma in the forensic workforce, but the efficacy of trauma management.

While there has been a recent increase in attention to first responders and the impact of trauma (direct and vicarious), other investigative personnel or non-front line personnel are often overlooked or an afterthought in addressing these issues. It is important to understand and recognize how stress and trauma are tied to the forensic and investigative professions specifically, including in the form of vicarious trauma, and how exposure to trauma and stress impacts an employee's personal and professional performance. Raising the awareness 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, is a critical next step in future-proofing the forensic and investigative workforce.

Paths forward and the development of Evidence-Based Policy (EBP) from related or tangential professions, such as police officers, dispatchers, firefighters, emergency medical services, trauma nurses, and other medical professionals may be adapted to the needs of various disciplines within the forensic and investigative workforce. However, a detailed understanding of unique and common stressors to those roles and responsibilities must be conducted to aid in the evaluation of existing policies and assistance typically available in agencies, if any, as well as to aid in empirically based policy development.

In seeking to serve communities as investigators or forensic professionals, many individuals are exposed to things that the average citizen cannot understand. These can include violent crime scenes, death investigations and autopsies, exposure risks, processing clandestine graves or receiving donated bodies for research purposes, reviewing materials in indecent images and child exploitation investigations, and so on, and sometimes these experiences stay with the individual. Recognizing that certain trends, such as the opioid crisis, can exacerbate the existing levels of stress and trauma faced by various personnel who often work in an interconnected environment, best practices suggest that an agency that is trauma-informed and has made preparations for employees will have better success in terms of keeping employees happy, healthy, and productive.

This presentation seeks to enhance the understanding of factors negatively impacting the emotional and cognitive impact of adverse experiences on forensic professionals. There is a paucity of research available with regard to resiliency, wellness, and burnout, and even less still addressing those for whom high-stress, violent, and traumatizing stimuli are not adverse risks, but job descriptions. These elements are endemic to the lives of first responders and forensic professionals, and yet extremely little is known about the long-term impact of chronic exposure to them, and the emotional, as well as cognitive, effect they may have.

This research seeks to evaluate a variety of factors via multiple avenues. The first is by identifying the prevalence of burnout in multiple forensic populations, including forensic anthropologists, sworn officers, medical examiners, and undercover operatives. Then cross-sectional analyses to scrutinize common and differential variables will be performed. Subsequently, participating agencies will have the opportunity to participate in an assessment of "trauma-informedness," with the opportunity for interventional recommendations. Finally, this ongoing research will use a targeted, brief neurocognitive assessment for individuals to evaluate the impact of burnout variables. Funding for this research is pending, but the current proposal is for a three-year study that is prepared to implemented at the end of FY2019–2020.

Stress/Trauma, Burnout, Resilience