



## Supporting our Responders by Developing a Culture of Resilience

**James Small**, Rural EMS Outreach Program Manager,  
Wisconsin Office of Rural Health



I saw it, I looked again, and it was gone.

I remember the first time I saw something I had previously seen in a critical incident. I knew the vision of a terribly injured person wasn't real. And then over the next several years, I saw it again and again and again. I worried I was crazy. I feared if I told someone I would be pushed away and found to be unfit for duty. This was just one of the many symptoms I was experiencing after a couple of decades as an emergency responder left me no longer able to control what my body was experiencing.

I felt completely alone and detached and my soul burned with anxiety. I slept a few hours a night and I felt the

most "normal" during high-adrenaline emergency responses. Each morning, I got up and threw myself into working and finding things to be productive to prove that I was fine. Excessive working became my maladaptive coping skill. I didn't want to admit I wasn't fine. My unwillingness to acknowledge what my body was telling me was destroying me.

Fortunately, I attended a training taught by Dan Willis who wrote *The Bulletproof Spirit*, a book about the impacts of critical incident stress on emergency responders. I spent eight hours listening to Dan talk about all the things I was experiencing. I learned that these things I was experiencing were

normal and I didn't need to feel shame that I couldn't manage them on my own anymore. Dan suggested that responders seek out a counselor who can perform Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) which is a treatment that helps process and resolve traumatic memories and experiences.

I left that training and reached out to a friend who was a counselor, and he suggested someone he thought would be a good fit for me. In late 2016 I walked into Bill's office for the first time. I followed Bill's advice and actively participated in EMDR sessions with him. EMDR was a challenging process, but worth the effort. Over time three sessions a week

turned into twice a week, and now I see him every month. I found myself feeling normal again. Initially, I still felt a stigma and hid that I was getting treatment from many of my friends and co-workers. The first time I spoke publicly about my experience was testifying in favor of the PTSD worker's compensation legislation in the Wisconsin Assembly in early 2020. Since then, I have learned that my experiences are shared by most other responders, and I can speak freely without feeling stigmatized.

My only regret was waiting so long to seek treatment. I was experiencing the impacts of critical incident exposures for at least 15 years before that and ignoring them. Rather than being a risk to my career, seeking treatment helped me become a better leader, emergency responder and most importantly, a better husband and father.

I wonder how different EMS would be today if we had been taught about critical incident stress and resilience beginning when we became emergency responders. We can improve our approach to resiliency by prioritizing building solutions into the culture of our agencies.

### THE EVOLVING APPROACH TO EMERGENCY RESPONDER WELLNESS

The idea of emergency responder wellness is quickly gaining traction in EMS and requires prioritization. Where just a decade ago it was taboo for us to discuss the impacts of our experiences, we are quickly improving our approach to supporting our wellness and making it acceptable to admit when we are not fine. It is no longer acceptable to expect someone to "just suck it up" or "figure it out."

A challenge we face in this evolution is how to create a culture of wellness in our agencies. Many responders (who are now in leadership roles) were taught nothing about the need for wellness strategies and developing these much-needed changes can feel insurmountable. One of the frustrations is that each person has individual needs and effective solutions require multiple strategies rather than a single solution.

"I wonder how different EMS would be today if we had been taught about critical incident stress and resilience beginning when we became emergency responders. We can improve our approach to resiliency by prioritizing building solutions into the culture of our agencies."

Building a multi-faceted approach is not as daunting as it might appear.

### APPROACHES TO INCORPORATING EMPLOYEE WELLNESS

There are several approaches many agencies are using in combination to incorporate employee wellness into agency culture:

#### 1. Employee Assistance Programs (EAP).

Employee Assistance programs are confidential services that employers offer to help employees with personal or work-related problems that impact job performance, health, or well-being. All Wisconsin fire departments are legally required to have an Employee Assistance Program for their members (SPS 330.16). EMS agencies are not required to provide this for employees.

There are many commercially available EAPs in Wisconsin, and they are available at very affordable rates. Typically, there is an annual fee based on the number of employees covered. These frequently include counseling sessions as a benefit.

A mistake that agencies commonly make with their EAP is they enroll their employees, hang the poster with the phone number on the wall and feel like the mission is accomplished. This type of implementation doesn't work because no emergency responder will trust calling a random number off a poster on the wall.

A method that works to make EAP usable to the employee is to hold an annual training with all employees where a representative of the EAP comes in person and teaches the responders what services the programs can provide and

how it works to access the programs. Agencies that incorporate this type of training see higher utilization of services. Having an EAP with 0% utilization means that the agency is not reaching its members, not that the members don't need the service.

In searching for a program, many hospital systems offer EAP services to area businesses. Most of these programs are very affordable.

Cost: \$1,000 to \$2,000 annually. TIP: Strategically FAP funds to create a budget margin that allows for funding EAP.

#### 2. Peer Support Programs.

Wisconsin is experiencing a rapid expansion of the peer support model. These programs provide confidential and informal support from trained colleagues who understand the unique stressors of the job and can help navigate challenges and access resources.

Peer Support is growing because it works. Typically, a peer support team is either run internally in an agency including members of the agency or regionally like a county wide multiple agency team.

Wisconsin 2023 ACT 220 provides regulation of emergency responder peer support programs. These include rules for establishing teams, training programs for team members, and most importantly, establishing confidentiality in what has been discussed during the peer support process. This means a member of an authorized peer support team cannot be forced to provide information to others, such as a departmental discipline process, on what has been discussed.

Professional Firefighters of Wisconsin Charitable Foundation is sponsoring peer support training in Wisconsin. Find a class near you at <https://pffwcf.org/fire-fighter-support>.

Cost: \$0-\$250/person. Funding sources are sometimes available to pay for training and costs associated with attending such as lodging.

### 3. Focus on Internal Workplace Culture.

Not surprisingly, internal workplace culture continues to consistently be a top stressor for emergency responders. We respond to calls where we are exposed to critical incident stressors and then return to a difficult workplace environment that acts as a force magnifier of those stressors. Recent studies have even identified agency culture and leadership as a risk factors in responders developing post-traumatic stress disorder.

As an industry, we excel at teaching people how to respond to emergencies and provide patient care. We provide essentially no training on being part of a team. We ignore topics like civility, teamwork, and conflict resolution. We focus so much energy on street skills that we spend no time developing soft skills. Then we can't understand why we have difficulty with things like employee retention. Numerous studies show training in life skills improves team performance (and patient outcomes) more than training together on our street skills.

A simple training plan to incorporate these discussions into your agency might include watching a TED talk on one of these topics and then having a group discussion among the staff on how the ideas can be incorporated into your workplace.

Start with Christine Porath's "Why being respectful to your coworkers is good for business." This is a 15-minute video that explains the impacts of incivility on individual performance. Have everyone watch this in a group and then discuss how each employee can bring these ideas into the workplace. Find this video at [https://](https://www.ted.com/talks/christine_porath_why_being_respectful_to_your_coworkers_is_good_for_business)

[www.ted.com/talks/christine\\_porath\\_why\\_being\\_respectful\\_to\\_your\\_coworkers\\_is\\_good\\_for\\_business](https://www.ted.com/talks/christine_porath_why_being_respectful_to_your_coworkers_is_good_for_business).

Culture change is a long-term process and will require ongoing reinforcement but when it takes hold is highly engaging to responders.

As a chief, one of my best memories came a few months into incorporating workplace culture training into the training plan. There was typical shop talk happening before training started and someone said something sarcastic. Another employee immediately pointed out, "Hey that's incivility!" Everyone laughed and the cultural changes continued to be reinforced for the better.

Cost: \$0.

### INCORPORATING THE CULTURE OF RESILIENCE

These are just three of many options available to help build a resilient culture in our agencies. It is critically important to openly discuss these options and others. No option is perfect, but adopting a process that incorporates multiple approaches will ensure better support for our responders.

Each of us needs to be willing, to be honest with ourselves about the impact

of critical incident stress on our own lives and be willing to ask for help. It should no longer be a part of our culture to keep sucking it up and saying we're fine. Building a resilient culture in our agencies helps each of us maintain a healthy relationship with our roles as emergency responders.

Value of building a culture of resilience in your agency: Priceless

### HOW CAN THE WISCONSIN OFFICE OF RURAL HEALTH HELP?

We assist communities across Wisconsin with developing and implementing solutions to EMS reliability and sustainability challenges. We provide technical assistance that can help local governments and EMS agencies better support their community's EMS responders. All services are provided by the Wisconsin Office of Rural Health at no cost. We can help with planning and implementing wellness programs in your agencies.

To contact the Wisconsin Office of Rural Health:

**James Small**

Rural EMS Outreach Program Manager

[smallj5@wisc.edu](mailto:smallj5@wisc.edu)

[www.worh.org/ems](http://www.worh.org/ems) 

**NEBO®**  
**SLIM™ MINI**

**LIGHT MODES**

- High (250 lumens): 2 hours / 67 meters
- Low (25 lumens): 10 hours / 21 meters

**OPERATION**

- Side-positioned button

**ACCESSORIES**

- USB to USB-C charging cable

**DESIGN**

- USB-C rechargeable
- Durable Clip
- Battery Charging indicator
- Anodized aircraft-grade aluminum
- Water and impact-resistant (IPX4)
- Powerful magnetic base

**BATTERIES**

- Powered by internal Li-ion rechargeable battery (Recharge time: 2-4 hours, depending on output of USB)

**SPECS**

- 0.14 lb.
- (H) 4" X (W) 1" X (D) 0.54"



**ONLY \$19.95**  
Everyone in your squad needs one!

**SMALLER THAN A PACK OF GUM!**  
**RECHARGEABLE 250 LUMENS**  
**SO BRIGHT!**

**REMARKABLY SMALL IMPRESSIVELY BRIGHT**  
The SLIM MINI packs a powerful 250 lumens in an ultra-compact design. Not much larger than a stick of gum, this **rechargeable** pocket light features a **durable pocket clip** and a **powerful magnetic base** for convenient hands-free lighting.

**IT WILL KNOCK YOUR SOCKS OFF!**

  
**ARNDT ADVERTISING**  
W5528 CIMMERON DR. • RANDOM LAKE, WI 53075  
920-946-9460 • [arndtadvertising@gmail.com](mailto:arndtadvertising@gmail.com)  
[arndtadvertising.com](http://arndtadvertising.com)

CALIFORNIA REQUIRED  WARNING | cancer and reproductive harm | [www.P65Warnings.ca.gov](http://www.P65Warnings.ca.gov)