

A Proactive Approach to First Responder Resilience

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Resilience really cuts to the core of what so much of first responder wellness is about. Resilience is defined in the [dictionary](#) as “an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change,” and first responders know firsthand how quickly things can change during a shift. Developing resilience is critical to being able to flourish on the job and in daily life as a first responder. First responders are exposed to significantly more trauma than civilians, and the inability to process that trauma is what can understandably lead individuals down paths of mental health challenges, anger issues, addictions, even suicidal thoughts. How do you overcome natural feelings of frustration, helplessness, anger, and other emotions when due to various circumstances, your best efforts aren’t able to redeem every situation? It is essential that responders process trauma in a way that allows them to be resilient in the face of unpredictable circumstances. Learning and building resilience helps first responders navigate their experiences and ultimately move forward, able to continue their important

work and maintain a healthy home life. While trauma is experienced differently for different people, there are proactive steps responders and their command staff can take to prepare for those difficult times. Here are some proactive ways to cultivate resilience in first responders.

Building a Holistic Support Network

The term “holistic” means taking into account the “whole,” or all components of an issue. With regards to resilience, this means ensuring all aspects of responder wellness are addressed and maintained, so that when the individual is in crisis, they have a strong foundation from which to draw to help them cope. For example, if a responder has a positive home life, eats well, works out regularly, is financially stable, and has practiced communicating about their emotional health whether in therapy or to peers, they’re much more likely to be able to lean on those established coping tools to help them when a crisis or trauma occurs. They have a network of resources and tools to reach for, providing a foundation of wellness that can support them through a difficult time in a healthy way. Managing stress and trauma in this way actually enables people to emerge from the difficult experience stronger.

A Sense of Mission and Purpose – Both Shared, and Individual

This can vary considerably depending on the responder’s role and personal convictions, but the idea is for first responders to recognize goals and motivation—both shared, and individual. As an individual, some people think about defining their purpose or mission as simply finding their “why,” meaning why they chose this line of work in the first place. Providing for one’s family, continuing a family tradition of first responder work, a general desire to help others in the community, or personally convicting experiences can all be part of a person’s purpose in pursuing and continuing responder careers. On a broader level, agencies or groups within organizations usually have a defined mission, which their staff commit to and can support each other in carrying out. Regardless of the particulars, the key here is to identify and write down a purpose or mission and place it somewhere memorable. It can then be referenced to remind responders why this career is “worth it” to them—even when times get tough.

Awareness of the Sphere of Control

Another way to build resilience is for responders to remind themselves about what is within their control vs. what is beyond their control. Focusing on factors that can be controlled channels energy into purposeful action. While responders might care very much about things outside their sphere of control, dwelling on them is draining and can feel defeating.

One area that all responders have control over is how they spend their time when not at work. Maintaining a healthy work-life balance by practicing self-care like physical fitness, investing in positive relationships, and developing an identity outside of the workplace are all powerful variables that can have a significant positive impact on resilience in the face of difficulty.

Regardless of how responders choose to prepare for or respond to challenges on the job, leaning on peer support and leadership should be encouraged anytime an individual feels they are struggling. No one understands like someone who has walked in the shoes of a first responder, and no one should struggle alone with the very common feelings of overwhelm and turmoil that all first responders experience to some degree. That said, spending some time preparing for challenging circumstances can make a big impact on how a person will cope and recover when the time comes.

Sources

“Here for My Peer: The Future of First Responder Mental Health” (International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 2021) [Read more here \(MDPI\)](#).

“Mental health stigma and barriers to mental health care for first responders” (ScienceDirect, 2020) [Read more here \(PLOS\)](#).