

## Tips for MRE Practitioners Working with First Responders

First responders (an elite group including police officers/fire fighters/paramedics) are often regarded as “heroes” who are passionate about their public service roles, and who provide invaluable and life-saving services to the community. However, along with demanding work schedules, some of the core skills that make first responders successful in their job can also create challenges in maintaining a healthy relationship with partners and family members. The divorce, suicide, and alcoholism rate for first responders is higher than for most other professions, likely due to the chronic stress that accompanies the nature of the job. This tip sheet provides valuable tips for practitioners to successfully deliver MRE services to first responders.

### Acknowledge the Challenges of the Job

First responders consider themselves to be “super heroes.” They see themselves as people who come in and ‘save the day’ and who protect others. They also encounter a unique set of challenges on the job, including shift work, inconsistent schedules, being called in to work during time off, missing holidays and family events due to work, and being exposed to chronic traumatic experiences. Skills that allow first responders to succeed on the job, such as taking charge when there is a problem, quick assessment and decision making skills, and the ability to disconnect emotionally in order to numb sensitivity – are effective for work, but often get in the way when used in family life.



These challenges often result in tension, disconnected relationships, and decreased communication at home. First responders, who frequently experience tight-knit working relationships, tend to feel different and alone at home as it is difficult to discuss with family members the types of stressful job experiences they experience on a day-to-day basis. These perceptions can put a wedge in their relationships with their spouses, ironically leaving their spouses feeling left out. It is important for the practitioner to acknowledge the unique challenges that the chronic stress of the job places on the first responder, and on the family, and to discuss ways to negotiate these relationship challenges successfully.

### Delivering Services

Many first responders have difficulty seeking professional help with their personal relationships because of the perceived risk of appearing “weak,”

or worse yet, that their jobs could be at risk if they seek mental health services. This can lead to ineffective and potentially dangerous coping skills. The most important way that an MRE practitioner can combat possible client resistance is to show that the practitioner understands the first responder world.

- *Research what works.* First responders often feel that traditional messages from MRE don't apply to them or aren't helpful for their family due to the kind of stressors that their job brings. Practitioners who experience a few actual shifts with first responders and who research the nature of their job will be able to more fully relate to their client's world, understand their unique stressors, and speak to the difficulties inherent in their clients' life experiences.
- *Be flexible and creative.* Practitioners need to show flexibility and creativity in presentations to help first responders see how to use traditional MRE skills and tips in nontraditional ways. A practitioner who suggests going to weekly or lengthy classes, tells the first responder to always go to bed at the same time as their spouse each night or to have a date night once a week, may not be seen as understanding. To connect, research what works with first responders in their lives and suggest experimenting with new ideas.
- *Teach the importance of communication.* Effective communication is a key feature of a healthy relationship, but is sometimes absent in a first responder's intimate relationships. The MRE practitioner should teach first responders and their spouses effective communication techniques that can be used not only to connect, but to resolve important issues. Practitioners should also discuss with

spouses how to handle the information their partner shares with them about their stressful work experiences. Finally, discuss the risks of making connections with other first responders (especially of the opposite sex) where the exclusive sharing of emotional information with co-workers can lead to marital discord, and if left unchecked, to marital affairs.

- *Offer solutions for inclusion.* Help the first-responder couple brainstorm creative ways to problem solve or communicate when their schedules are opposite of one another. Encourage partners and family members to keep the first responder involved in the family routine and in decision making despite irregular schedules.
- *Incorporate special topics into the curriculum.* To reassure first responders that the practitioner understands the uniqueness of their population, it is helpful to include specific content on various topics that impact their success at work. Special topics of interest may include:
  - o Maintaining a strong connection to their family
  - o Neurological responses to stress and trauma and what to expect after the shift ends
  - o PTSD, chronic stress and defense mechanisms in response to chronic stress
  - o Compartmentalizing time at work vs. time at home
  - o Understanding heightened safety awareness and hyper-vigilance due to chronic exposure to life-threatening situations

In order to respond successfully in a crisis and maintain their mental health, it is vital that first responders learn skills to strengthen their sources of support and connection. To assist effectively, MRE practitioners must exhibit a great understanding for the unique stressors that are faced by first responders. Marriage and relationship education services can be effective and provide a positive impact on first responders and their spouses if they are offered as a voluntary service without fear of a negative impact on job security. Services should include a special focus on creative skills and solutions for navigating work stress, problem-solving, communicating effectively, and maintaining strong relationships at home.

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