



**PREPARING FOR THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY OF 9/11:
ANTICIPATING THE EFFECTS OF TRAUMATIC STRESS
LAW ENFORCEMENT & SECURITY PERSONNEL**

A SPECIAL REPORT FROM EXTREME BEHAVIORAL RISK MANAGEMENT
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BY STEVEN M. CRIMANDO, MA, BCETS, CHS V

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The 9/11 Anniversary Will Be Saturated with Reminders

On a daily basis, a range of internal and external factors impact the performance of law enforcement and security professionals who may be called upon to make split second, life and death decisions. These factors are realities; they are part of the Job. But the 10th anniversary of the catastrophic terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, DC and Shanksville, Pennsylvania may introduce a powerful influence over many who will be tasked with protecting high-profile events, locations and individuals associated with 9/11 while being simultaneously bombarded with 9/11-related imagery and discourse in the media and in the general population recalling the tragedy with great detail and emotion.

A significant number of law enforcement officers on duty that fateful day still remain on the Job. Others have retired completely or have moved on to positions in homeland or corporate security. Regardless of where they are, for many, today is September 12th. Every day is September 12th, the day after the attacks, the day their world changed and things have never been the same. The sights, sounds and feelings connected to that day are permanently seared into memory and in some way, have affected nearly every aspect of personal and professional life from that day forward.

Volumes have been written about the psychophysiology of deadly force encounters and their impact on performance. The effects of our stress-related biochemistry are well understood. Fine motor skills deteriorate, higher-cognitive functioning diminishes, vision narrows, the brain and body can begin to work against us once we pass the optimal range of our “fight or flight” response. Auditory exclusion, a skewed sense of time and distance, as well as other perceptual distortions, can fog our memory and twist our recollection of the facts. The effects of acute stress on physical and mental performance in life or death situations are well understood and widely accepted. This is how the mind and body work when exposed to certain extreme conditions. There is no shame associated with this response as there is a solid scientific explanation for such reactions. To have such a reaction is not a weakness, nor sign of psychological problems.

Just as the stress of a deadly force encounter can wreak havoc on mental and physical performance, the effects of traumatic stress can have equal but different consequences. One of the critical differences though is that most individuals with military, law enforcement or security experience can acknowledge and accept the stress response to deadly force, far fewer comfortably accept or acknowledge the effects of traumatic stress. Even though a traumatic stress reaction may have essentially the same fundamental neuro-cognitive origins as the reaction to a deadly force encounter, it is still viewed by many as a sign of weakness, a personal deficiency or as some sort of mental health problem, resulting in denial by those experiencing such reactions and a stigmatization by others.



The executives, managers and leaders of law enforcement and security organizations can benefit by understanding and anticipating the potential effects of traumatic stress on personnel during the upcoming anniversary of 9/11. Many in the organization's ranks may be "kindled" by their own 9/11 experiences, exposures and losses, to have potentially strong reactions in the lead up, during and for a while after the 9/11 anniversary. Traumatic stress, not just posttraumatic stress disorder, the most commonly discussed diagnosable form, but even the less damaging types, are highly subject to "trigger" events that can stimulate re-experiencing and other reactions that can significantly impact all aspects of functioning. The run up to the 9/11 anniversary will be saturated with every type of reminder. While this anniversary may have a more positive, triumphant quality, especially in the wake of the death of terrorist leader, Osama Bin Laden, it will certainly be solemn and painful for many. The powerful and ubiquitous images of 9/11 will no doubt stir a strong reaction in anyone even remotely connected to the event.

The Effects of Traumatic Stress on Performance

Not a great deal of research has been done examining the effects of previous traumatic exposure or traumatic stress reactions on the performance of law enforcement and security personnel. The good news is that what research there is suggests that neither previous exposure to traumatic events nor traumatic symptoms are correlated with performance levels. For example, in research with police recruits with high or severe levels of trauma symptoms, "subjects did not demonstrate impairments in judgment, communication, or situation control compared with their colleagues with lesser or no trauma symptoms. On the basis of these findings, there is no reason to believe that police recruits with PTSD are prone to making errors of communication or judgment that would place them or others at increased risk." (LeBlanc, et al, 2007)

This is not to say that the typical and expected traumatic stress reactions to a significant event or reminders of that event, such as a highly-publicized anniversary, will not result in disruptions in sleeping and eating patterns, strong grief reactions related to lost colleagues, the avoidance of reminders of the 9/11 experience and other behavioral changes in law enforcement and security personnel that can indirectly impact functioning. The existence of prior trauma in itself does not seem to degrade performance, but the physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioral changes officers or agents may experience in the run up to, during, and for a short while after the 9/11 anniversary, may affect concentration, energy levels, mood and overall functioning. The bottom line, therefore, is while there is no strong evidence of the effect of traumatic stress on performance, there are likely to be indirect effects that can be successfully anticipated and countered.

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Understanding and Anticipating the Kindling Effect

Just as the “fire triangle” illustrates the conditions or elements necessary to ignite a fire (i.e., air, heat and fuel), likewise, a confluence of different factors must be present to create the initial traumatic stress response to an event that is outside the realm of normal human experience. A convergence of dynamics can result in an emotional and psychological conflagration even years after the original experience. This is not just the case with individuals diagnosed or suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder, but potentially with anyone exposed to a significantly violent or traumatic event. There is also the possibility of a delayed onset with traumatic stress in which a great deal of time may elapse between the traumatic event and the onset of a powerful reaction.

The term “kindling effect” is used to describe the rapid increase in symptoms in someone who has not previously reported difficulty related to a traumatic experience, but who seemingly suddenly and spontaneously becomes overwhelmed by their physical, emotional and cognitive response to a traumatic reminder or stimuli. Traumatic exposure results in an alteration of the biochemical stress response system in the brain that changes an individual’s ability to respond efficiently and effectively to new stressors. Many behavioral science researchers focus on this altered biological stress response system following trauma (e.g., Bevans, Cerebone, & Overstreet, 2005; Teicher, Andersen, Polcari, Andersen, Navalta, & Kim, 2003).

To further explain, when an individual is exposed to a traumatic event they may react in a variety of ways. Cognitively, they may be focused on a real or perceived threat to their safety and survival. Emotionally, they may experience intense feelings of fear or anger. Physically, they may experience an increased autonomic arousal with sharply elevated vital signs and a classic “fight or flight” response. Each of these reactions is closely linked to each other and the traumatic experience through a complicated and intricate neurochemical feedback system that is intended to respond to threats against an individual’s safety. The human body is well designed to respond to extreme stress in a way that promotes survival.

When this system confronts a stressor so extremely traumatic that the stress response system itself is altered, the individual experiences a traumatic stress reaction or response. The traumatic stress response starts with automatic and instantaneous assessment of threat that activates a cascade of different neurochemicals that helps the individual successfully respond to the challenge at hand (Bevans et al., 2005). This traumatic stress response is different from a typical stress response in that the neurochemicals released persist long after the threat, causing more prolonged disruption of normal physical, emotional and mental functioning (Weber & Reynolds, 2004). Both structural and functional capacities of the brain become locked into a maladaptive feedback cycle



(Vasterling & Brailey, 2005), directly affecting different brain regions involved in the stress response.

All of this is to say, that our human response to threat is very powerful, immediate and somewhat out of our direct control. If we had to pause to consider if we should turn on our stress response in the face of a serious threat, valuable time would be lost compromising our odds of survival. Traumatic stress is somewhat different in that overtly or covertly, it lingers below the surface, perhaps for decades after the initial threat and is subject to being reignited by sparks that trigger the elaborate neurochemical response described here. This is simply the way our body and brain work. The challenges are in understanding, acknowledging and managing traumatic stress reactions, which will be of special importance to those tasked with high-stress or high-threat assignments on and around the 9/11 anniversary.

Predict and Prepare

In your efforts to help personnel predict and prepare for potential emotional and behavioral changes associated with the anniversary, it is important to share information about possible triggers and reactions. Such triggers typically increase in frequency around the time of an anniversary of a disaster or violent event. While some are foreseeable, others can occur unexpectedly, and many are unique to the individual. Some triggers may not be easily recognized and they can be variable, changing over the anniversary timeline. Due to the “kindling effect”, many individuals may find themselves increasingly reactive to emotional triggers when under stress or increased performance pressure.

Personnel should also know that when stimulated, memories and emotions associated with 9/11 can surface in many different forms and at different times. The emotions often stirred up by anniversaries include:

- Grief and sadness
- Fear and anxiety
- Frustration, anger, and guilt
- Avoidance
- Remembrance
- Reflection
- Restlessness
- Complicated grief
- Increased use of “gallows humor”

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Action Steps and Recommendations

In the interest of employee wellness and job performance, there are several proactive measures that organizations and their leaders can take to mitigate the potential impact of the 9/11 anniversary. The days and weeks prior to anniversary will certainly require higher levels of activity and vigilance for law enforcement and security personnel, especially in those jurisdictions most directly impacted by the initial events. It is completely reasonable and foreseeable that the national media will fixate on the event and repeatedly display 9/11 imagery that can stir up emotional reactions. It is equally foreseeable that those in the organization's ranks with direct 9/11 exposures or who suffered the loss of loved ones, friends or family, may have the most powerful reactions. Therefore, it is suggested that acknowledging and discussing strategies to manage the emotional impact of the anniversary begin well in advance of September 2011.

Leaders can help address the potential impact of the anniversary by presenting a balanced posture, acknowledging the positive aspects of the event, as well as those that may be more negative. In doing so, it can be helpful to:

- Take stock of the accomplishments of the nation, the community, the organization and of affected individuals, since the initial attack;
- Enhance and strengthen connections within the organization and the community of stakeholders for mutual support;
- Promote education and awareness that can foster resilience and leave a positive legacy;
- Provide access to materials and tools to assist personnel in managing their own reactions, as well as other traumatic events they may have encountered in their careers.

A good example of a tool to help personnel manage traumatic stress is the free mobile phone app, "PTSD Coach" offered by the National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/pages/ptsdcoach.asp>) or guidance in using "tactical breathing" to gain control over physiological and psychological responses to stress. A more full discussion of tactical breathing can be found in Lt. Col. Dave Grossman's work outlined in, "On Combat" The Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Conflict in War and Peace (Grossman & Christensen, 2004).

In a non-critical, non-stigmatizing way, it is important for the leaders of law enforcement and security organizations to convey their understanding of the normalcy of anniversary reactions and help educate and prepare personnel for their likely occurrence. Having resources via Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), open sources, like the National Center for PTSD (www.ncptsd.va.gov) and the U.S. Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (<http://www.samhsa.gov/>), and even mobile phone apps or guidelines



mentioned above, is also helpful. It is strongly recommended that information and resources about managing anniversary reactions be provided before such reactions occur. Those experiencing such reactions often retreat from support and assistance and may be reluctant, for several understandable reasons, to seek or utilize assistance.

If your organization uses an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), it may be helpful to have a discussion about what sort of services, including educational programs, may be offered to address 9/11 anniversary-related stress reactions and if possible, to schedule educational sessions for the workforce.

Conclusion

It is known from extensive research in traumatic stress, that not everyone who experiences a disaster or violent event is in fact traumatized. There are established risk factors associated with both individuals and event types that can increase the likelihood of traumatic stress reactions. There is good reason to believe that given the nature of the 9/11 events and factors common to law enforcement, security and other first responders, that many individuals connected to that tragedy continue to experience varying degrees of traumatic stress even ten years after. One significant characteristic of traumatic stress is the potential for reactions to be rekindled by reminders even long after the initial event. Anniversaries and other reminders can be emotionally uncomfortable, highly distressing and in some instances, overwhelming for individuals and families, as well as communities and organizations.

The 10th anniversary of 9/11 will undoubtedly be a time of deep reflection. For many, it will also be a time in which painful emotions resurface. For those still actively protecting and serving, in the same or in a new capacity, it will be important to anticipate, plan for and actively manage traumatic stress reactions that can affect personal and professional functioning. Mitigating the emotional impact of the anniversary must begin with an understanding and acceptance of the reality of traumatic stress. From there, we can seek to minimize operational risks associated with traumatic stress reactions and emotional distress among the ranks of law enforcement and security professionals with strong 9/11 ties. Any efforts to do so should begin now.

> **Mitigating the emotional impact of the anniversary must begin with an understanding and acceptance of the reality of traumatic stress.**

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About the Author

Steven M. Crimando, MA, BCETS, CHS-V, is a noted author, consultant and trainer to governmental agencies, NGOs and multinational corporations specialized in the prevention and response to mass violence. He is the former Chair of the Forensic Counseling Division of the American College of Forensic Examiners International (ACFEI), a member of the Association of Threat Assessment Professionals (ATAP), the International Counter-Terrorism Officers Association (ICTOA) and International Association of Counterterrorism and Security Professionals (IACSP). He serves on the Board of Directors for the International College of the Behavioral Sciences.

Mr. Crimando holds dual undergraduate degrees in Human Development and Public Communications from Syracuse University, a graduate degree in Clinical Psychology from Fairleigh Dickinson University and continued post-graduate studies in Clinical Psychology at Seton Hall University. He is the Managing Director of Extreme Behavioral Risk Management ("XBRM"), a consultancy focused on human factors /behavioral sciences applied to disaster recovery, business continuity and homeland security. XBRM is a division of AllSector Technology Group, Inc., a New York-based full service technology consulting company offering systems integration, managed services and applications development and implementation. AllSector Technology Group, Inc. is a subsidiary of the F·E·G·S Health and Human Services System, one of the nation's largest and most diversified not for profit organizations.

Contact: Steven M. Crimando

T: 212-366-8343

Email: steve@xbrm.com