



"You Are Never Alone"

FOUNDATION PROVIDES MUCH NEEDED
SUPPORT TO PTSD SUFFERERS

Words: Jess Le Fanu

THE
CODE9
FOUNDATION
#YOUARENEVERALONE

After starting as a small private Facebook group, The Code 9 Foundation has now grown into an Australian recognised charity supporting almost 3,000 members suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Founder Mark Thomas knows first hand the effects PTSD can have on first responders. In 2003, Mark was already a seven year veteran of the Victorian Police force and had seen his fair share of distressing scenes. He was young at the time, but maintained that his resilience was adequate. However, nothing prepared him for witnessing the scene of a suicide. "I can [still] recall

the whole scene," he says now, almost 17 years later.

With first responders facing life and death emergencies on a regular basis, it's no wonder that they experience higher levels of post-traumatic stress disorder when compared to the general population. In fact, around 10% of these individuals around the globe meet the criteria for PTSD. Evidence also suggests that emergency service personnel such as firefighters, police officers and paramedics have a higher prevalence of mental health disorders across the board, with paramedics showing the highest prevalence of PTSD (14.6%) when compared with their peers.

While the effects of Mark's grim incident weren't immediately acknowledged by him, he says now, "I was young and didn't reach out." He admits he was naive about mental health at the time and ignored the climbing symptoms of anxiety he experienced over the next ten years.

Despite there being a general trend for PTSD symptoms to occur soon after exposure to a traumatic event, not everyone's experience is the same. On some occasions, the initial symptoms can present themselves more than six months after exposure in what's known as 'delayed-onset PTSD'.

For Mark Thomas, the ten years following his harrowing experience eroded his resilience. It wasn't until February of 2013 that this erosion resulted in him being hospitalised and formally diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Looking back at that time, he states, "My protective barrier was gone." He also acknowledges that during the almost two weeks spent in hospital, he felt absolutely alone and didn't think that anyone else could possibly feel the same way. However, it was this trip to the emergency room and subsequent



Mark Thomas - founder of Code 9

hospital stay that not only helped Mark get through this terrible time in his life, but also inspired his creation of The Code 9 Foundation. He says, "I wanted to start a support group to let others know there are other people out there that know exactly what you're going through."

Named after the radio code police officers use for 'police requiring urgent assistance', The Code 9 Foundation aims to create a place for first responders to support each other through their PTSD experiences. "When you hear that code on the radio," Mark says, "everyone stops what they're doing and comes for support." It seems like the perfect title for a group designed to make sure its members felt supported by their peers.

In the beginning, Code 9 was set up as a peer-to-peer support group that met in Victoria at various locations. The idea behind these 'Peer Support Catch Ups' is to provide hundreds of emergency service personnel a completely nonjudgmental atmosphere. Members can be at ease surrounded by likeminded individuals who have had similar experiences. The Facebook page was only initially set up by Mark to tell people when and where these groups would meet. Little did he know that this private online group would soar to almost 3,000

first responder members and be the most beneficial aspect of the organisation.

"[There are] people with anxiety that can't get out of the house," Mark explains. In the online forum, members can choose to be as involved as much or as little as they like in the safe private Facebook group Code 9 has created. While some members enjoy openly sharing stories and experiences, others choose to sit back and be comforted by reading the experiences of others. Since it is only available to first responders, it provides a sense of camaraderie and support only those who have experienced this line of work can fully understand.

Around 70% of Code 9's online population is made up of those in the police department as Mark Thomas initially started spreading the word of his organisation through his workmates. The site has now grown to include both fire fighters and ambulance workers as well as 000 dispatchers. While most new members join through word of mouth from others in their field, Mark says he does have requests from those who have stumbled across Code 9 in the search for help. He is diligent in checking IDs and ensuring the group only contains first responders.

Mark is also adamant that the site be monitored and kept positive. There is absolutely no operational talk allowed on the page as it can act as a trigger for PTSD symptoms. Negative comments are also immediately deleted so as not to bring down the moral of the forum. He says, "If the conversation starts negative, it continues negative." Luckily, there are page administrators to help with the task of moderation. They also check in with people in the group to see if they are receiving help and can put them in contact



Assistance dogs for members of the emergency services who are suffering post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety.

with the welfare unit available to first responders through their workplace. "We refer a lot of first responders to clinics," says Mark.

In addition to the first responders forum and catch ups available throughout Victoria, another private Facebook page is available to the partners and carers of these first responders suffering from PTSD. With roughly 100 members on this family page, Mark's aim is to find out how The Code 9 Foundation can best help and support these carers. After asking the members this very question, he found that what's needed most is simple household chores. Things like mowing the lawn, basic housework, and collecting groceries from the shops were the top requests and Mark was blown away by the simplicity of the needs. "I didn't realise something so easy would mean so much," he says.

Mark is currently researching how to contract out the work that would make such a difference to the families of the PTSD sufferers within the Code 9 Foundation and hopes to roll out these additions in the near future. These benefits would be added to the already invaluable donations Code 9 makes to training support dogs

who help PTSD sufferers deal with their triggers and remain calm in situations with crowds of people.

Given the culture of first response work, many responders will attempt to minimise mental health symptoms and may not seek support through the formal programs available to them for fear of losing their job. As Mark says, "You can't fix PTSD. You have it for life." This makes the existence of peer-to-peer support programs like Code 9 so important, as they offer responders a safe and non-judgemental opportunity to talk about their mental health.

The Code 9 Foundation assists first responders and their families with online and in-person peer-to-peer support, advice on recovery techniques, navigating the WorkCover process, and so much more. But most importantly, it is ensuring that first responders suffering from PTSD and their families never feel alone.

If you would like to get involved with The Code 9 Foundation, visit www.code9ptsd.org.au for more information.

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