

Determining essential elements of stress management training and education at the Fenton Fire

Protection District.

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Certification Statement

I hereby certify that this paper constitutes my own product, that where the language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writing of another.

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Abstract

The Fenton Fire Protection District (FFPD) has an annual curriculum that provides opportunities to train on many different aspects of firefighting, but not stress management. The problem is the FFPD does not include any type of stress management training/education in their annual curriculum. The purpose of this research is to identify recommendations for including regular opportunities for stress management training/education at the FFPD. A descriptive research method was used to answer the following research questions: (a) What stress management training/education do comparable departments in the St. Louis area provide? (b) How do FFPD line personnel view the importance of stress management training/education? (c) According to FFPD line personnel, what are necessary elements of stress management training/education? (d) What do mental health professionals find are essential elements of an effective stress management education program? Findings resulted from original research including surveys, interviews, and analysis of FFPD training records for 1998 to 2014. Results indicated that stress management training/education was not included in annual training curricula in departments comparable to the FFPD; many FFPD line personnel viewed stress management training/education as an important topic to be included in a training curriculum; most FFPD line personnel found general information on stress management training/education and coping skills techniques as necessary elements needed in an effective stress management training/education program; and mental health professionals saw normalcy of reactions to stress, identification of personal stressors, teaching and practicing coping skills, and a comprehensive list of resource options as necessary elements to include in stress management training/education. Based on the results, recommendations identified for stress management training/education include an annual up-to-date curriculum available to all line personnel, stressing elements of normalcy of stress,

identification of personal stressors, teaching and practicing coping skills, and a comprehensive list of resource options.

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Introduction

Stress is part of everyday life. It occurs when we encounter something “that disturbs or interferes with our normal physiological equilibrium.” (“Webster’s Universal College Dictionary,” 1997, p. 779) The body responds to stress in many ways. “The stress response can help us rise to meet challenges, but beyond a certain point, stops being helpful and starts causing major damage to your health, your mood, your productivity, your relationships, and your quality of life.” (Smith, Segal, & Segal, 2014, para. 1)

The fire service has always been on the list for being one of the most stressful jobs. In a recent article from CareerCast.com, the occupation of firefighter is ranked as the number one most stressful job for the year 2015. (“CareerCast,” 2015)

Unmanaged stress leads to physiological and psychological complications such as infection & illness, obesity, heart disease, autoimmune disease, depression, and anxiety disorders. (University of California, Irvine, Health Education Center website, n.d.) The problem is the Fenton Fire Protection District (FFPD) does not include any type of stress management training or education in their annual curriculum. The purpose of this research is to identify recommendations for including regular opportunities for stress management training and education at the FFPD.

A descriptive research method will be used to answer the following research questions:

- (a) What stress management training/education do comparable departments in the St. Louis area provide?
- (b) How do FFPD line personnel view the importance of stress management training/education?
- (c) According to FFPD line personnel, what are necessary elements of stress

management training/education? (d) What do mental health professionals find are essential elements of an effective stress management education program?

Background & Significance

The Fenton Fire Protection District is an average mid-American fire department, which protects a population of 65,000 in a radius of 19 square miles that responds to approximately 4,000 calls a year. The department is made up of 58 firefighters who are each cross-trained as either an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) or paramedic. The depth of experience of the members ranges from two to thirty-five years. This number constitutes volunteer/paid experience and prior employment with the FFPD. As the second fire department in the State of Missouri awarded accreditation status from the Commission of Fire Accreditation International (CFAI), the FFPD uses the Insurance Services Organization (ISO) to assist with the development of the number of required training hours necessary that each member of the fire department must meet. Before 2014, the training committee focused on a 10 hour a month requirement for each of the department's firefighters. This calculated to 120 hours annually per fire department member. These hours could be in any discipline from live fire training to company officer development.

After 2014, the FFPD began to seek reassessment by the Insurance Services Organization in hopes of improving its class-three ISO rating. With this goal as the main focus of the FFPD in the next coming years, the training committee is re-evaluating the current training program and now realizes that not only have the minimum hours been increased from 10 to 16 hours per firefighter per month but specific disciplines must be met. With this increase in hours and discipline requirements, many existing training classes have been properly categorized and new training classes have been created or will be required. Unfortunately, even with the increase in

required hours, the FFPD training committee has not created nor considered adopting a stress management/education course in their yearly curriculum.

Beyond training requirements, the FFPD initiated a wellness fitness program in 2007. This mandatory program solely focuses on physical fitness. Workout sessions are one hour a day per shift by each on-duty firefighter. The program was created to assist FFPD firefighters in attaining and maintaining the physical abilities such as strength and endurance to perform job requirements. Additional assistance has been adapted to aid in the program compliance and success. Initially in 2012, a personal fitness trainer was hired and would visit the fire stations every other month creating a team workout session for crews to complete. By 2013, the personal trainer was budgeted to come once every month to provide the same service. The wellness fitness program brought a nutritionist to discuss healthy eating habits and provide nutritional education. At no time since its induction has the FFPD's wellness fitness program provided a class or in-service pertaining to stress management.

The FFPD provides a generic Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Personal Assistance Services (PAS) comes to the fire department once a year to go over services that they provide. Our pension, medical, dental, and PAS representatives all come on the same day to provide employees an opportunity to find out information and ask questions in a group setting.

The FFPD does have a critical incident stress management program which was implemented in 2004. The program is drafted more like a policy. It recognizes that a firefighter's job can be inherently stressful and describes the necessary steps in order to activate the Greater St. Louis Region Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) Team. The program outlines automatic activations of the CISM team with a line-of-duty death or mass casualty incident. It provides the CISM contact numbers and the proper chain of command in order for

the FFPD company officers and chiefs to be allowed to activate the team. Any other incident that may require the activation of the CISM team is truly up to the company officers and chiefs of the department. If the company officers or chiefs are unaware of signs, symptoms, or possible reasons for activation then the program cannot be utilized to its fullest. This program, which is a great resource, has been used a small handful of times by FFPD. Although part of the debriefing process includes an educational section, it is only provided when the CISM team gives a debriefing. Those receiving this education are only the small group of participants involved in the significant incident that resulted in the call for the CISM team. The FFPD's critical incident stress management program is a voluntary program designed as a post-incident event, not a preventive or a proactive one. The FFPD's critical incident management program does not provide or require pre-incident education on stress management. As with our EAP, the critical incident stress management program is available but must be sought out by the employee.

From the years 1998 and 2014, only one stress management/education class has been offered at the FFPD. This required class was offered in 2006 and was presented three different days in order for all firefighters to be able to attend while on duty. Between 2007 and 2014, two additional classes were offered by the FFPD. These classes were held in 2009 and 2013. Again, each class was presented three different shift days but each was held out of the FFPD response area and only two truck companies each day were allowed to attend. This resulted in only 18 out of 58 firefighters being able to receive stress management education. In other words, 32% of the department received this stress management education.

Since 2006, there has been no required stress management class offered by the FFPD and made available to all employees. In a department of 58 firefighters, there have been 14 new hires during that time period. The only recorded education for some of these newer FFPD

firefighters may be the introduction course on stress management education that is given during the time of their recruit class at the St. Louis County Fire Academy.

The Executive Analysis of Community Risk Reduction course at the National Fire Academy (NFA) discussed the Five E's that can be used to assist in risk-reduction prevention intervention. These are education, engineering, enforcement, economic incentives, and emergency response. (*EACRR-Student Manual*, 2013, p. SM 1-11) In order for a fire department to be an active participant in risk reduction it needs to have firefighters willing, ready, and able to assist the community they serve. This requires the fire department to not only have firefighters educated in their physical field of skill but also mentally prepared to respond to emergencies on a daily basis.

The mission statement of the FFPD is: "The Fenton Fire Protection District is committed to providing our residents and neighbors the highest quality emergency services by being progressive, highly trained and community oriented. We will achieve our mission through strong leadership, financial responsibility, and innovation." (Fenton Fire District, n.d., para. 1) The FFPD does make a progressive effort in training for the physical aspects of the job, as well as staying attentive to current fire service strategies and tactical trends. However, this approach does not address the mental aspect of such an emotionally demanding career. A progressive educational approach in stress management must also be included. "Training them to deal with trauma, stress, and grief is no less important than training them to be safe on the fire ground." (Sweeney, 2014, para. 22) If the FFPD is to be committed to the mission of being highly trained then it must include regular effective stress management training/education. Neglecting stress management training/education should be as unacceptable as inadequate training in driving or operating the fire apparatus.

There are several important factors in determining the focus on stress management training/education. The first would be to discover the mindset and core value beliefs of the FFPD regarding stress education and management. How important is the subject matter to them? What are the particular areas in which they would like more information? Another factor to consider is investigation of what other similar departments in the FFPD area are doing to educate their line personnel on the subject. Finally, what do the professionals in stress management education value as the important elements of a program? The identification of these factors can help in developing a unique set of recommendations that can be used to develop a future stress management training/education course pertaining to the FFPD.

This research relates to the United States Fire Administration's goal #3, "Improve the fire and emergency service's capability for response to and recovery from all hazards." (U.S. Fire Administration Website, n.d., p. 14) Firefighters and chief officers can find numerous classes related to the physical skill set of firefighting. From state certifications in driver/operator of fire apparatus to basic courses titled Firefighter I & II, these are the familiar training subjects. However, having a mission statement of being highly trained needs to include all disciplines of the fire service job. By regularly including stress management in the training program, it can improve a firefighter's performance. "Investing in the individual -- the fire service's greatest resource -- is an investment in the capability to provide high-quality service to communities while enhancing the quality of life of the individuals who serve." (IAFF: Wellness Fitness Initiative Resource, n.d., para. 1)

Literature Review

With recent events, such as the rioting and burning of buildings in Ferguson, Missouri, it is not difficult to realize why the fire service continues to be in the top ten most stressful jobs.

“Blame aside, fire and EMS personnel found themselves in combat-like situations as they moved under police escort to treat the wounded and attempt to knock down at least a dozen business and auto fires.”(Markley, 2014, para. 2)

In the course of this research, four questions were asked: (a) What stress management training/education do comparable fire departments in the St. Louis area provide? (b) How do FFPD line personnel view the importance of stress management training/education? (c) According to FFPD line personnel, what are necessary elements of stress management training/education? (d) What do mental health professionals find are essential elements of an effective stress management education program?

Stress-related disorders have often been linked to warfare. There have been personal accounts of young men’s stress reactions during Civil War battles. The psychological consequences of the trench warfare of World Wars I & II spawned the term “shellshock.” Eventually, following the Vietnam War, the ultimate descriptor of the effects of long term exposure to intense stressors became posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). (Andreasen, n.d.) In order to prevent these psychiatric consequences of war, a screening program was implemented. Psychiatrist Thomas W. Salmon, who also advocated prevention “advised the US armed forces to screen recruits and exclude insane, feeble-minded, psychopathic, and neuropathic individuals.” (Pols & Oak, 2006, para. 4) During World Wars I & II a screening program was used. However, more manpower was needed during World War II and General George C. Marshall eliminated the screening process. The military also realized that the screening process was a poor predictor of those who would develop psychiatric issues. (Pols & Oak, 2006) Since the Vietnam War, a “Combat stress control team” has been established. It is responsible for retaining manpower and maintaining operational efficiency of the men. It

accomplishes this by providing a range of services which include prevention education to unit commanders, brief in-services on suicide prevention, interpersonal climate surveys within units, interpersonal climate advice for returning home, and an informal soldier support group. (Pols & Oak, 2006)

The book, *Warrior Mindset*, provides a look at using stress reactions to increase performance associated in military and law enforcement activities. This is accomplished partly by prevention education. It teaches the necessary principles in understanding stress responses and then how to control them. (Asken, Grossman, & Christensen, 2010)

Beyond military and law enforcement, stressors have been identified in the general business world. “According to the research cited, Human Resource professionals believe the number one reason high achievers leave a company is due to a lack of promotion opportunities.” (Key, 2011, para. 2) Unfortunately, Human Resource professionals have it wrong. It is stress that makes them leave. (Key, 2011) Businesses are now providing stress management training and an employee assistance program (EAP). These programs are teaching employees “about the nature and sources of stress, the effects of stress on health, and personal skills to reduce stress.” (“Stress...At work,” 1999, para. 49) Some businesses have taken additional steps and brought in “consultants to recommend ways to improve working conditions.” (“Stress...At work,” 1999, para. 50)

In a 2013 Journal of Emergency medical Services (JEMS) salary & workplace survey, “65% of all organizations report an “in-house” or “third-party” stress management program.”(Greene, 2013, p. 36) Fire departments recognize the need for stress education and provide assistance by either counseling or support such as the EAP or mental health professional. (Norwood & Rascati, 2012)

In 1988, Los Angeles Fire Department implemented a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing Program that included not only post event counseling and peer support counseling but preventive education in stress symptoms and how to cope with them. (Kendall, 1988) Jefferson Parish Fire Department has partnered with East Jefferson General Hospital Wellness Center in providing a Wellness/Fitness Program. This comprehensive program provides firefighters with a total fitness program. Complete medical and physical fitness evaluations are performed and specialized training programs are developed for each firefighter's needs. The unique addition to the program is providing firefighters with workshops and lectures on stress management, body mechanics, smoking cessation, and nutrition. ("Jefferson Parish Fire," n.d.)

“Military officials everywhere have displayed a strong ambivalence toward the involvement of psychiatrists in military affairs. For example, they often labeled soldiers suffering from psychiatric symptoms as cowards lacking moral fiber.”(Pols & Oak, 2006, para. 4) This view of psychiatric symptoms indicating weakness in character and cowardliness by military officials bleeds down to the foot soldiers. “Soldiers most in need of mental health care do not seek it because of fear of embarrassment, difficulties with peers or officers, or interference with career opportunities within the military.” (Pols & Oak, 2006, p. 33) Law enforcement officers continue the stigma of mental health assistance. Officers worry that they will be seen visiting a therapist, yet they are exposed to stressors beyond the capacity of their emotions. (Kroll, 2015) “For some officers, alcohol is an acceptable response in dealing with those emotions.” (Kroll, 2015, para. 6)

Along with military and law enforcement comes the same negative view from the fire service. Firefighters have the notion that if they can't handle everything that is thrown at them then they are less than a real firefighter. “Although the stigma has lessened greatly over the past

20 years, it still exists-and in a significant way.”(Norwood & Rascati, 2012, para. 23) Jeff Dill, a fire captain and licensed counselor, says, “We suffer what I call cultural brainwashing. Once we put this uniform on, we’re expected to act a certain way: Be strong. Don’t show weakness. Don’t be the weak link of the company – we can handle problems on our own.” (Erich, 2014, p. 39) Even when resources are available to provide support, there still is a stigma attached to using it. “I’ve seen many cases of harassment and bullying among peers who will criticize someone who seeks help,” says Vince Savoia, a former paramedic.” (Erich, 2014, p. 39) He also adds “we’re all very empathetic toward our patients, but how many show empathy toward our peers?” (Erich, 2014, p. 39)

In order to promote mental wellness, organizations must address cultural and environmental barriers at all prevention levels. It is imperative that the shame and negative belief system that discourages at-risk police officers from seeking help must be changed if a program of prevention is to be successful. (“COPS,” 2014) This belief system we have can result in a lot of stress. “We have literally thousands of premises and assumptions about all kinds of things that we hold to be true –everything from, you can’t fight city hall and the customer is always right, to men shouldn’t show their emotions.”(Posen, 1995, para. 34) Individuals must keep in mind that these truths are a person’s philosophy or value system and that it is really just their opinion that may not be the same as your own. (Posen, 1995)

Pittsburgh Firefighters Local No.1 enlisted the help of Dr. Bruce S. Rabin, the University of Pittsburgh immunologist and stress-management expert, to assist with identifying and reducing firefighter stress. He holds two-hour training sessions to teach stress related skills to the 570 firefighters. This pre-education instills coping mechanisms, breathing techniques, and stress-trigger awareness. (Templeton, 2013) Dr. Rabin’s research regarding the effects of stress

shows that “coping mechanisms help blunt the flow of stress hormones and prevent stress-induced disruptions of important bodily functions.” (Templeton, 2013, p. 13) One unanticipated stress-related health risk he observed while visiting the Pittsburgh fire house was the continuous radio chatter and the alarms that firefighters were exposed to, even when they didn’t involve that fire company. He informed the “firehouse lieutenant and the union’s recording secretary that the persistent noise elevated stress hormones with negative effects on health.” (Templeton, 2013, para. 9)

A trial resiliency-based training program took place in Aurora, Colorado. (Erich, 2014) Twenty-five first responders who were involved in the 2012 theater shooting were given pre-class & post-class resiliency assessments. Twenty-four reported improved ability to cope with stressful events following the six week program. “The First Response Resiliency curriculum focused on 12 skills: goal setting, nutrition, exercise, sleep, relaxation, ABCs (activating events, beliefs, and consequences), perspective, self-defeating thoughts, empathy, wins/losses, reacting out, social support.”(Erich, 2014, p. 46)

The leading cause of Line of Duty Deaths (LODD) is still heart related despite extensive health and wellness programs implemented in the fire service. “Yet, the physical workload of that firefighter hasn’t increased; this reaction has more to do with the victim’s emotional fitness rather than physical fitness. Being fit for duty is not only how often you run or how much you lift; you must place as much effort and importance on your mental and emotional fitness.” (Brokaw, 2014, para. 7)

Teaching complex methods like breathing techniques and relaxation exercises cannot be adequately taught in a teaching phase of a critical incident debriefing. These stress management techniques are better taught pre-incident than post-incident. A complex skill of this nature

usually takes an average of five exposures before being adequately learned. (Mitchell & Everly, 1997)

A new trend in prevention efforts is being emphasized in many fire departments. “Beyond just awareness training, that means building skills that allow us to withstand and rebound from operational stress injuries.” (Erich, 2014, p. 43-44) Lori Gray, PhD, a clinical, rehabilitation and forensic psychologist believes this is where the field is heading. “Rather than a reactive approach, it involves more proactive care and prevention to build resiliency – things such as pre-incident education and what can be done to give people more skills for the types of situations we know can be difficult. For example, we’re seeing more training around delivering bad news and death notifications.” (Erich, 2014, p. 44)

Company officers are often considered the “most important and impactful position in the fire service.” (Eisel, 2013, p. 58) Company officers should be able to determine if their crews are not only physically prepared for the challenges that a duty day can bring but mentally prepared as well. A company officer’s interest in the health and safety of their crew impacts every level of their crew’s performance. (Eisel, 2013)

In 1908, an Inverted-U graph was created by Robert Yerkes and John Dodson to explain the relationship between pressure (stress) and performance. (Sincero, n.d.) The Inverted-U has a low pressure end which creates boredom and a high stress end that creates anxiety and unhappiness. In between these two regions is a peak which is called, “area of best performance.” “In this region, moderate pressure resulting to optimum stress or stress that is totally manageable leads to the highest level of performance.” (Sincero, n.d., para. 13) If firefighters can learn/train to cope with negative circumstances by utilizing prevention education associated with awareness and coping techniques, then they can triumph over that negative circumstance. (Brokaw, 2014)

In summary, the literature review reinforces the importance of preventive stress management training/education. Teaching coping skills and breathing techniques are complicated skills to teach post-incident. Fitness and Wellness programs have to be well-rounded for success. They need to include physical and mental fitness. These two elements together can increase firefighter performance. In addition, preventive education can help assist individual, as well as organizations to identify stress triggers such as environmental sounds (i.e. continuously audible dispatch radio). Lastly, introducing regular required stress management training/education can also initiate a positive attitude change in the mental health belief system of fire departments and their members. Francis Bacon said, “Knowledge is power” and with organizations and their firefighters properly trained prior to stressful events they cannot provide those they serve their highest level of performance to mitigate the incident.

Procedures

The purpose of this research is to identify recommendations for including regular opportunities for stress management training and education at the FFPD. The first step in the research project was to collect and review the existing programs in place at the FFPD. Using the years 1998 through 2014, a thorough review of FFPD training records was conducted. Training records have been kept since 2011 to current on FIREHOUSE (FH) software. Prior to 2011, annual reports were provided to the Chief of the FFPD by the training officer describing courses completed. Structured training courses are recorded by the three deputy chiefs of the FFPD. The next phase was to analyze the existing training records for stress management content. In addition the FFPD employee manual was reviewed to discover what if any resources or programs are available to the line-personnel regarding stress management.

Interviews with mental health professionals were conducted to gather data on essential elements of an effective stress management education program. A set of interview questions were developed and administered in interview format. The scope of the applied research project (ARP) was discussed at the beginning of the interviews. Each interviewee was reminded their participation was voluntary. Of the four mental health professionals contacted, only two participated.

On January 6, 2015, an interview took place with Erin Kniffen, a licensed professional counselor at Personal Assistance Services (Appendix A). Another interview was conducted on January 12, 2015, with Sally Frese, a psychiatric nurse practitioner from the Greater St. Louis Region CISM Team (Appendix B). The interview questions were created to obtain information regarding how often stress management should be taught, should the program be voluntary or mandatory, and what elements are important to include in stress management training/education.

Written notes were used to record discussions. Each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes. Participants were chosen as representatives of mental health agencies that provide stress management resources.

In addition, a questionnaire with cover letter was distributed by way of email to training officers of fire departments comparable to the FFPD (Appendix C). The questionnaire consisted of seven questions and space available for additional comments. Questions were designed to determine what stress management training/education is provided by comparable fire departments in St. Louis area. Ten questionnaires were distributed and three were completed and returned to this researcher.

Also, a survey conducted across FFPD line personnel regarding their views of the importance of stress management training/education as well as what they feel are necessary

elements of stress management training/education (Appendix D). The survey consisted of seven questions. Each survey with cover letter was hand delivered to allow for opportunity for any necessary clarification. The delivery of surveys occurred across three days at shift change. Questions were designed to collect data on FFPD line personnel's opinions on the importance and essential training elements of a successful stress management program at the FFPD. Of 58 surveys, 29 were completed and returned to this researcher.

Using interview and surveys to gather information has limitations. A comprehensive research study was published in 2008 regarding return rates on surveys. Individual rate of returns averaged 52.7% and organizational rate of returns averaged 35.7%. The study further indicated that these rates did not vary significantly over the previous ten years. (Baruch & Holtom, 2008) Possible reasons for limited survey returns could be time constraints, lack of confidence in anonymity, and a general disinterest. Low participation in interviews could also be due to time constraints or minimal interest, as well as low priority level.

Although being a researcher who is within the FFPD allows for a particular perspective, problems regarding objectivity can occur. Therefore, the limitation for personal bias is acknowledged.

Results

Research results came from interviews of mental health professionals, questionnaires, and analysis of 1998 to 2014 FFPD training records. The first research question asked what stress management training/education is provided by comparable departments in the St. Louis area. Those responding include Affton Fire Protection District, Black Jack Fire Protection District, and Pattonville Fire Protection District.

The Black Jack Fire Protection District does not have a stress management training/education program. They do provide the EAP to their employees and remind them annually of its availability. A copy of survey results is located in Appendix F.

Chief Jim Fritz, of the Affton Fire Protection District(AFPD), stated the AFPD also does not have a stress management training/education program. They too provide the EAP. In addition, Chief Fritz reported that the department has utilized the assistance of the CISM team on some occasions. A copy of survey results is located in Appendix G.

Battalion Chief Dave Dotson of the Pattonville Fire Protection District stated that they have offered stress management training/education. Once, several years ago, professional counselors from a regional mental health agency were brought in to discuss stress and suicide prevention. This was prompted by a department employee's suicide. This training was not required unless personnel were on duty on the day of the presentation. Battalion Chief Dotson felt that most attendees thought the topic did not apply to them but some were appreciative of the information and had awareness of the suicide trend in the fire service. Beyond this initial training, no other stress management training/education has been offered by the department. Battalion Chief Dotson did note that while no similar tragic events have occurred since that time, he acknowledges the importance of continued education on the subject. A copy of survey results is located in Appendix H.

Additional survey results included views of FFPD line personnel regarding the importance of stress management training/education and what they feel are necessary elements of stress management training/education. Twenty-nine of fifty-eight questionnaires were completed and returned. The majority of respondents agreed that stress management training/education is important. When asked how often such education should be taught, 59%

believed the class should be presented annually. Further, 86% indicated that yearly stress management training/education should be required. When total respondents were broken into 10 year increments of fire service, the groups with 11 or more years of fire service indicated a stronger desire to have regular opportunities for stress management training/education. Percentages in these groups ranged from 54 to 67. According to survey results, 50% of those newest to the fire service reported feeling neutral about annual stress management training/education. When asked if the stress management training/education offered by the FFPD meets their individual needs, 83% of total respondents answered no. Twenty-four percent of respondents brought up awareness of the EAP, yet still stated that their need for stress management training/education was not being met.

Participants were asked what elements they feel are important to include in a stress management training/education program. Several components were identified including knowledge of available resources, decreasing stigma of use, and identification of need for help. Across all respondents, the need for information regarding coping skill techniques was greatest at 59%. In addition, 48% of respondents felt a need for general or basic stress management education. Specific information is sought on topics such as signs/symptoms of stress, causes of stress (environmental, occupational, home), and better management of stress.

Existing coping methods reported by respondents varied from alcohol and/or medication to exercise. Fifty-nine percent of participants noted the use of exercise to combat stress. Thirty-one percent said they use methods of relaxation such as driving, music, sleeping, and finding time for themselves. Twenty-eight percent of respondents indicated using alcohol and/or medication as a way of coping with stress. The use of alcohol and/or medication as a stress

reducer was as commonly reported as engaging in a hobby. A copy of survey results is located in Appendix E.

Erin Kniffen, LPC from the Personal Assistance Services (PAS) was interviewed regarding her thoughts on the essential elements of an effective stress management education program. Ms. Kniffen indicated that a stress management program should be part of a regular annual training program for fire service personnel. She feels that in a field such as the fire service, making additional training available every six months would be the most beneficial. Components of a presentation should cover the normalcy of emotional reactions to stress, knowing yourself and what causes you stress, and learning coping techniques. She emphasized the need to practice coping techniques on a regular basis in order for them to be effective. She also mentioned making sure individuals are aware of the stress management resources available to them. Ms. Kniffen highly praised the use of peer support teams, particularly in first responder environments. Information from this interview is located in Appendix A.

Sally Frese, psychiatric nurse practitioner and member of The Greater St. Louis CISM Team, was also interviewed to get her input regarding necessary elements of a stress management training/education program. Ms. Frese, too, felt a regular stress management program should be provided to fire service personnel at least annually. It should be a part of routine training for all line personnel. Components should include identification of modern day stressors (social media; abundance of 24-hour news outlets; constant use of recording devices during emergency incidents by bystanders), active participation during training, learning coping skills, individuality of participants, and availability of resources. She also noted the need for ongoing practice of techniques learned of success. Ms. Frese said by including current research and trends when developing a stress management training/education program, an organization can keep the

information contemporary and interesting to its audience. Information from this interview is located in Appendix B.

Discussion

This project's goal was to identify recommendations for including regular opportunities for stress management training and education at the FFPD. Since 1998, only three classes have been offered at the FFPD pertaining to stress management and only one was held at FFPD training grounds, allowing all employees to attend. Since 2006, there have been no required stress management training/education opportunities for all employees. Potentially, 24% of the current line personnel have not attended a stress management training/education class.

The researcher used four questions to gather information regarding stress management in order to offer recommendations for the inclusion of regular stress management training/education at the FFPD.

One significant finding of this research was that a formal stress management training/education program is not necessarily the norm in comparable fire departments in the St. Louis area. Though FFPD has only offered three opportunities for stress management training/education during this researcher's 17 years of employment, similar departments contacted during this research have provided considerably fewer. Any specific training that was discovered only required the attendance of those on shift at the time of the class. Most departments contacted reported relying on EAP as their main resource used if employees needed stress management information. A reaction-based stress management program does not teach preemptive coping strategies. Avoiding or reducing the impact of stress through the use of coping mechanisms can decrease "disruption of the chemical and physiological balance of the body." (Templeton, 2013, para. 12) In the book *Warrior Mindset*, prevention education is also

highlighted as an important factor in stress management that can lead to improved employee performance. (Asken et al., 2010)

Another finding was that most current line personnel at the FFPD feel the need for at least annual stress management training/education. Individuals with more than 11 years of service indicated a stronger desire for required stress management training/education. Those beyond 27 years agreed unanimously that it should be required. A possible explanation for senior members having a stronger opinion about requiring stress management training/education could be their confidence in their abilities due to their years of experience compared to newer firefighters still trying to prove themselves. Pals and Oak talk about military officials reacting negatively toward soldiers receiving psychiatric treatment. (Pals & Oak, 2006) The article from COPS newsletter discusses “the still-pervasive stigma that discourages at risk officers from seeking help for fear of negative peer reactions or career ramifications.” (“COPS,” 2014, para. 5) Senior members of the FFPD are closer to the end of their careers so the thought of negative career consequences from addressing the issue of stress management may not be as big a concern. Senior members may also be experiencing a larger cumulative effect of occupational stressors as well as observing the effect in peers.

This researcher found that most survey respondents want information on stress management coping skills. Information gathered about existing coping methods suggests that many line personnel rely on less-than-optimal ways to relieve stress. More than one-fourth of the respondents admitted to using alcohol/medication to combat stress. It was noted that these same respondents were line personnel with eleven or more years of service. “In law enforcement, cumulative stress is associated with an increased risk of alcohol abuse.” (Kroll,

2015, para. 7) This researcher found that at least a portion of the respondents who report utilizing alcohol are interested in other methods of coping with stress.

The two most reported coping methods recorded in this research, exercise and relaxation, are frequently recommended and supported by previous researchers. Common themes across literature reviewed regarding stress management strategies include exercise, relaxation, support systems (family, friends, and coworkers), sleep, and belief systems (normalcy of stress, perceptions, preconceived notions). Years of research have continued to support these stress management techniques. Posen (Posen, 1995) and Erich (Erich, 2014) agree these are achievable and beneficial means to assist with decreasing stress. The authors of the Warrior Mindset also address the importance of exercise, relaxation techniques, and belief systems among other methods to handle stressful situations. (Asken et al., 2010)

While coping strategies are important, information gathered when talking with mental health professionals indicated there are several necessary elements to include in a stress management training/education program. These four components continued to surface throughout this research. They offer a framework for a manageable but useful stress management training/education program.

First, participants must understand the normalcy of stress reactions. Ms. Kniffen expressed that individuals need to be reminded that their reactions are perfectly normal. It's alright to feel a range of emotions or none at all. Ms. Frese, too, raised the importance of teaching that stress is a normal occurrence. When this researcher inquired about how important stress management is to their ability to cope with occupational stress, several survey respondents denied having any occupational stress at all. This canned response could be attributed to avoiding the stigma associated with being perceived as weak. Previous researchers have found

“although the stigma has lessened greatly over the past 20 years, it still exists-and in a significant way.” (Norwood & Rascati, 2012, para. 23)

Everyone is different. Ms. Frese feels that knowing yourself and your personality traits are a necessary element in handling stress. Ms. Kniffen agrees that getting to know your self is beneficial in discovering your own stress triggers. By identifying his/her stressors, a person can prepare for or learn to handle them. The CDC article, Stress at Work, talks about “working conditions playing a primary role in causing job stress; however, the role individual factors cannot be ignored.” (“Stress...At work,” 1999, para. 18)

The most obvious element of a stress management training/education program is coping skills. FFPD survey respondents, as well as mental health professionals, feel coping techniques are an essential part of an effective program. Ms. Kniffen and Ms. Frese emphasized not only knowing techniques to use but practicing them both in and outside of class. Whether it be driving a fire apparatus or doing deep-breathing techniques, learning any skill requires frequent practice in order to be mastered. “You can’t stop the tornado from coming but, through proper preparation, you can make it ‘hurt’ less.”(Brokaw, 2014, para. 9)

Ms. Kniffen and Ms. Frese pointed out that employees must know what resources are available. Although the EAP is known to the employees of FFPD, the overall scope of help EAP provides regarding stress management may not be understood. Perhaps either the annual EAP familiarization of benefits does not effectively convey what is offered or the EAP is not an option of choice. Thirty-one percent of the survey respondents still want to know what resources are available. The e-newsletter of the COPS office encourages those contemplating suicide to “talk with a family member, a peer, your supervisor, your agency leadership, an EAP representative, a healthcare provider, the confidential National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, or

Safe Call Now (crisis line for public safety employees).” (“COPS,” 2014, p. 9) Providing a variety of stress management resources allows individuals to choose the avenue that works best for them.

Both mental health professions agree regular opportunities for stress management training/education should be offered at least every twelve months. Ms. Frese added that the information provided in this annual program should be up to date and relate to fluctuating employee needs. She also recommended the presenter be mindful that an audience of adult learners often does best with active participation. As a 20 year veteran of the fire service, this researcher has experienced many dated and mundane training classes with unchanged original course content.

The line personnel of the FFPD want, need, and deserve regular opportunities for stress management training/education.

Recommendations

The purpose of this research is to identify recommendations for including regular opportunities for stress management training and education at the FFPD. This was done by using a descriptive research method, review of associated literature, and original research that included surveys, interviews and analysis of FFPD training records. Based on these findings, the following recommendations are presented.

The first recommendation is to require at least annual stress management training/education for all line personnel at the FFPD. This would consist making stress management training/education available across shifts and in a location such that all line personnel can attend.

The second recommendation is to design a stress management training/education program with a basic framework that includes normalcy of reactions to stress, identification of personal stressors, teaching and practicing coping skills, and a comprehensive list of resource options.

The third recommendation is to keep abreast of current trends and research when reviewing the annual stress management training/education curriculum. Sources of up-to-date information can include EAP and CISM.

The fourth recommendation is to continue seeking FFPD line personnel feedback regarding the program effectiveness. Information gained during this research can be used as a starting point.

The fifth recommendation is to continue the annual review of EAP services provided by their agency representative.

The sixth recommendation is to explore the use of the CISM team beyond post critical incident event. CISM representatives can assist in a proactive manner as well.

The seventh recommendation is to continue the use of FFPD's wellness fitness program to promote ongoing use of exercise as a means of coping with stress.

Future researchers could examine the relationship of years of service to occupational stress within the fire department. Research could also focus on the prevalence of alcoholism in the fire service. In addition, researchers might wish to study current and past beliefs regarding the stigma of firefighters admitting and addressing feelings of stress.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions & Answers from Personal Assistance Services (PAS)

Interviewer: Captain Romona Kaminski

Interviewee: Erin Kniffen, LPC

Date of Interview: January 6, 2015

Note: answers (in italics) are paraphrased from a telephone conversation

Questions

1. How often should stress management be taught?
 - *How often a stress management program should be taught really depends on what type of field of work they are in.*
 - *Really depends on the emotional support an individual has. Do they have a good support group?*
 - *First responders – twice a year.*
2. Should the program be voluntary or mandatory?
 - *It is hard to make programs mandatory because if you make someone take the course and they are not interested they may resist the information and get nothing out of it.*
 - *Mandatory once a year and then have another that is voluntary. That way you get training in it twice a year. Could be more successful doing it that way.*
3. What elements are important to include in stress management education?
 - *First normalizing the emotional feelings. Reminding individuals that the feelings they are having after a stressful event are perfectly normal. You can feel angry, sad, or have no feeling at all. These are all okay.*
 - *Getting to know yourself. This is beneficial because then you can identify stress triggers. These are the things that can cause you to “stress.” If you can identify these triggers then you can prepare to learn to handle them. It wouldn’t be a surprise reaction. You will be able to know it is a stressor right away and have a plan in place so you can handle it.*
 - *Learning helpful techniques to utilize when you do have stress. It allows you to learn how to control your emotions.*
 - *Deep breathing*
 - *Counting when breathing, stretching – i.e. rolling shoulders back 10 times*
 - *When you get mad at someone, instead of typing the email and shipping it off to them. Type it then come back to it in a couple of hours or day later before sending it.*
 - *The importance of practicing stress relief. Stress techniques are not taught and learned by one lesson. These techniques need to be practiced. Understanding it could take a long time for it to ever be second nature. You should practice stress techniques on the “little stressors” so when the “big stressors” happen you can use them. Practice techniques weekly or monthly.*
 - *Knowing the resources that are available to you.*

4. Any other comments?

- *Peer response teams/peer support teams are amazing. These systems work great in a first responder environment. Police departments in some areas are already using it. It is a voluntary program that has allowed individuals to talk to people in the same field and understand what it is like to be in “their shoes/service world.”*
- *Knowing the ways how to minimize stress. If we know ourselves and have a plan in place to minimize (such as breathing techniques) it is important to practice them. Only by practicing are we better at doing it.*

Appendix B

Interview Questions & Answers from the Greater St. Louis Region Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) Team

Interviewer: Captain Romona Kaminski

Interviewee: Sally Frese, Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner (member of the CISM Team)

Date of Interview: January 12, 2015

Note: answers (in italics) are paraphrased from a telephone conversation

Questions

1. How often should stress management be taught?
 - *Annually at a minimum*
2. Should the program be voluntary or mandatory?
 - *It should be mandatory just like other training that the fire service requires of their personnel.*
3. What elements are important to include in stress management education?
 - *Go over updates on what is going on in health and wellness on the stress front. New studies and findings.*
 - *Remind them that stress is a normal occurrence.*
 - *Talk about burnout, day-to-day stressors, identify stressor and learn ways to cope with these stressors.*
 - *Stress “skills” have to be practiced just like any other “skill” you are trying to learn and possibly master.*
 - *Discuss personality traits. All people are different. Can they identify with a certain personality trait? – knowing themselves.*
 - *Awareness of social media – being bombarded with stressful events and then not being able to find a way to get away from it. Even on days off. (i.e. news coverage on Ferguson events)*
 - *Remember these are adults and learning can be facilitated through participation – i.e. activities.*
 - *Making sure they are aware of what resources are available to them.*
 - *Going over balance – balancing work, family, and other activities in life.*
4. Any other comments?
 - *We have all been in classes that we have had to take annually. We need to make sure elements are discussed but it needs to be not the “same old boring class.” Keep updated and keep it interesting.*

Appendix C

Questionnaire with cover letter sent to training officers of fire departments comparable to the FFPD

Cover Letter:

Fire Department Training Officers,

I am currently enrolled in the Executive Officers Program at the National Fire Academy. As part of my course assignment, I am required to complete a research paper. My paper this semester is on stress management training/education and I am looking for some input from training officers in the St. Louis Region. Please take a few minutes to fill out the survey below and return by January 1, 2015

Thank you in advance for your participation. Feel free to contact me with any questions.

Captain Romona Kaminski
Fenton Fire Protection District
captkaminski@gmail.com

Questionnaire:

1. Do you offer stress management training/education for your line personnel?
2. If so how often?
3. Is it voluntary or required?
4. Who teaches it?
5. Who developed the curriculum?
6. What is discussed/covered?
7. How receptive are the participants?
8. Any additional comments welcomed.

Appendix D

Survey with cover letter to FFPD Line Personnel

Cover letter:

Fenton Firefighters,

As most of you are aware, I am a student in the Executive Officers Program at The National Fire Academy. As part of my course assignment, I am required to complete a research paper. My paper this semester is on stress management training/education and I am looking for some input from our line personnel. Please take a few minutes of your time to fill out the survey enclosed and return it to me by January 1, 2015.

Thank you,

Captain Romona Kaminski

Survey:

1. How many years of service do you have in the fire service?
2. Do you feel stress management training/education should be required or optional for line personnel?
3. How often should stress management training/education be taught?
4. Do you feel the stress management training/education offered by the FFPD meets your needs?
5. What elements do you feel are important to include in a stress management training/education program? (These may or may not be elements of the current stress management training/education program.)
6. How important do you feel stress management training/education is to your overall ability to cope with occupational stress?
7. What do you do to cope with stress? (i.e. exercise, retreat to a hobby...)

Appendix E

Results from FFPD Line Personnel Survey

Number of surveys handed out – 58

Number of surveys returned – 29

Questions

1. How many years of service do you have in the fire service?

01 – 10 years of service = 06%

11 – 20 years of service = 45%

21 – 30 years of service = 31%

31 plus years of service = 18%

2. How often should stress management training/education be taught

Total

- 1 time a year = 59%
- 2 times a year = 10%
- Every 2 years = 14%
- Every 3 years = 7%
- Not Sure = 10%

Broken down in years of service

- 01 – 10 years of service
 - Not sure = 50%
 - 1 time a year = 50%
- 11 – 20 years of service
 - 1 time a year = 54%
 - 2 times a year = 15%
 - Every 2 years = 8%
 - Every 3 years = 15%
 - Not sure = 8%
- 21 – 30 years of service
 - 1 time a year = 67%
 - 2 times a year = 11%
 - Every 2 years = 11%
 - Not sure = 11%
- 31 plus years of service
 - 1 time a year = 60%
 - Every 2 years = 11%
 - Not sure = 20%

3. Do you feel stress management training/education should be required or optional for line personnel?

Total

- Not sure = 7%
- Required = 86%
- Optional = 7%

Broken down in years of service

- 01 – 10 years of service
 - Not sure = 50%
 - Required = 50%
- 11 – 20 years of service
 - Required = 92%
 - Optional = 8%
- 21 – 30 years of service
 - Not sure = 11%
 - Required = 78%
 - Optional = 11%
- 31 plus years of service
 - Required = 100%

4. Do you feel the stress management training/education offered by the FFPD meets your needs?

Total

- Yes = 17%
- No = 83%

Broken down into years of service

- 01 – 10 years of service
 - Yes = 50%
 - No = 50%
- 11 – 20 years of service
 - Yes = 15%
 - No = 85%
- 21 – 30 years of service
 - Yes = 22%
 - No = 78%

- 31 plus years of service
 - No = 100%

5. What elements do you feel are important to include in a stress management training/education program? (These may or may not be elements of the current stress management training/education program.)

Total

- Information on coping skills/techniques = 59%
- Information on what resources are available if you need them = 31%
- Discussion about the stigma over stress related issues (admitting to having stress, seeking help) = 17%
- How to identify if you need help and when to get help = 31%
- Didn't know what elements were important to add or left question blank = 10%
- General education = 48%

Broken down into years of service

- 01 – 10 years of service
 - Information on coping skills/techniques = 50%
 - Didn't know what elements were important to add or left question blank = 50%
- 11 – 20 years of service
 - Information on coping skills/techniques = 77%
 - Information on what resources are available if you need them = 31%
 - How to identify if you need help and when to get help = 15%
 - Didn't know what elements were important to add or left question blank = 18%
 - General education = 54%
- 21 – 30 years of service
 - Information on coping skills/techniques = 44%
 - Information on what resources are available if you need them = 33%
 - Discussion about the stigma over stress related issues (admitting to having stress, seeking help) = 22%
 - How to identify if you need help and when to get help = 56%
 - Didn't know what elements were important to add or left question blank = 11%
 - General education = 44%
- 31 plus years of service
 - Information on coping skills/techniques = 40%
 - Information on what resources are available if you need them = 40%
 - Discussion about the stigma over stress related issues (admitting to having stress, seeking help) = 60%
 - How to identify if you need help and when to get help = 40%
 - General education = 60%

6. How important do you feel stress management training/education is to your overall ability to cope with occupational stress?

Total

- Yes or important = 79%
- No or low priority = 3%
- “I don’t have stress or I don’t know” = 18%

Broken down into years of service

- 01 – 10 years of service
 - Yes or important = 50%
 - “I don’t have stress or I don’t know” = 50%
- 11 – 20 years of service
 - Yes or important = 77%
 - “I don’t have stress or I don’t know” = 23%
- 21 – 30 years of service
 - Yes or important = 89%
 - No or low priority = 11%
- 31 plus years of service
 - Yes or important = 80%
 - “I don’t have stress or I don’t know” = 20%

7. What do you do to cope with stress? (i.e. exercise, retreat to a hobby...)

Total

- Exercise = 59%
- Hobbies = 28%
 - Hunting
 - Camping
 - Fishing
 - Home improvement projects
- Talk about it with friends/family = 21%
- Humor & Comradery (with coworkers) = 17%
 - Joking around/light hearted
 - Dark humor
- Don’t really know what they do = 3%
- Faith/religion = 3%
- Drink/medicate = 28%
- Retreat/solitude/withdrawal/isolate = 14%
- Family time = 10%
- Relax = 31%
 - Disconnect from work when off duty
 - “Me” time

- Listen to music
- Ride Horses
- Drive
- Health – eating healthy/getting enough sleep

Broken down into years of service

- 01 – 10 years of service
 - Exercise = 50%
 - Family time = 50%
- 11 – 21 years of service
 - Exercise = 69%
 - Hobbies = 15%
 - Talk about it with friends/family = 23%
 - Humor & comradery (with coworkers) = 15%
 - Faith/religion = 8%
 - Drink/medicate = 31%
 - Retreat/solitude/withdrawal/isolate = 15%
 - Family time = 15%
 - Relax = 38%
- 21 – 30 years of service
 - Exercise = 44%
 - Hobbies = 44%
 - Talk about it with friends/family = 33%
 - Humor & comradery (with coworkers) = 33%
 - Don't really know what they do = 11%
 - Drink/medicate = 33%
 - Retreat/solitude/withdrawal/isolate = 11%
 - Relax = 11%
- 31 plus years of service
 - Exercise = 60%
 - Hobbies = 60%
 - Drink/medicate = 20%
 - Retreat/solitude/withdrawal/isolate = 20%
 - Relax = 60%

Appendix F

**Questionnaire results from Black Jack Fire Protection District
Battalion Chief Roger Ellison**

Note: Answers in italics

Questionnaire

1. Do you offer stress management training/education for your line personnel?
No
2. If so how often?
3. Is it voluntary or required?
4. Who teaches it?
5. Who developed the curriculum?
6. What is discussed/covered?
7. How receptive are the participants?
8. Any additional comments welcomed.
We have an Employee Assistance Program that all employees were once made aware of and periodically (once a year or every other year) updated on.

Appendix G

**Questionnaire results from Affton Fire Protection District
Chief Jim Fritz**

Note: Answers in italics

Questionnaire

1. Do you offer stress management training/education for your line personnel?
No
2. If so how often?
3. Is it voluntary or required?
4. Who teaches it?
5. Who developed the curriculum?
6. What is discussed/covered?
7. How receptive are the participants?
8. Any additional comments welcome.
We do subscribe to an Employee Assistance Program that offers counseling or coaching for our personnel and under certain circumstances we have been assisted by the Critical Incident Stress Management Team.

Appendix H

**Questionnaire results from Pattonville Fire Protection District
Battalion Chief/Training Officer David Dotson**

Note: Answers in italics

Questionnaire

1. Do you offer stress management training/education for your line personnel?
We brought in professionals to discuss stress and suicide prevention with our personnel once. It has not been a regular occurrence for our department.
2. If so how often?
Just the one time so far.
3. Is it voluntary or required?
The training was not required unless personnel were on duty on the day of the presentation.
4. Who teaches it?
Professional counselors from Alternative Behavioral Care in St. Peters, MO were brought in.
5. Who developed the curriculum?
They developed the curriculum based on our request.
6. What is discussed/covered?
We were specifically looking for signs and symptoms of depression and other issues that may lead to suicide or suicidal thoughts.
7. How receptive are the participants?
Being typical fire fighters, most thought the topic didn't apply to them. Some were appreciative of the information and were aware of the suicide trend in the fire service.
8. Any additional comments welcome
We brought this group in because we had one of our own commit suicide several years back. Many, myself included, wondered if we missed signs or clues that could have prevented this tragedy. It was my hope to educate people on what to look for and how to address someone when you are concerned. We have not had any similar events since, but I still believe that we need to keep educating ourselves and keep an eye on each other.