

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Psychological Supports for Employees

Q: What psychological supports does BC Emergency Health Services provide for employees?

A: BCEHS offers its employees, their spouses and dependents short-term, solutions-focussed counselling services through our Employee & Family Assistance Program (EFAP).

Our employees also have access to our critical incident stress peer defusing team and critical incident stress management program to help deal with specific incident and cumulative job-related stress. In addition, employees can access the services of a clinical psychologist who has extensive experience in first responders' psychological health.

Q: What is BCEHS doing to help employees with disability claims related to psychological injury?

A: We are currently working with WorkSafeBC to provide a better understanding of the unique challenges facing our employees throughout the province. BCEHS's Disability Management team assists employees in accessing services and navigating the claims process.

Q: How is BCEHS helping staff with post-traumatic stress disorder?

A: Awareness, education and early identification are the main tenets of our psychological supports program. BCEHS encourages employees to look out for each other; to recognize the signs and symptoms of psychological injuries, and to know who to ask for help. But, there is still so much to learn about post-traumatic stress disorder and mental health in general. Research suggests up to 30 per cent of first responders may have PTSD. BCEHS will continue to enhance its psychological supports based on feedback and best practices research.

Q: What is BCEHS doing to educate employees on psychological health?

A: Historically, paramedics and dispatchers have suffered in silence. BCEHS is trying to help facilitate a cultural shift by emphasizing the importance of psychological fitness and accessing appropriate support services throughout their career. Our psychological support education encourages employees to come forward when they need help and teaches all employees how to recognize the signs of psychological challenges and cope with critical stress effectively. Last year, BCEHS and the Provincial Health Services Authority (PHSA) began rolling out online programs aimed at providing additional psychological support and promoting a healthier workplace. In January 2015, BCEHS began offering workshops and training to frontline leaders on mental health and how to support employees with critical incident stress.

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Q: What support do paramedics and dispatchers receive for counselling services?

A: The health and welfare benefit plan provides up to \$100 annually for counselling services. Benefit entitlements are set out in the collective agreement that applies to members of the Ambulance Paramedics of BC (APBC). This entitlement is bolstered by access to our critical incident stress peer team, short-term counselling for staff and their families, and sessions with our clinical psychologist.

Q: What is critical incident stress management and why is it important for paramedics and dispatchers?

A: Critical incident stress management (CISM) is a wellness-based initiative. It uses the strengths and benefits of peer counsellors coupled with professional psychological oversight to ensure employees are:

- Aware of healthy coping strategies;
- Can be identified early for additional support if needed.

Q: How does BCEHS provide CISM supports for frontline staff?

A: The BCEHS CISM program takes a holistic approach to mental health. It focuses on:

- Psychological health promotion, education, and more effective intervention when and where employees need it most.
- Access to peer-defusings and debriefings to help colleagues deal with the emotional impact of major incidents.
- Referral, if necessary, to a specialized, clinical psychologist.

Q: What are peer-defusing and debriefings and why are they beneficial?

A: Defusings are conducted within eight hours of an incident, either individually or in a group. Debriefings are conducted in a group of affected individuals with at least two members of the peer support team and a psychologist. Both defusings and debriefings focus on the individual's reaction to a call and offer the opportunity to decompress from challenging patient events. The critical incident peer team is activated after major incidents such as car accidents with multiple fatalities, the suicide of a colleague, the death of a child or a police-related shooting. Employees can also personally request assistance from the peer team 24/7, 365 days a year. The BCEHS peer team is trained to International Critical Incident Stress Foundation (ICISF) standards.