

News

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****Program helps paramedics manage stress.**

DALLAS--Anxiety over potential threats makes many jobs, such as law enforcement, hotbeds for stress-related problems. And now researchers and counselors are realizing that these same dangers and pressures are present in another group of professionals to perhaps an even high degree--paramedics.

"When you have a job and you've made a mistake and it costs you money, yes, that bothers you; but what if that mistake means a life? That's a very difficult question, and that's what a paramedic lives with. That's their world," says Dr. James Atkins, who co-directs Emergency Medical Services at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas with Dr. Erwin Thal, professor of Surgery.

The Emergency Medical Services program at UT Southwestern Medical School has long been recognized as one of the leading systems in the nation. In 1981 the program won "System of the Year" -- the only urban system to be awarded such an honor. One of the reasons for this status, says Atkins, is its centralized focus on teaching. The same instructors rotate classroom, field training and continuing education responsibilities. This crossover results in a more well-rounded experience for both instructors and students. In addition, the program works in cooperation with Parkland Memorial Hospital's Emergency Room where paramedics spend their second five-week training period. Here nearly 180,000 emergencies are seen each year affording the paramedics the chance to see trauma in greater numbers, severity and diversity than in many other urban areas. Every effort is made to prepare the paramedics well for the job they will do. But every situation, every "run" is different, and the anxiety surrounding the job takes its toll in many ways.

Paramedics are faced daily with life and death situations. Being responsible for saving lives in itself is stressful. But paramedics are dealing with human beings in crisis situations, and verbal and physical abuse directed toward them is common. Paramedics must not only handle their own emotions but also bear the brunt of the victim's family's denial, worry and guilt. Unlike police officers, they do not carry weapons, nor are they allowed to use physical force. Thus they are often unprepared for the hostile confrontations that may occur when they arrive at the scene. Said paramedic Sherrie Wilson, "When you go into a building and there's blood and guts on the floor, you don't know what's at the top of the stairs."

Dr. Al Somodevilla, chief psychologist at Dallas Psychological Services, who counsels police officers, paramedics and their families, said recently when paramedics were asked what would make them feel more comfortable on the streets, they replied "shotguns." This illustrates the anxiety level that paramedics face each day.

Nearly half the time, paramedics are dealing with a person who is drunk and belligerent, says Atkins, who is also associate professor of Internal Medicine and director of Community Medicine Emergency Services at UTHSCD. Those are commonly the people who are involved in car accidents, knifings and shootings. "Take a situation where you make a run and pick up a child who's been hit by a drunk, then you answer a few more crisis calls, and later you pick up someone else injured by a drunk driver. Near the end of the night, you're called to a family dispute, and you go in and are cussed out by someone who is drunk. Can you hold your emotions? For a lot of people that would be the breaking point. You want to take out all the frustrations of all those injured people you've taken care of on that drunk. But you can't. That's part of what makes the paramedic's job so stressful."

"My job has been responsible for both the lowest and the highest points in my life,"

(over)

says Wilson, who graduated from the paramedic training course here in 1979. The hardest thing for her to deal with, she says, is knowing what to say to parents. Recently, for example, the ambulance on which Wilson rides was called to a scene where a five-year-old girl had been hit by a car. "Instead of stopping, the driver got scared and drove off, but in doing so, drug the little girl about 50 feet. In the ambulance, her mother kept asking me what she should do. I said, 'We've done everything we can. All we can do now is pray.' The mother said, 'I don't know how to pray.' And so all the way to the hospital I prayed for that little girl. But it's very disheartening to think that it just wasn't God's will for her to live."

Much of the stress depends, of course, on the quality of the "run" that was made. There is a particularly deep sense of helplessness when a person dies. Once the patient is left at the emergency room, paramedics rarely know the outcome of their efforts. That's not because they don't care, says Diane Reid, EMT training coordinator at the health science center. "There's not a one of them that couldn't pick up the phone and call. the reason they don't call is there's nothing worse, for example, than to do CPR on someone, bring them back to life and find out later they died in surgery."

These are some of the stresses that are placed on paramedics in an urban system. Working in a rural system takes on a different form. The odds are they lived in the town for a long time, and everyone they work on, they know. "How would you like to continually resuscitate and patch together all your friends and lose some, which you will. That creates a lot of stress," says Atkins.

Studies also show that burnout and stress problems can occur more frequently in stations that have minimal activity because the agitation level is so high and there is no release from the adrenaline buildup that often accompanies anxiety.

Internal pressures are also prevalent. Paramedics and firemen, as a group, says Atkins, have a tremendous amount of pride. They are skilled technicians who view themselves as helpers and feel they have a high public image to live up to. Their job is to save people's lives, and they are devastated when they encounter hostility from the public and family and friends of the victim.

"One of the neatest things," said Wilson, "is when you do CPR and convert back to a rhythm; and another is when a doctor pats you on the back for doing a good job, for doing the right thing."

Rookie paramedics sometimes set impossible goals for themselves. They want to think they can be perfect--never burn out, never tire and never let anyone die. They become extremely disappointed when they realize that some things are beyond their control.

All these demands place excessive stress on their emotions, and the way in which they deal with this constant anxiety has a direct effect on their job performance, personal lives, health, and ultimately, life expectancy. The need to help paramedics anticipate and manage stress is a major concern of the training division and has culminated in the use of various resources.

One of the major signs of stress is marital problems. Reid estimates that in nearly every class of paramedics (or EMTs) there has been at least one divorce. Perhaps the couple had marital difficulties before the spouse began his or her training, but it's also likely that the pressures of the job, training and responsibilities aggravated whatever problems were present. In fact, cites Somodevilla, national statistics indicate that the divorce rate for paramedics is fast approaching that of police officers -- 65 percent.

If early warning signs of stress are recognized and intervention begun early, many long-term effects can be substantially minimized. Stress management is not routinely taught in every program, but here as part of the classroom training, two lectures are presented on stress, and one on crisis intervention and death and dying. Paramedics are taught to recognize, identify and manage their stress and are encouraged to find ways to deal with it on a daily basis. Most of all, they are urged to seek help early.

Because stress often manifests itself at home, the focus is also turned on the family. An orientation is held during the first few weeks of each class that provides an opportunity for the spouses to voice their concerns, discuss problems, develop a network or support system of friends and to acquaint themselves with available counseling before a situation becomes irreparable. Instructors, spouses of previous paramedic students and counselors from the Dallas Psychological Services offer advice and help spouses understand the immediate and long-term stress burden of the paramedics. They agree that it helps to know another spouse in the same class. Rozalyn Katz whose

husband went through paramedic training before the orientations were held, emphasized the importance of mutual support. "I wish I had had another person to talk to. Even though I was boiling over with it, I was too embarrassed to call anyone and admit we were having problems. And I also thought it might somehow violate the confidentiality of our relationship."

The EMS instructors also developed a coloring book in which the children of paramedics learn what their "daddy" or "mommy" does every day at work.

The course itself contributes to stress. Many fire departments terminate students who do not pass paramedic training. Says Reid, there is an incredible amount of textbook knowledge that must be learned in five and one-half weeks. A grade of at least 75 percent must be maintained for the 220 hours of class, and students must pass the class before continuing on into the clinical rotations in the hospital and field experience. No one is allowed to repeat the class. Says Reid, "There are no second chances."

Students are encouraged to study in groups; however, not only are paramedics competing to keep their jobs, but they also compete among themselves in the classroom. This tremendous pressure they put on themselves can be healthy but also can lead to silent alienation and the loss of vital support that friends can provide.

Working to pass the course causes an immediate stress that exhibits itself in a number of ways. By necessity, paramedic school becomes the most important thing in their lives. As one wife said, "The family came second. Our life was put on hold for those weeks." Many expressed concern that their husbands were not the "men they married."

Fights, irritability, insomnia, nervousness and altered personality states appear to varying degrees. One wife related that her husband would arrive home from class, ask for dinner and immediately barricade himself behind his books. Literally everything he did at home for those weeks, he did behind a wall of textbooks.

One of the biggest complaints voiced by the families is that of depersonalization. There is a need for people in highly stressful occupations to develop psychological protection so that they can professionally do their jobs. But it often overlaps into the home environment. Paramedics see so many serious accidents that it's difficult for some to react appropriately when someone in their family suffers a minor injury. One wife said, "Unless the kids or I are within five minutes of death, he doesn't think it's serious." Reid emphasizes that this doesn't mean the paramedic is uncaring or cold. It's a necessary "hardening" that must occur to prevent total emotional breakdown.

After the classroom and emergency room rotations, the paramedics spend another four weeks riding in an MICU (Mobile Intensive Care Unit) in a high-activity area of Dallas. All three types of training are combined for a grade. It's extremely unusual for a paramedic to do well in class and not do well through the rest of the course or vice versa. Says Atkins, this is one of the few professions where classroom scores predict street performance to a fairly high degree. A study conducted here in 1979 by EMS staff correlated scores and job evaluations two years after graduation and found a 75 percent accuracy in predicting job performance.

Experts agree that there are many effective ways to relieve stress. One of the best is ventilation. One advantage that paramedics have over police officers is that they live at the station during their 24-hour shifts and between runs are able to talk with each other to relieve frustrations and anger and to reinforce positive results of a run. Said one paramedic, Colleen James, "I have been lucky in that there have always been a few guys at the station that I can get close to that ride together. There's time to talk on the ambulance and it helps to tell them about my problems. Being able to listen is important, too, and realize that they are feeling the same way. It's good because we leave many of our problems at work."

The need to talk extends into the home, and families should urge open communication at all times. Melanie Miller, a paramedic wife who went through the orientation last year, says, "If there is any advice I can give to paramedics, it's keep your wife informed, tell her your feelings." Debbi Cason, paramedic training coordinator at the health science center told the spouses' group to "listen to their feelings and not the 'grossness' of the story." The worse the experience is, the greater is the need to talk. When communication is absent or does not adequately fill the need, the tendency is to find another outlet such as drinking or extramarital affairs.

Channeled properly, stress has many positive rewards. Tolerance, increased ability to love, adapt, take on responsibilities, laugh and relax are all signs of effective

stress management. Paramedics and their families often are more sensitive to needless hostility and appreciate the delicate balance between life and death. Said Katz, "We realize that time spent together is precious and shouldn't be wasted on unnecessary arguments."

Immediate stress is best handled on a daily basis. It should not be allowed to build up to a boiling point. To reduce hostile confrontations, much of the immediate stress can be alleviated by explaining the civil procedures and telling the victim's family what the paramedics need to do and why. Internal stress can be significantly lessened through healthy ventilation -- exercise, sex, tears and laughter.

Long-term stress is best handled through training, education, counseling and biofeedback. In general, people who feel needed on the job can handle stress better. Said Atkins, one of the best things that companies can do is provide an "out" for a stressful job. Those in excessively stressful occupations often reach their limit after about 10 years. He emphasizes that this is not because of emotional instability, it's that the stress is so concentrated. "We can offer incentives and bribe people into staying but that's not the type of person we necessarily want to stay on."

But a person can handle only so much stress.

The system, Atkins says, has to provide a viable alternative. by enduring stress for long periods of time, workers are weakened by it and soon get tired of fighting it. Suppressing feelings causes stress to chip away at emotions and leads to insensitivity and apathy. There needs to be another job within the framework of the organization that provides them an outlet that is neither a demotion nor a symbol of quitting. One of the things, said Somodevilla, that is still lacking in paramedic counseling is situational or proactive counseling. For example, it is mandatory for police officers to receive counseling after a fatal shooting incident. There are specific incidents that can be particularly devastating to paramedics and firemen, also, such as being trapped in a burning building or having to retrieve dead children from a fire.

Everyone involved in the program are quick to confirm that guns, abuse and the use of force is not the answer. When people interact at any level, there is some degree of misunderstanding. Insight by both paramedics and the public into human nature and behavior can greatly reduce stress on both parts. "I try to treat everyone the way in which I would want them to treat my mother or father," said Wilson.

When asked how her husband deals with the stress, Miller replied, "He knows he's helping people and reminds himself that if he weren't there, it would be worse. He is a gentle and caring person and gets involved and thinks about his job a lot, but he doesn't let it ruin his life. I think paramedics must feel good about themselves. Then they are fulfilled knowing they did the best they could do."

Reid ends the spouse orientation the same way she wraps up her stress lecture. "In the end, it's not more money or material pleasures, it's helping people. Don't ever let anyone tell you that you or the job you do is not important. We can't depend on others for comfort in the job we do. We do the very best we can and it's the internal gratification that must keep us going. There is no way we can help as much as we would like to, but there is no job more important in this world than saving a life."

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