

Psychological Supports for Employees

Q: What psychological supports does BC Emergency Health Services (BCEHS) provide for employees and their families?

A: BCEHS offers its employees, their spouses and dependents free short-term, solutions-focussed counselling services through our Employee & Family Assistance Program (EFAP). These services are very beneficial for most life situations. In addition, through the Critical Incident Stress program our employees have free access to a network of trauma-trained and occupationally aware counsellors and psychologists for occupational stress injuries.

Our employees also have access to our confidential critical incident stress peer team. This team connects with frontline employees within 24 hours of specific high risk events to help understand the emotional impact of the work, support the management of cumulative job-related stresses and help make appropriate referrals to professional resources.

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

A: We are continuing to work with WorkSafeBC to provide a better understanding of the unique challenges facing our employees throughout the province, and the impact of cumulative stress. We have made some progress with “mental health” claims, but more is needed. 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: Research suggests that up to 30 per cent of first responders may have PTSD. Awareness, education and early identification are the main tenets of our psychological supports program.

This year the Critical Incident Stress Program has started a number of educational initiatives to help understand occupational stress injuries, including PTSD. These include a segment in the new employee orientation, and a course on cumulative stress that had its origins in the funding of the opioid crisis.

BCEHS will continue to enhance its psychological supports based on feedback and best practice research. We are currently partnering with two different psychologist researchers to better understand sustainable and effective resilience skills for paramedics. More will be coming out in the fall and early winter.

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. Since 2015, all BCEHS employees, as part of the Provincial Health Services Authority (PHSA), have had access to a number of online programs aimed at providing additional psychological support and promoting a healthier workplace. This information is available to employees on POD (PHSA's internal intranet site). It includes a number of topics such as depression management, and other wellness techniques

This year, BCEHS is also introducing resilience education into the new employee orientation; and a course called Opioid Resilience for more experienced employees, taught by a psychologist and dealing with the compassion fatigue associated with patient care.

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 is why any employee can call the Critical Incident Stress program (1 877 969 4321) or our Employee and Family Assistance Program (1 866 398 9505) and ask for "free" counselling.

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

A: Critical incident stress is a normal reaction to an abnormal situation. Its management is a wellness-based initiative. It uses the strengths and support of peer counsellors coupled with professional psychological oversight to ensure that employees are:

- Aware of healthy coping strategies in these circumstances
- Able to identify early the need for additional support, leading to more effective resolution of occupational stress injury
- Able to understand why the same event may impact us all differently, and that this is not weakness, just difference.

Q: How does BCEHS provide critical incident stress management supports for frontline staff?

A: The BCEHS Critical Incident Stress Management Program takes a holistic approach to mental health. It focuses on psychological health promotion through education, peer response and connecting to more effective interventions for recovery.

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

A: The BCEHS peer team is trained to International Critical Incident Stress Foundation (ICISF) standards. These techniques help realign the emotional reaction to an event and can build team cohesion.

A defusing is a peer-led process usually provided within eight hours of an incident, either individually by phone or in a small group. Debriefings are more formal. They occur about 5 to 72 days after the event and involve a mental health practitioner to make sure the process is mentally safe for all participants. Staff are always paid to attend these sessions if off duty. 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 routinely activated after major incidents such as multiple fatalities, the suicide of a colleague, the death of a child or a police-related shooting. All of these processes are strictly confidential.