

"Like Little Nicks to the Soul": First Responders Experiences with Moral Suffering and Resilience

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Introduction

- First responders are an interdisciplinary group of professionals who are the first to answer calls for help in emergency situations.
- They face increased risk of mental health issues and significant barriers to treatment.
- Moral suffering is a clinically significant concern that is likely contributing to worsened mental health outcomes for first responders. Yet it remains largely unexamined in the scientific literature and there is a lack of widespread awareness among first responders and mental health professionals about this phenomenon and how to address it.

Background

- Moral suffering refers to a continuum of physical, psychological, and spiritual symptoms that can occur after exposure to a moral stressor. Ranging from more mild, short term symptoms (moral distress) to more severe, longer lasting symptoms (moral injury)
- A moral stressor is any event that creates an inner conflict with ones' moral values.
- First responders frequently face exposure to moral stressors on duty.

Purpose

1. To gain a deeper understanding of first responders' lived experiences with moral suffering and resilience and how they cope with moral stressors encountered in the line of duty.
2. To use this knowledge to contribute to addressing the problem through raising awareness with relevant community stakeholders, including first responders themselves, policy makers, and mental health professionals.

Results

A detailed analysis using the methodological approach of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) yielded four group themes and seven sub-themes that describe participants' experiences with moral stressors through the types of moral stressors they encountered, how they were affected by their experiences, and how they coped with their experiences over the course of their careers.

Theme 1 - Systemic Moral Stressors

Organizational Factors

"the politics of law enforcement...I think that's the stress that's the most detrimental and hardest on people in this profession...You see people getting mistreated internally or you see people getting mistreated by the court system. You know it's wrong, it's unjust, but there's nothing you can do about it. And it just kind of, it's hard to reconcile that. Because if we didn't have a strong sense of right and wrong, justice, and fairness, we wouldn't have gotten into this profession to start with."

- Shawn, police officer

Societal Factors

Theme 2 - Human Suffering & Violence

Firefighter Andrew described the most difficult calls are those where he witnessed *"what a human being can do to somebody else and not have remorse"* and those involving *"the loss of life of an innocent person, an innocent child. They haven't even gotten to live yet. It shouldn't be that way, like they should have lived a full life."*

Methods

A small, purposive sample of five first responder participants shared their experiences through individual, semi-structured interviews. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) data analysis method was utilized to analyze transcripts from each participant and then conduct cross-case analysis. Initial study design incorporated a photovoice component, but this portion was made optional and all participants opted out. Training presentations were delivered in lieu of the photovoice exhibit to raise awareness with relevant stakeholders.

Theme 3 - Impact of Exposure

→ Personal Paradigm Shift

"you're not going to be the savior of the world that you think you're gonna be. You're gonna win a few and lose most. And that sounds very negative, but it seems like there's a lot of that."

- William, Former Firefighter/EMT and retired police officer

→ Negative Impact on Health & Relationships

Firefighter Andrew said, *"Two years ago I was struggling. I had severe, severe anxiety and depression"* and described how *"about 5 years in [to the job], was kind of when the shift happened and my parents could notice...I was more disgruntled and angry and frustrated."*

→ Compassion Satisfaction & Post-Traumatic Growth

Officer Shawn described a feeling of compassion satisfaction *"any time I actually got to help somebody and I see them make a positive change in their life"*. He went on to express how his experiences have ultimately led to spiritual growth for him, saying, *"It's helped my faith in, you know, trusting that God has better plans for me than I do."*

Theme 4 - Coping with Moral Stress

→ Early Career Stages: Avoidance & Uncertainty

Trooper Elliot described how early in his career his mental health was *"probably the most important thing that I was kind of ignoring along the way."* He relied heavily on avoidant coping through working long hours in a fast paced role on a DEA task force. *"I was just running so hard, so fast, that I just - my demons stayed bheind me all the time."*

→ Forging a Path to Resiliency

Each participant described how they developed a variety of more resilient coping strategies and outlets over time.

"I started doing some meditation...I don't have to tell everybody about it, you know what I mean. Because I'm a big rough, tough marine...When you think of meditation, I'm thinking like all these granola heads, we're gonna go out and hug a tree and eat some tofu. But that's not what it is. It's amazing."

- Trooper Elliot

Conclusion

Frequent exposure to moral stressors on duty puts first responders at risk of developing moral distress or more severe moral injury. Moral suffering is not an inevitable outcome of a career as a first responder, however. It is an occupational hazard that can be addressed through individual, organizational, and systemic efforts.

References and Acknowledgements

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