

## E73 Gap Assessment of Stress, Vicarious Trauma, and Resiliency for Forensic Science Professionals

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**Learning Overview:** After attending this presentation, attendees will understand: (1) the unique characteristics of vicarious trauma experienced by Forensic Science Professionals (FSPs); (2) factors correlated with stress and burnout among these professionals; and (3) recommendations for improved resiliency.

**Impact on the Forensic Science Community:** This presentation will impact the forensic science and medicolegal death investigation communities by addressing the gap in scientific literature related to stress, vicarious trauma, and burnout for FSPs. Attendees will learn the results of a recent study that used the Vicarious Trauma-Organizational Readiness Guide (VT-ORG) developed by the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) modified for FSPs. Vicarious Trauma (VT) has been characterized by intrusive thoughts, avoidance and withdrawal, and symptoms of tension and disturbed sleep.<sup>1</sup> Responses are related to the indirect exposure to a traumatic event through second-hand materials, such as images or stories. Professionals suffering from these symptoms report lower job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion, increased thoughts of leaving their position, and stress in their family lives.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, burnout is characterized by fatigue, poor sleep, headaches, anxiety, irritability, depression, hopelessness, cynicism, and a lack of professional efficacy.<sup>3</sup> Burnout and VT often develop together and many of the symptoms overlap. Attendees will learn suggestions for future research and policy implications regarding resiliency resources.

A subset of VT literature has documented a litany of issues in first responders, law enforcement, legal professionals, and human services providers.<sup>4-6</sup> A handful of studies have attempted to characterize stress responses and identify effective coping strategies in FSPs. One study of crime scene investigators' physical responses to stress found that heart rates increased by approximately 50 beats per minute at crime scenes compared to routine activities.<sup>7</sup> A 2011 study found that although virtually all of the digital investigators who participated were satisfied with their jobs, 68% felt they were under a lot of stress and half stated that aspects of the job made them upset.<sup>8</sup>

Studies with first responders, such as police, firefighters, and emergency medical services, have supported several strategies for addressing stress and increasing resiliency. Resiliency is the ability of individuals exposed to highly disruptive events to maintain both healthy psychological and physical functioning. Studies of effective interventions have concluded that organizations must train employees to accept and recognize stress as a routine part of the job and offer them strategies to reduce the stress.<sup>9</sup>

The current study used an anonymous, online survey of seven laboratories to ask FSPs about their self-reported stress levels and their perception of organizational support for stress reduction. The first instrument, the VT-ORG, modified for FSPs, gathered information about the perception of the organization's efforts to support this stress in employees. The second survey, Professional Quality of Life (ProQOL), contained self-reported questions about the employee's stress responses and job satisfaction. Additionally, a demographic questionnaire asked questions relevant to job stressors. The results will be fully discussed as well as suggestions for future research and policy implications regarding resiliency resources for FSPs.

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**Forensic Science Professionals, Vicarious Trauma, Stress**