Telecommunicator
The Forgotten Victim

We Suffer in Silence
Dispatchers: What We Do

911 Dispatchers

What society thinks I do

What my friends think I do

What my parents think I do

What the officers think I do

What I want to do

What I really do

When lives are on the line

We answer

911 Dispatchers
Objectives

- Stress
  - Define
  - Recognize
  - Cope
- Studies on Public Safety Stress
  - Field Personnel
  - Telecommunicators
- Industry Standards
- Unique Stress of Telecommunicators
  - Process
  - Dissociation
  - Fight/Flight/Freeze
  - Adaptation Syndrome
- Reaction Stages
  - Alarm
  - Adaptation/Resistance
  - Exhaustion
- Compassion Fatigue
  - Definition
  - Secondary Traumatic Stress
  - Signs
- Burnout
  - Symptoms
- Personality Characteristics
- Stress and New Telecommunicators
- Coping Mechanisms
  - Awareness
  - Strategies
  - Self Care Practices
  - EMDR
  - Resources
Introduction

- Stress is a normal part of life that can help us learn, grow and accomplish great challenges. Conversely, stress can cause us significant problems.

- Those who are experiencing high amounts of stress in their life need to be aware of the possibility of Compassion Fatigue: Loss of sympathy and the gradual lessening of compassion.
This is Not C.S.I.
This is Real Life

• Victims in burning homes
• Burglaries in progress
• Suicide attempts
• Armed robberies
• Automobile fatalities
• Sexual assaults
• Murders
Anything Can Happen…

- In a Split Second
- Vehicle pursuits
- Subject pursuits
- Shots fired

And Fallen Officers, Firefighters and Paramedics…
Definition of Stress

- Stress – A pathological process resulting from the reaction of the body to external forces and abnormal conditions which tend to disturb the organisms homeostasis.

Stress

- Refers to the emotional, psychological, or physical effects as well as the sources of agitation, strain, tension or pressure


November 4, 2008

November 12, 2012
What Causes More Stress?

- The following tends to cause more stress, taking more of a toll on dispatchers.

- Unclear Requirements:
  - When it is not clear to workers how to succeed, it is harder for them to be confident, enjoy their work, and feel they are doing a good job.
What Causes More Stress?

• High-Stress Times with No “Down” Time:
  – Handling one emergency call after another without the opportunity to de-stress or walk away from the console due to minimum staffing requirements.
What Causes More Stress?

• Big Consequences for Failure:
  – People make mistakes; it is part of being human but not part of being a dispatcher.
  – When there are dire consequences to the occasional mistake, such as lawsuits or death, the overall work experience becomes much more stressful, and the risk of compassion fatigue increases.

Job Burnout: Job Factors That Contribute to Employee Burnout - What Makes Some Jobs More Stressful?
By Elizabeth Scott, M.S
What Causes More Stress?

• Lack of Personal Control

  – Workers who feel restricted and unable to exercise personal control over their environment and daily decisions tend to be at a greater risk for burnout.
Consequences of Stress?

- Stress causes loss of empathy and patience which can be detected through voice inflection during a court proceeding due to a lawsuit.

- No one will ask what you meant.
Few actions trigger stress, resentment and diminished motivation quicker than having one’s hard work, extra effort, and significant contributions taken for granted.
Stress

• Poor Leadership

– Depending on the leadership style and quality determines the employee’s feeling of value and achievement and their place among the team.
Stress

• Too Much Work With Little Balance

  – A life of consistent 40 hour work weeks with an added 40 hours of overtime with no down time is a classic high risk scenario for compassion fatigue and burnout.
  
  – Shift work with mandatory overtime leaves the dispatcher with inadequate personal time to enjoy life to sustain themselves through the stress.
Stress

- No Help or Supportive Resources

Most agencies are caught in the middle of the administrative red tape between the police department and the fire department leaving Communications to decipher the desired procedure.

Job Burnout: Job Factors That Contribute to Employee Burnout - What Makes Some Jobs More Stressful?
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Stress

• Too Little Social Support:

In addition to needing people who can help us with responsibilities, we need people to help us shoulder the emotional burden of helping others.
Stress

• Not Enough Sleep

– Shift work can create sleep disturbances which can leave the body unable to sufficiently restore normal processes.

– When did sleep become a luxury and not a necessity?
Work Stressors

• Environmental
  – Noise
  – Clutter/Dirt/Dust
  – Overcrowding at stations
  – Temperature extremes
  – Confined spaces
  – Lighting
  – Pressure of rapid response
  – Speed and volume of calls
Numerous studies have addressed the high level of stress experienced by public safety personnel such as Police, Fire and EMS as well as the effect of their stress on relationships.

Off duty coping methods have also been a topic of research.
Public Safety Stress Research

• Researchers have studied the impact of public safety personnel’s stress on their spouses’ physical and mental health.

• Trauma is transferable.
The results concluded public safety work had an adverse impact on their overall family life due to long hours, shift work and cancelled leave.
• United States marriage rate per 1,000 population: 6.8%

• Civilian divorce rate per 1,000 population: 3.4%

• Public Safety Divorce Rate: 14.5%
A PTSD study conducted by Northern Illinois University and published in the Journal of Traumatic Stress questioned 171 emergency dispatchers currently working in 24 states.

Telecommunicator Research

• The dispatchers were asked about the types of calls they answer and their corresponding emotional distress.

• The participants were found to be:
  – Predominately white females
  – 38 years of age
  – More than 11 years of dispatching experience

The participants then rated the types of calls that caused great distress and were asked to recall the worst call they ever received.

Telecommunicator Research

- About 16% of the calls dispatchers identified as their worst involved the unexpected injury or death of a child
- 13% were suicidal callers
- 10% were police officer shootings
- Another 10% involved the unexpected death of an adult

The researchers reports that the dispatchers experienced a high level of distress following 32% of potentially traumatic calls.

3.5% of the dispatchers reported symptoms severe enough to be classified as PTSD.
Telecommunicator Research

• We are the “First” First Responder’s and very few published research studies have been conducted to determine the effects of the trauma we face on a daily basis.

• No major studies have been performed to determine the dispatchers susceptibility to compassion fatigue and burnout. The symptoms should be treated before they reach the point of PTSD.
Research

• The studies which have been conducted on Police, Fire and EMS suggest that public safety, as a whole, tend to not cope well with the psychological stressors that are part of emergency service work.

• Employees often turn to maladaptive coping methods such as avoidance and distancing.
Only 20% of psychological trauma is seen at the surface.
Some things that may be very traumatic to one person hardly seem to bother another person. If something bothers you a lot and it does not bother someone else, it does not mean there is something wrong with you. People respond to experiences differently.
Telecommunicator Stress Compared to Other Occupations

- Low-Stress Occupations
  - Accountant
  - Artist
  - Auto Mechanic
  - Forester

- Medium-Stress Occupations
  - Hospital manager
  - Physician (GP)
  - Psychologist
  - School principal

- High-Stress Occupations
  - Police Officer
  - Telecommunicator
  - Air Traffic Controller
  - Waiter/waitress
Research

• Over 80% of adults will be exposed to a traumatic event in their lifetime resulting in the needed compassion from a 911 dispatcher.

• We become so concerned over the minutes of the call we forget there is a person attached to those minutes.
Industry Standards

• The World Health Organization has called workplace stress the *health epidemic of the 21st Century*.

• According to NENA, PSAP’s are finally starting to recognize the serious risk posed by work-related stress on the mental and physical health of 9-1-1 Emergency Telecommunicators.

NENA Standard on 911

• The National Emergency Number Association (NENA) Executive Board approved a standards document on Chronic Stress Management on August 5, 2013.

• Recommending a minimum of 8 hours of Stress Management Training, procedures incorporated into the SOP and participation in CISM debriefings
Industry Standards

• Stress levels will only increase with Next Generation 9-1-1 (texting, real-time video)
The Forgotten Victims

- Stress from multiple calls
- Having little information about and low control over the emergency situation
- Intense, confusing, and frequently hostile contact with frantic or outraged citizens
- Exclusion from the status and camaraderie typically shared by on-scene personnel who “get the credit”.
The Forgotten Victims

- Dispatchers never receive the closure street units have after traumatic calls.
- Our minds will often fill in the blanks and the crime scene has become worse than it actually is.
The Forgotten Victims

- After particularly difficult calls, dispatchers may show many of the classic post traumatic reactions and symptoms but are often overlooked by Police, Fire and EMS CISM debriefings.
The Process Begins…

• When the Telecommunicator is called upon
The Normal Process

• Dissociation

  – When a traumatic call is received, the Telecommunicator will remove their feelings from the situation so the training can take over.
The fight or flight response is a natural reaction which is only meant to be triggered occasionally. It was designed to keep us alive and protect humans from danger. It is not meant to be a continuous or sustained response. If continued it changes to the second stage which is the resistance reaction. If the resources in the body become depleted and cannot sustain the resistance stage the body enters the exhaustion stage.
Dispatchers do not have the luxury to experience the flight or freeze stage.

We must fight!
Fight or Flight or Freeze
The Generalized Adaptation Syndrome

**Alarm**
- Cycle back to alarm
- Exhaustion is reached much faster
- No additional adrenaline produced
- Feel wired

**Exhaustion**

**Adaptation**
- Fight, flight or freeze
- 3 seconds
- Massive adrenalin dump

*Peak Function*
*Unknown duration*

@2012 International Critical Incident Stress Foundation
Fight or Flight

• First Stage – Alarm

Alarm stage is first stage of stress response where the organism meets face to face with the stressor.

Organisms need to protect itself from the stressor (stimulus that provokes a stress response) and initiates alarm reaction, "fight-or-flight" reaction. Adrenaline will be released and activation of Cortisol occurs.

In alarm stage, stress response helps us to protect our self, giving us extra strength to defend our self. We are rising to the challenges, stay focused, energetic (burst of energy), and alert, work hard and react quickly.

Fight or Flight

Second stage: Resistance

Hypothalamus releases more hormones such as Cortisol

Cortisol stimulates greater release of glucose by the liver and breaks down triglycerides into fatty acids

Generally the body returns to normal after the second stage
Final Stage: Exhaustion

Prolonged exposure to high levels of Cortisol and other hormones causes a wasting of muscles and suppression of the immune system, ulceration of the gastrointestinal tract. Stress related disorders include gastritis, hypertension, migraine headaches, anxiety and depression.
There is a Problem If...

The Telecommunicator stays removed from their feelings after the situation has subsided
Dissociation

- Many traumatized individuals alternate between re-experiencing their trauma and being detached from, or even relatively unaware of the trauma and its effects.
While the term compassion fatigue and burnout are often thrown around in discussions of stress, do you really know what they mean, and the cause?
Compassion Fatigue

What is it?

Compassion Fatigue
Or Secondary Traumatic Stress
Loss of sympathy and the gradual lessening of compassion by individuals who work directly with trauma victims on a routine basis
Secondary Traumatization

• Experiencing Everyone Else’s Worst Day…

Everyday
Compassion Fatigue

- Many of the symptoms of stress, compassion fatigue and burnout are the same. What makes them different is the degree or severity and the frequency of the symptoms.
## Signs of Compassion Fatigue

### Physical:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptom</th>
<th>Symptom</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sweating</td>
<td>Headache</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rapid Heartbeat</td>
<td>Nausea</td>
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<tr>
<td>Breathing Difficulties</td>
<td>Tunnel Vision</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aches and Pains</td>
<td>Muffled Hearing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dizziness</td>
<td>Tremors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impaired Immune System</td>
<td>Frequent Colds/Flu</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Signs of Compassion Fatigue

**Emotional:**
- Anxiety
- Powerlessness
- Guilt
- Anger
- Depression
- Sadness
- Shutdown
- Hypersensitivity
- Overwhelmed
- Depleted
- Panic Attacks
Signs of Compassion Fatigue

**Behavioral:**

- Clingy
- Impatient
- Irritable
- Withdrawn
- Accident Prone
- Sleep Disturbances

- Isolation from Others
- Constant Complaining
- Poor Self-Care
- Substance Abuse
- Nightmares
- Perfectionism
Compassion Fatigue at Work: What it Means for the Organization

- High absenteeism
- Constant change in co-worker relationships
- Lack of team work
- Aggressive behavior towards co-workers
- Negativism towards management
- Strong reluctance toward change
- Lack of vision for the future
Compassion Fatigue at Work

- **911 Dispatcher Morale**
- Be the first to admit
- Be the first to change
- Be the first to propose a solution
Burnout


Burnout is now recognized as the last stage of Compassion Fatigue. It is the extinction of motivation or incentive.
• While burnout is not a recognized clinical psychiatric or psychological disorder, there are some similar features between burnout and diagnosable conditions such as
  – Depression
  – Anxiety disorders
  – Mood Disorders
  – Post traumatic stress
Main categories relating to burnout are:

- Job structure
- Lifestyle features
- Individual personality characteristics
Burnout Symptoms

- Emotional exhaustion:

  You feel impatient, moody, inexplicably sad, or just become frustrated more easily than you normally would.
Burnout Symptoms

• Lowered immunity to illness:
  – When stress levels are high for a prolonged amount of time the body becomes exhausted and can not fight against germs
  – Higher susceptibility to cold’s and flu
Burnout Symptoms

• Less investment in interpersonal relationships
  – Withdrawing from friends and family
  – May feel like you have less to give
  – Less interest in having fun
Burnout Symptoms

- Increasingly pessimistic outlook:
  
  - When experiencing burnout symptoms it is harder to get excited about life
  
  - More difficult to “look on the bright side”

  - The thought of talking to another citizen leaves you feeling overwhelmed
The following personal characteristics can affect your stress level and put you at an increased risk for compassion fatigue and burnout.
Personal Characteristics

- Perfectionist Tendencies:
  - Striving to do your best is a sign of a hard worker and can be a positive trait which leads to excellence but can also lead to frustration and anxiety when trying to fulfill an unobtainable expectation.
Personal Characteristics

• Pessimism:

  – Having a negative attitude and constantly seeing the worst in people and in yourself will cause stress levels to rise
• Excitability:

– Some people are naturally more excitable than others. They have a stronger response to stress and the response is triggered more easily.

– Type “A” personality can put people at an increased risk for cardiac disease and other health issues.
Personal Characteristics

- The Rescuer Personality
  - Needs to be in control
  - Action oriented
  - Easily bored
  - High need for stimulation
  - Strong need to be needed
  - Has a need for immediate gratification

Socialization of New Personnel

• The socialization of new Telecommunicators includes teaching them coping mechanisms to deal with the realities of:
  
  – Death
  – Crime
  – Human Nature
  – Crying Citizens
  – Boredom on the job
Socialization of New Personnel

- Many new Telecommunicators may not realize the consequences of shift work which can cause a deterioration in communication with family and friends.
Socialization of New Personnel

• Inherent in this socialization process is the change that inevitably occurs in the dispatcher’s outlook.

• Many of the dispatcher’s attitudes and comments suddenly seem strange or coarse to family and friends.
Socialization of New Personnel

- Think of your own experience as a new dispatcher

- The Social Learning Theory
  - New employee’s observe the levels of motivation and satisfaction of other employees and then model those levels
Are We All Doomed?

WE'RE ALL DOOMED!
DOOOOOOMED
I TELL YOU
Awareness

Awareness is the first step in the battle
Awareness

- Dispatchers are expected to be a coach, mentor, psychologist, lawyer, mind reader with a crystal ball, miracle worker, a referee, social worker and an employee.

- We can not be everything to everyone

- We can not be a single one of those unless we take care of ourselves first
Locus of Control

• Internal or External Locus of Control
  – An individual with an **Internal** locus of control believes that his/her behavior is guided by his/her personal decisions and efforts.
  – An individual with an **External** locus of control believes that his/her behavior is guided by fate, luck, other people or other external circumstances.
Resiliency

• Resilience is the actual ability to bounce back from difficulty.

• It is not a trait that people either have or do not have. It involves behaviors, thoughts and actions that can be learned and developed in anyone.
Help Each Other

- Do not criticize a co-worker about the way they handled a critical incident
- Do not offer unsolicited advice
- Be mindful of how you treat your team members
Strategies for Letting Go

- Keep things in perspective
- Only one call at a time
- Can not save everyone
- Take care of yourself before others

Go Ahead and Call 911 It's my day OFF!!
Basic Self Care Strategies

• The following are important basic self care strategies which can keep you functioning well and ready for life’s challenges
Self-Care Strategies

• Get Enough Sleep

  – Sleep is important for your emotional and physical wellbeing

  – Lack of sleep can negatively impact your ability to handle stress and fight off diseases
Self-Care Strategies

• Maintain Proper Nutrition

– Many people are not aware that a poor diet can actually make you more vulnerable to stress
Self-Care Strategies

Anti-Stress Snacks

**Frozen Yogurt** – Has calcium and tryptophan which convert to serotonin and acts as a mood stabilizer

**Lean Protein** – Fish, white meat chicken and turkey will stabilize blood sugars which fluctuate under stress

**Almonds and Pistachios** – Contains fiber and unsaturated fatty acids and helps lower blood pressure

**Cherries** – High in melatonin which initiates the sleep cycle

**Oranges and Bell Peppers** – Contains vitamin C which lowers Cortisol released during the flight or flight response

Let’s not forget: **Chocolate (in moderation of course)**

Choose dark chocolate with cocoa content of 65 percent or higher. Limit yourself to around 3 ounces (85 grams) a day

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http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/healthy-chocolate/AN02060
Self-Care Strategies

• Exercise Regularly

  – Exercise can reduce both physical and mental stress
  – Walk, stretch, or simple exercises which can be done safely while at the console
Self-Care Strategies

• Maintain Social Support
  – Social support creates a buffer against stress
  – Participate in hobbies
  – Play as hard as you work
Self-Care Strategies

• Process Your Emotions Appropriately

  – Keeping your emotions bottled up usually leads to an emotional explosion later on and causes physical harm
Laugh

• Children smile over 300 x a day and laugh approximately 150 x a day

• Adults chuckle about 15 x a day

• Dispatchers smirk about 2x a day
  – Remember appropriate humor

Stress Reduction Techniques

Deep breathing is one of the best ways to lower stress in the body. This is because when you breathe deeply it sends a message to your brain to calm down and relax. The brain then sends this message to your body. Those things that happen when you are stressed, such as increased heart rate, fast breathing, and high blood pressure, all decrease as you breathe deeply to relax.

http://www.cchs.net/health/health-info/docs/2400/2409.asp?index=9445
Stress Reduction Techniques

- Sit in a comfortable position.
- Put one hand on your belly just below your ribs and the other hand on your chest.
- Take a deep breath in through your nose, and let your belly push your hand out. Your chest should not move.
- Breathe out through pursed lips as if you were whistling. Feel the hand on your belly go in, and use it to push all the air out.
- Do this breathing 3 to 10 times. Take your time with each breath.
Stress Reduction Techniques

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

This technique stimulates nerve-muscle relaxation. It requires the contraction and release of a muscle group, then slowly moving to other parts of the body. Progressive relaxation is usually used to treat migraines, tension headaches, and other illness.
Self Care Practices

- Balance between work and home
- Boundaries/limit setting
- Getting support/help at work
- Generating work satisfaction
- Acknowledge your feelings

- Catch it to Prevent it!
EMDR

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing.

Developed in 1987 but recently gained attention as an effective treatment option for PTSD.

http://www.emdr.com/general-information/what-is-emdr.html
Resources

- SafeCall - 206-459-3020 [http://safecallnow.org](http://safecallnow.org)
- Serve & Protect – (615) 373-8000 [www.serveprotect.org](http://www.serveprotect.org)
- The Code Green Campaign [http://codegreencampaign.org](http://codegreencampaign.org)
- EMDRIA – EMDR International Association [http://www.emdria.org/search](http://www.emdria.org/search)
To Be Forgotten No Longer

- You are not alone
- We are a team
- We are 911 Telecommunicators
**Meme 1:**

I'm so excited! And I just can't hide it...

I get to work the radio without a trainee!

**Meme 2:**

You shouldn't have been snippy.

Dispatch is going to send you from one end of the city to the other all shift.

**Meme 3:**

Please call 911 and ask what time the fireworks start!!!

...said no dispatcher ever....

**Meme 4:**

Say I'm just a dispatcher.

One more time.
Telecommunicator

The Forgotten Victim

We Suffer in Silence

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