

Rescuers at risk: Emergency personnel face trauma and post traumatic stress symptoms

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A new study in *Frontiers in Psychiatry* has for the first time, demonstrated differences in the prevalence of post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) in different groups of rescue workers and emergency personnel, including firefighters, police officers and psychiatric nurses. The researchers showed that the varying experiences and circumstances these workers encounter, such as handling aggressive people, working with families or dealing with deaths and suicide, are tied to varying levels of PTSS and suicidal thoughts, with emergency department staff and psychiatric nurses showing the highest levels of PTSS and suicidal thoughts out of the emergency professions studied. The findings highlight the urgent need for bespoke training and counseling services across the rescue and emergency industries, which would help staff to cope with the trauma they experience, improving their quality of life and mental wellbeing in such high-risk professions. The study was led by Dr. Leila Soravia and Dr. Thomas Müller at the University of Bern's Hospital of Psychiatry in Switzerland.

Rescue workers and emergency personnel often

encounter traumatic events as part of their roles and are therefore at a higher risk of developing PTSD and suicidal thought patterns than the general public. Dr. Soravia explains:

"Though [rescue workers](#) across different professions will often be engaged at the same event or emergency, they have very different roles and responsibilities on the scene: this can mean the stress experienced by different workers is very subjective—whether that's from dealing with deaths, working with families of victims, or being exposed to violence. The mental wellbeing training that is offered to staff to teach them how to cope with this stress and trauma also often varies across these different professions. We therefore speculated that the prominence of PTSS and other related factors would vary across different [rescue](#) workers, which has not been studied so far."

The researchers distributed an anonymous online survey to rescue workers across Bern, Switzerland, which included police officers, firefighters, ambulance personnel, emergency department staff and psychiatric nurses. All the participants were asked questions about [traumatic events](#) they had experienced before and during the course of their job, any PTSS or [suicidal thoughts](#) they experienced, and were also asked to rate how well they thought they coped with stress and PTSS.

The study found significant differences in the prevalence of PTSS between different professions, and notably, emergency department staff and psychiatric nurses featured the highest prevalence of PTSS. For individuals who demonstrated PTSS, dysfunctional coping strategies, such as alcohol abuse or avoidance of a situation or emotion related to their [stress](#) was one of the most robust predictors of their symptoms.

"The findings highlight how even the same emergency situations can affect the mental health of rescue workers differently. We urgently need

profession-specific training that can improve emergency workers' abilities to cope with the stresses of their job to reduce their PTSS and enhance their quality of life in such high-risk professions," highlights Dr. Soravia.

"Long term studies would help us understand the predictors of PTSS in [emergency personnel](#)—a more profound understanding of these symptoms could then be a valuable basis for mental wellbeing training and support in the future."

More information: Leila M. Soravia et al, Rescuers at Risk: Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms Among Police Officers, Fire Fighters, Ambulance Personnel, and Emergency and Psychiatric Nurses, *Frontiers in Psychiatry* (2021). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsy.2020.602064](#)

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