



W25 Working Toward a Wellness Mindset for Forensic and Investigative Personnel: Addressing Stress and Trauma in the Workforce and Taking Steps to Change Agency and Professional Culture

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Learning Overview: After attending this workshop, 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 an employee's personal and professional performance.¹⁻⁷ Attendees will also learn evidence-based strategies to mitigate and reduce the impacts of stress and trauma, as well as learn from the experience of the anthropology program at the University of South Florida and the Maryland State Police's Crime Laboratory efforts to address stress and trauma. 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. This workshop builds upon and expands the content of the half-day workshop presented at the American Academy of Forensic Sciences Annual Scientific Meeting in 2019.^{8,9} Paths forward and the implementation and incorporation of Evidence-Based Policy (EBP) will also be addressed so attendees can examine what policies and assistance are available in their own agencies or assist in policy development.¹⁰⁻¹⁸ This workshop will address concerns related to both line-level and supervisory personnel.¹⁹

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This workshop 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 and 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. This workshop will also address the concept of trauma-informed agencies, ensuring that appropriate resources are available to employees, focusing on evidence-based interventions. By attending this workshop, attendees will be better equipped to understand the 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 burn-out and decreased cognitive abilities that may impact service provision and job performance.

In seeking to serve communities as forensic professionals, individuals are exposed to things the average citizen cannot understand; sometimes these experiences stay with the individual. Recognizing that trends (e.g., the opioid crisis) can exacerbate levels of stress and trauma faced by personnel, best practices suggest that a trauma-informed agency has made preparations for employees and will have better success in terms of employee resilience and productivity. This discussion is still in its infancy, due largely to issues of mental health stigma and the lack of research exploring how forensic personnel experience trauma.

This workshop aims to broaden and continue discussions on a topic often considered taboo and highlights the variety of traumatic experiences faced by personnel. Similar conversations have begun in different arenas associated with forensic sciences, evidenced by the creation of the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors (ASCLD) Stress and Trauma Task Force, the development of the Forensic Technology Center of Excellence (FTCoE) webinar series, attention of the Organization of Scientific Area Committees (OSAC) Human Factors Committee, and mention in the forthcoming Department Of Justice (DOJ) Needs Assessment of Forensic Laboratories (NAFL) report.²⁰⁻²³

Cognitive implications subsequent to traumatic exposure are varied in presentation and require management, but may be difficult for forensic professionals to detect. Amnesic complications of dissociation, as well as shifts in cognitive schemas following trauma have implications on both cognitive functioning and possible treatment.^{24,25} The cognitive impact of trauma can be seen in both primary and vicarious/secondary trauma exposure (e.g., peers, treating clinicians).²⁶ Some research has suggested a negative impact on executive functioning and memory, which may be compounded by repeated exposure to trauma.²⁷⁻³⁰ These cognitive skills (necessary for effective forensic job performance) are being shown in the literature to be impacted by trauma exposure.^{31,32}

Employee burnout can represent the loss of an employee, but also an agency's financial investment in individuals (e.g., training, development). This highlights the importance of striving for well-developed, empirically supported policies protecting the financial interests of the agency and jurisdiction, in addition to the well-being of personnel. Even if the employee impacted by stress/trauma does not leave the agency, they may represent a financial loss in terms of decreased productivity, workers' compensation, litigation, absenteeism, and other similar costs.³³⁻³⁵ Professionals may not recognize the psychological impacts of trauma exposure or cumulative stress, and the easiest response may be identifying these impacts as an individual problem.^{36,37} These effects may also relate to the human factors discussion taking place in the Academy.³⁸⁻⁴⁹ Research suggests cost-effective approaches, and EBP should involve effective training, preparation, and swift intervention to avoid personnel developing longitudinal cognitive and/or psychological deficits following trauma exposures. Utilizing Seamone's argument to apply intervention and prevention programs, this workshop will discuss multiple EBP options, as well how appropriate training can have preventative effects.⁵⁰⁻⁶⁷

This workshop will help attendees identify factors associated with these aforementioned needs, in addition to implementing empirically supported strategies for proper management of cognitive/psychological concerns. This will impact the forensics community by elucidating that the human experience is variable (as are symptoms of trauma exposure), leading to complex and abstract behavior patterns. This workshop addresses the concept of trauma-informed agencies and ensuring that appropriate, evidence-based resources are available to employees. Attendees will be better equipped to



understand potential impacts of trauma, leading to increased chances of a positive work environment, increased efficiency, and maintaining employee well-being cost-effectively.

This workshop will use many cases, videos, and discussion points to illustrate the conceptual and applied understanding of how trauma and its impacts manifest. Given the nature of the material, this workshop is not recommended for those persons who are sensitive and/or in some form of crisis.

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Stress/Trauma, Wellness, Resilience