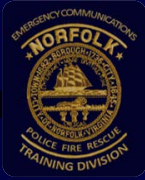




# **Telecommunicator**

## **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



# 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

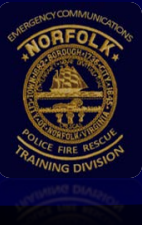
- Stress is a normal part of life that can help us learn, grow and accomplish great challenges. Conversely, stress can cause us significant problems.
- Those who are experiencing high amounts of stress in their life need to be aware of the possibility of Compassion Fatigue: Loss of sympathy and the gradual 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...

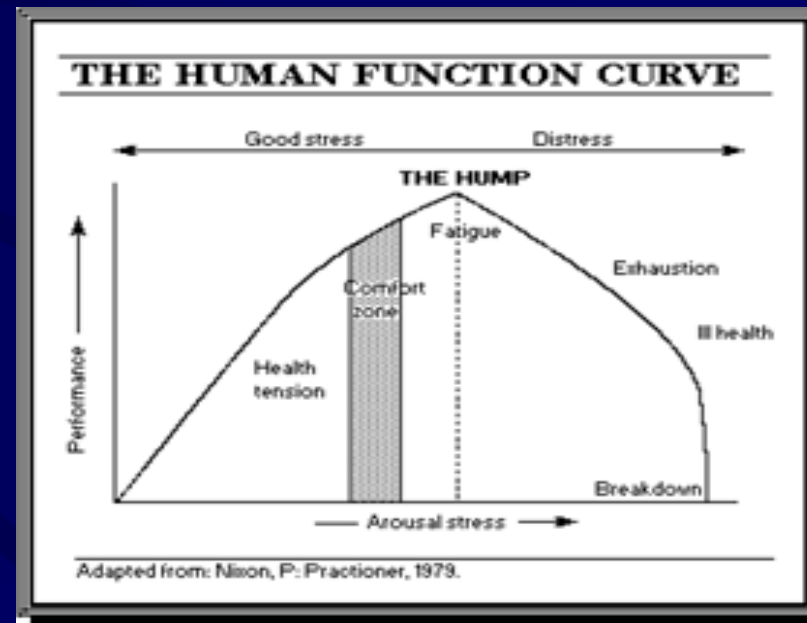
- **In a Split Second**
  - Vehicle pursuits
  - Subject pursuits
  - Shots fired
- And Fallen Officers, Firefighters and Paramedics...





# 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.



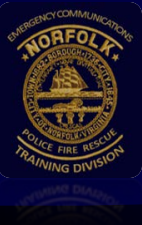
# What Causes More Stress?

- 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.



# 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.





# Stress

- Few actions trigger stress, resentment and diminished motivation quicker than having one's hard work, extra effort, and significant contributions taken for granted.



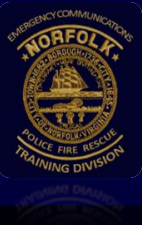
# Stress

- 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

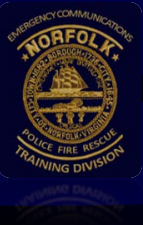
- Too Much Work With Little Balance
  - A life of consistent 40 hour work weeks with an added 40 hours of overtime with no down time is a classic high risk scenario for compassion fatigue and burnout.
  - Shift work with mandatory overtime leaves the dispatcher with inadequate personal time to enjoy 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.

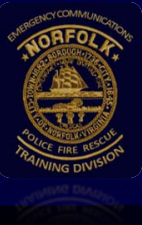


# Stress

- 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



# Public Safety Stress Research

- 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.



# Public Safety Stress Research

- The results concluded public safety work had an adverse impact on their overall family life due to long hours, shift work and cancelled leave.





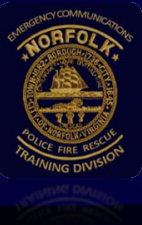
# Public Safety Stress Research

- 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%**



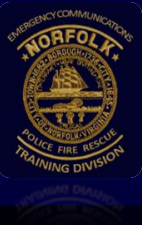
# Telecommunicator Research

- 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



# Telecommunicator Research

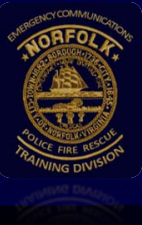
- The participants then rated the types of calls that caused great distress and were asked to recall the worst call they ever received.



# 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





# Telecommunicator Research

- 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.



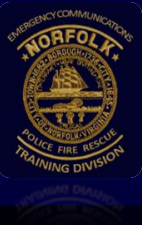
# Telecommunicator Research

- 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.



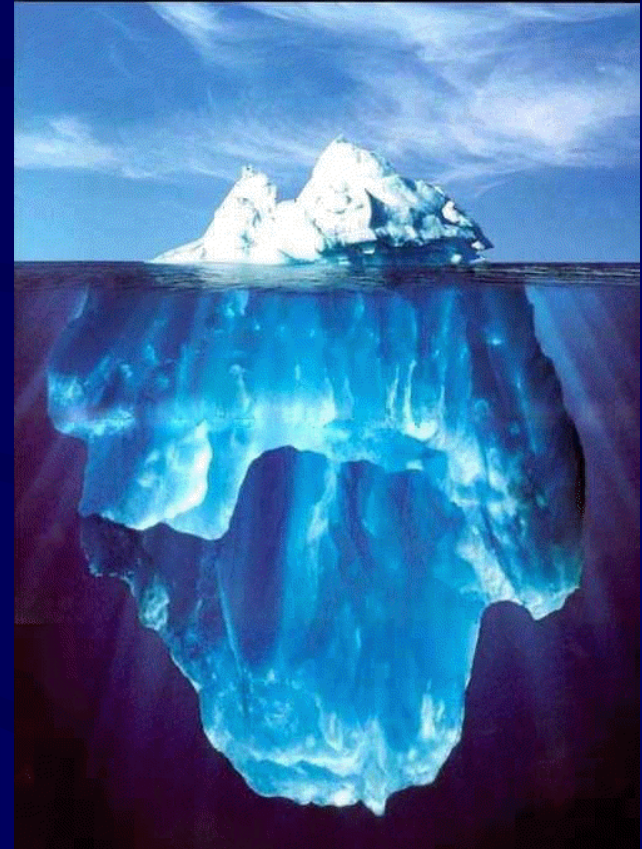
# Research

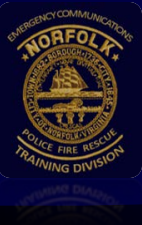
- The studies which have been conducted on Police, Fire and EMS suggest that public safety, as a whole, tend to not cope well with the psychological stressors that are part of emergency service work.
- Employees often turn to maladaptive coping methods such as avoidance and distancing.



# The Iceberg Effect

Only 20% of psychological  
trauma is seen  
at the surface



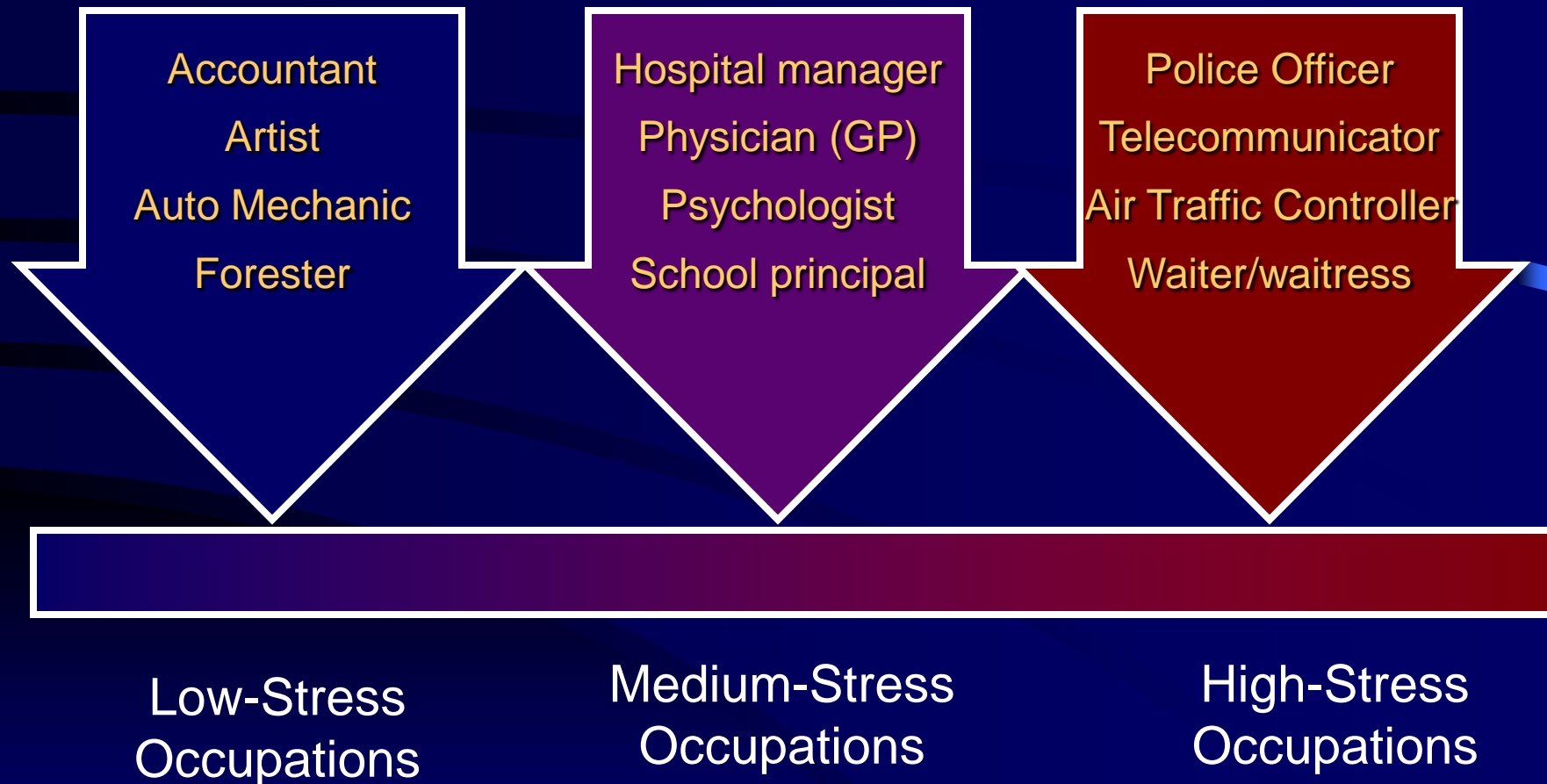


# Psychological Trauma

- 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





# 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

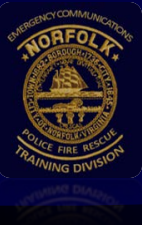
- The World Health Organization has called workplace stress the *health epidemic of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.
- According to NENA, PSAP's are finally starting to recognize the serious risk posed by work-related stress on the mental and physical health of 9-1-1 Emergency Telecommunicators.





# 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



# Fight or Flight or Freeze

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.







# Fight or Flight or Freeze

Dispatchers do not have the luxury to experience the flight or freeze stage.

We must fight!





# Fight or Flight or Freeze



Bunting shooting.mp3



# The Generalized Adaptation Syndrome

Alarm



Fight, flight or freeze

3 seconds

Massive adrenalin dump

Adaptation



Exhaustion



Cycle back to alarm

Exhaustion is reached much faster

No additional adrenaline produced

Feel wired

Peak Function

Unknown duration





# 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

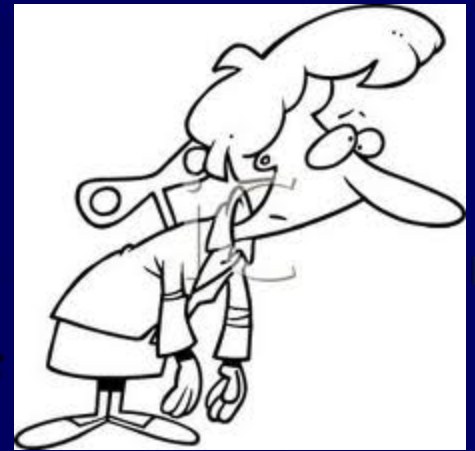
Generally the body returns to normal after  
the second stage



# Fight or Flight

## Final Stage: Exhaustion

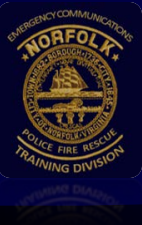
Prolonged exposure to high levels of Cortisol and other hormones causes a wasting of muscles and suppression of the immune system, ulceration of the gastrointestinal tract. Stress related disorders include gastritis, hypertension, migraine headaches, anxiety and depression





# There is a Problem If...

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



# Dissociation

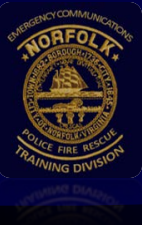
- Many traumatized individuals alternate between re-experiencing their trauma and being detached from, or even relatively unaware of the trauma and its effects





# Compassion Fatigue

- 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:

Sweating

Headache

Rapid Heartbeat

Nausea

Breathing Difficulties

Tunnel Vision

Aches and Pains

Muffled Hearing

Dizziness

Tremors

Impaired Immune System

Frequent Colds/Flu



# 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

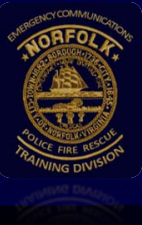
Perfectionism



# 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

First coined in 1974 by Herbert Freudenberger,  
In his book, “Burnout: The High Cost of  
Achievement”

Burnout is now recognized as the last stage of  
Compassion Fatigue. It is the extinction of  
motivation or incentive.





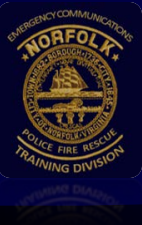
# Burnout

- 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



# Burnout

- 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

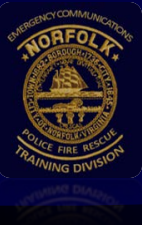
- Increasingly pessimistic outlook:
  - When experiencing burnout symptoms it is harder to get excited about life
  - More difficult to “look on the bright side”
  - The thought of talking to another citizen leaves you feeling overwhelmed





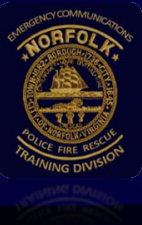
# Personal Characteristics

- The following personal characteristics can affect your stress level and put you at an increased risk for compassion fatigue and burnout



# Personal Characteristics

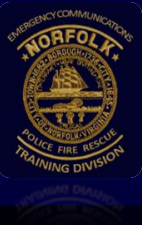
- Perfectionist Tendencies:
  - Striving to do your best is a sign of a hard worker and can be a positive trait which leads to excellence but can also lead to frustration and anxiety when trying to fulfill an unobtainable expectation.



# Personal Characteristics

- Pessimism:
  - Having a negative attitude and constantly seeing the worst in people and in yourself will cause stress levels to rise





# Personal Characteristics

- 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

healthedsolutions.com

“I feel so energized  
after that  
12-hour shift...”

said no one, ever.



# 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



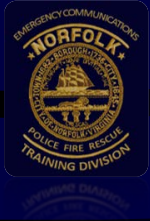
# Are We All Doomed?



**WE'RE ALL  
DOOMED!**

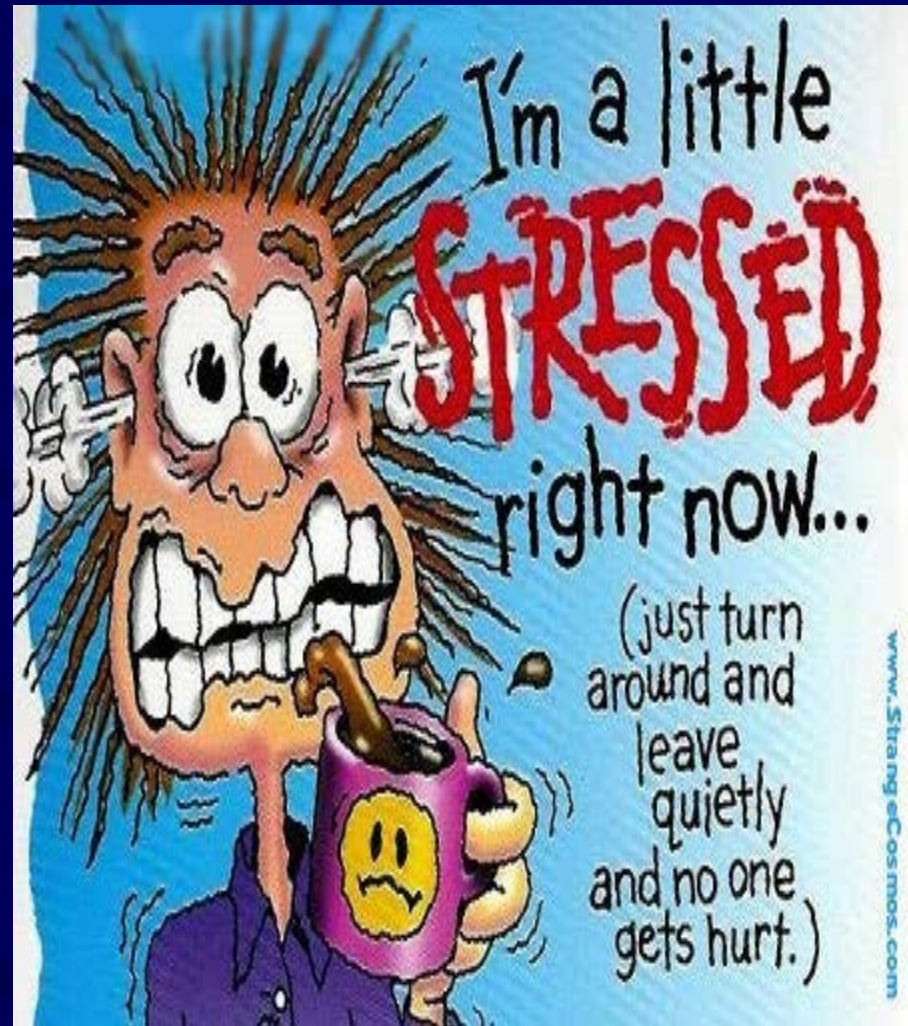
DOOOOOOOMED

**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.

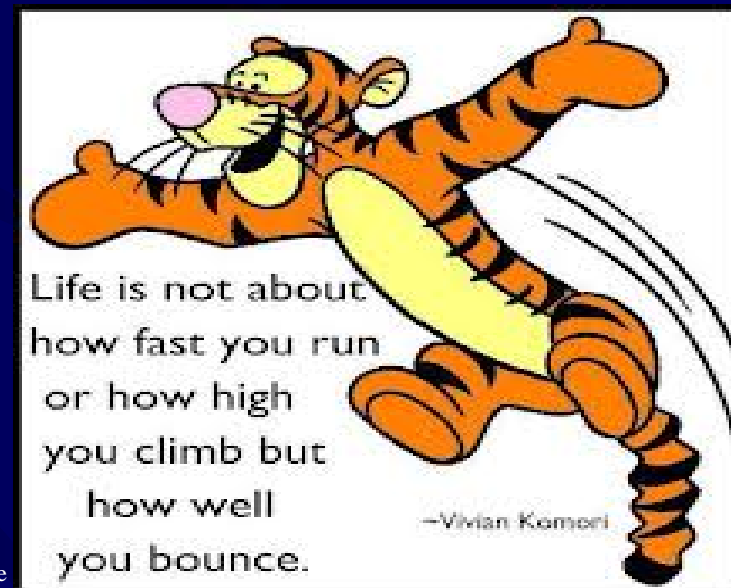


- An individual with an ***External*** locus of control believes that his/her behavior is guided by fate, luck, other people or other external circumstances



# 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 !!***





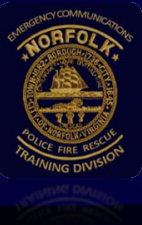
# Basic Self Care Strategies

- 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

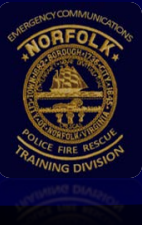
**Let's not forget : Chocolate ( in moderation of course)**

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



# 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



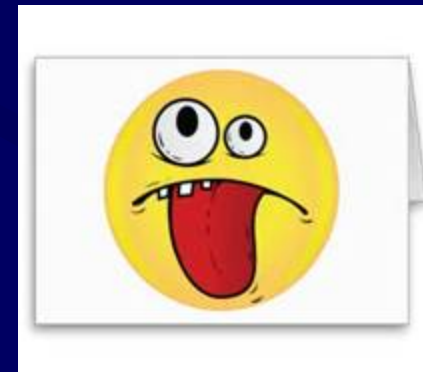
# Self-Care Strategies

- Process Your Emotions Appropriately
  - Keeping your emotions bottled up usually leads to an emotional explosion later on and causes physical harm

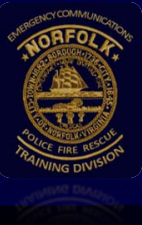


# Laugh

- 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

## Diaphragmatic Breathing

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.



# Stress Reduction Techniques

## Diaphragmatic Breathing

- 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

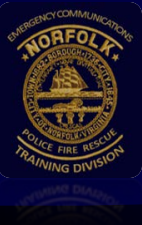
## Progressive Muscle Relaxation

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.



# Resources

- SafeCall - 206-459-3020 <http://safecallnow.org>
- Serve & Protect – (615) 373-8000 [www.serveprotect.org](http://www.serveprotect.org)
- VALEAP – Virginia Law Enforcement Assistance Program <http://valeap.org/>
- The Code Green Campaign <http://codegreencampaign.org>
- Virginia Department of Health CISM <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/OEMS/EO/CISM.htm> (CISM team listing)
- EMDRIA – EMDR International Association <http://www.emdria.org/search>

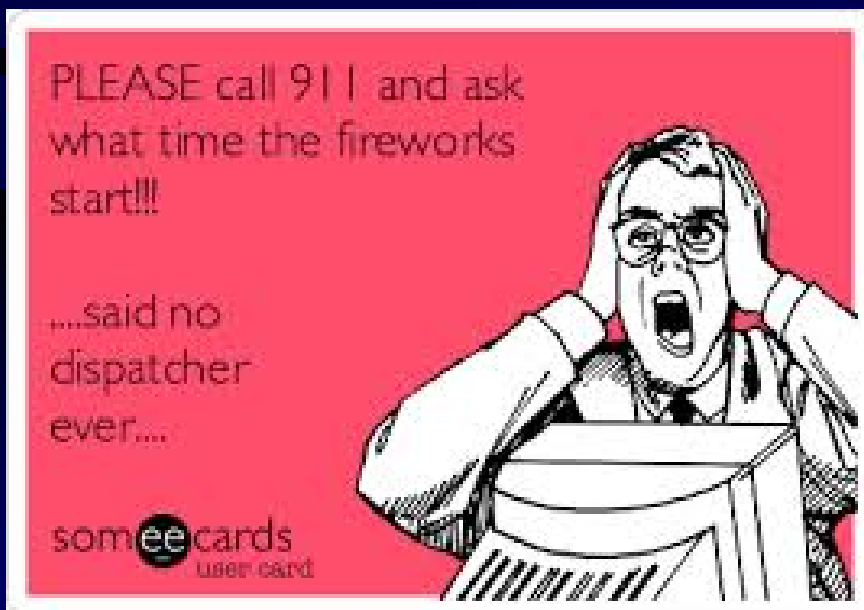


# To Be Forgotten No Longer

- You are not alone
- We are a team
- We are 911  
Telecommunicators











# **Telecommunicator**

# **The Forgotten Victim**

# **We Suffer in Silence**

**Developed by: Angela Johnson**

**Dyan McDermott, Jackie Davis, Rena Scarborough**

**City of Norfolk Emergency Preparedness and Response**