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65 Glen Road, Suite 123, Garner, NC 27529

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Trauma and Stress in the Field of Forensic Science

Compared to law enforcement officers, very little research has been conducted on stress and vicarious trauma experienced by forensic professionals. Many forensic professionals are civilian employees and are not afforded the preemptive training and/or career long mental health support needed to traverse a balanced career. The job duties of forensic professionals are distinct from those in other professions. Such duties may require contact with victims, documentation of crime scenes, collection of evidence, analysis of evidence, or more administrative tasks such as expert witness testimony and management of quality systems.

The task of understanding, detailing, and mitigating the negative impacts of stress and vicarious trauma on individuals within the field of forensic science is daunting. Stress is routinely experienced in nearly all forensic disciplines, including medical examiner and coroner investigations, crime scene investigations, and forensic analysis. All forensic professionals have the potential to be touched by the violence and stress of day-to-day operations in both public and private sector work. Practitioners in this field may be exposed to the worst of humanity through exposure to the trauma of physical and sexual violence at crime scenes, handling evidence contaminated with hazardous materials, participation in autopsies, viewing or listening to digital media recordings, and during testimony as an expert witness. In addition, daily operations supporting the criminal justice process have been attributed to perceived stress/trauma from caseload size, managing backlogs, inadequate funding/staff, emotional exhaustion, personnel management, lack of tolerance for errors, and technique criticism.^{1, 2, 3}

Stress can be defined as an individual's perception and assessment of the task at hand and whether or not it exceeds his or her resources to achieve the demands of the task.⁴ The American Psychological Association identified that trauma, "...is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster...Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea."⁵ Other distinct concepts that can also overlap with stress and trauma are burnout and vicarious trauma. Practitioners may experience symptoms of one or more of these categories as the result of working many cases over time, or by a trigger from a single case. The perception of stressful and traumatic situations is subjective to the individual, and a very broad area of study considering the diverse field of forensic science.

It should be noted that not all stress is bad; however, prolonged (chronic) and mismanaged stress can have deleterious effects on a person's mental and physical health. Stress increases the hormonal and nervous response in every organ system within the body. Chronic stress does not allow the body to return to normal function and causes the person to continue operating while biologically impaired. Decades of stress and trauma research studies into sworn peace officer stress have identified links between job-related stress and a myriad of harmful ailments, for example: poor work performance, compassion fatigue, burn-out, early retirement, various cancers, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, premature death, and suicide.^{6,7,8,9} Much of the stress experienced in forensic science can become chronic, and does not allow for the removal of the stress or avoidance of trauma.

The American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors (ASCLD) has formed a Trauma & Stress Working Group (TSWG) composed of members from federal, state and local forensic science laboratories, and research professionals located across the country. The TSWG was formed to highlight the critical lack of awareness, research, and training of forensic professionals regarding job-related stress and vicarious trauma. In conjunction with ASCLD's support, the TSWG is examining the factors contributing to stress and vicarious trauma, and identifying current strategies to address these issues and build resiliency, as well as related gaps in knowledge and resources. Additionally, the TSWG endeavors to encourage study and evaluation, and promote strategies to build a culture of workforce resiliency for job-related stress and vicarious trauma experienced by forensic professionals of every level. The TSWG intends to identify research results that ASCLD can disseminate within the forensic community for the development of training materials and stress management programs that will mitigate the impact of stress on forensic professionals.

The forensic science profession must counteract the negative impact stress and vicarious trauma have on its personnel and should act to develop a resilient workforce. Paying attention to the health and wellness of forensic practitioners will facilitate the timeliness and quality of work performed on behalf of the criminal justice system. ASCLD aims to promote and encourage training institutions, educational programs, research organizations, and host agencies with distinctively focused data on the stressors and traumas experienced within the realm of forensic science to contribute to research and development of coping techniques. This information should be used to encourage an open culture that seeks to develop a workforce resilient to the stressors to which they are exposed. We urge interested researchers to engage their local forensic laboratories and ASCLD to identify opportunities for research collaborations.

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