

# Let's Talk Mental Health

with Dr Erin Smith

## THE PEOPLE BEHIND 000: PROTECTING THE MENTAL HEALTH OF OUR FIRST RESPONDERS

On the 27th March 2018, the Australian Senate referred an inquiry into the role of Commonwealth, state and territory Governments in addressing the high rates of mental health conditions experienced by the "people behind 000" – Australia's hundreds of thousands of emergency service workers and volunteers.

This inquiry came about as a result of an individual first responder, Ms Simone Haigh, reaching out and relating her experiences after the death of a close friend and witnessing the psychological distress of many other colleagues and friends within the paramedic profession.

The inquiry stimulated conversation nationwide regarding the mental

health of paramedics, police, and fire professionals as well as volunteer and communications staff working in the emergency services sector.

What other job requires you to be in a constant state of hyper vigilance and alertness yet at the same time be a counsellor, a social worker, a lawyer, or a prison warden. What other profession authorizes you to take a person's liberty, or potentially use deadly force, but then mandates that you attempt to save the person's life that has just tried to kill you? What job causes you to wonder whether you will come home to your loved ones after you bid them farewell each and every day as you head off to work? (1)

The mental health challenges faced by our emergency services personnel are well documented. They primarily relate to affective, anxiety and stress-

related disorders including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The causes of these conditions are less well documented, but can be explained by a range of factors including the nature of the emergency services role and environment, exposure to cumulative stress, and the way personnel access (or don't access) available support.

Anecdotally we know that emergency services personnel have traditionally been wary of speaking to formal support services provided through their employers for fear of potential repercussions – being seen as unable to undertake their role or losing their job.

We are starting to see a positive shift in this regard, with many emergency services around Australia making comprehensive efforts to change the existing culture around mental health and normalising the way we discuss mental health conditions.

But despite these encouraging improvements, stigma is still a pervasive issue when it comes to talking about what's going on above the neck, as highlighted by the findings of Beyond Blue's major research project 'Answering the call'.

The research – a national survey exploring mental health conditions in emergency service personnel – found that first responders self-stigmatise, with 33% feeling shame about their condition and 32% expressing shame about the burden their mental health placed on those around them. But perhaps one of the more alarmingly results was how 61% of first responders avoid telling others that they suffer from a mental health condition. (2)

But it seems this stigma is largely directly inward.

When asked whether they would support colleagues suffering from a mental health condition, a significant majority responded positively. Only 1% of first responders thought that individuals were to blame for their own mental health conditions, and only 2% believed that mental health problems are a burden on others. (2)

While one in eight Australians experience high or very high psychological distress, this research found that the rate for emergency service personnel is one in three – much higher. The research also reported that one in four ex-first responders experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). So the problem is lingering (and potentially even starting) in retirement.

Emergency service personnel are more than twice as likely to report having suicidal thoughts and are three times more likely to have a suicide plan. Rates of suicide attempts were comparable with the general population. However, a National Coronial Information System (NCIS) report published in June 2015 indicated that the suicide rate among paramedics in Victoria was four times higher than the Victorian average and three times higher than other emergency services personnel such as police and fire services. (3)

### So what helps?

Personnel who reported having better social support and higher levels of resilience had lower levels of suicidal thoughts and behaviours, even if they had experienced traumatic events that deeply affected them. This reinforces the need for emergency services to prioritise staff mental health and wellbeing and for personnel to actively engage in self-care activities that build resilience.



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The findings of 'Answering the call' confirm long-held views that emergency services personnel have a higher risk of developing mental health conditions linked to cumulative exposure to traumatic events as well as poor workplace culture. We now need to continue to move forward and use what we have learned as a benchmark and measure change over time as emergency service agencies work towards improving mental health outcomes. Beyond Blue Chief Executive Georgie Harman called on governments, unions, emergency services personnel and their families to convert the evidence into further action and lasting change. We need to protect the mental health of the people behind 000 – our vital emergency services workforce.

### References

(1) Mr Grant Edwards (2018). Submission to the Senate Education and Employment Reference Committee Inquiry into the Mental Health Conditions Experienced by First Responders, 55, p. 2.

(2) Beyond Blue Ltd. (2018). Answering the call national survey, National Mental Health and Wellbeing Study of Police and Emergency Services – Final report.

(3) National Coronial Information System (NCIS) (2015-16). Annual Report.