

STAYING HEALTHY IN THE FACE OF FIRST RESPONDER TRAUMA

Presented by Matthew Johnston
Surrey Fire Fighter

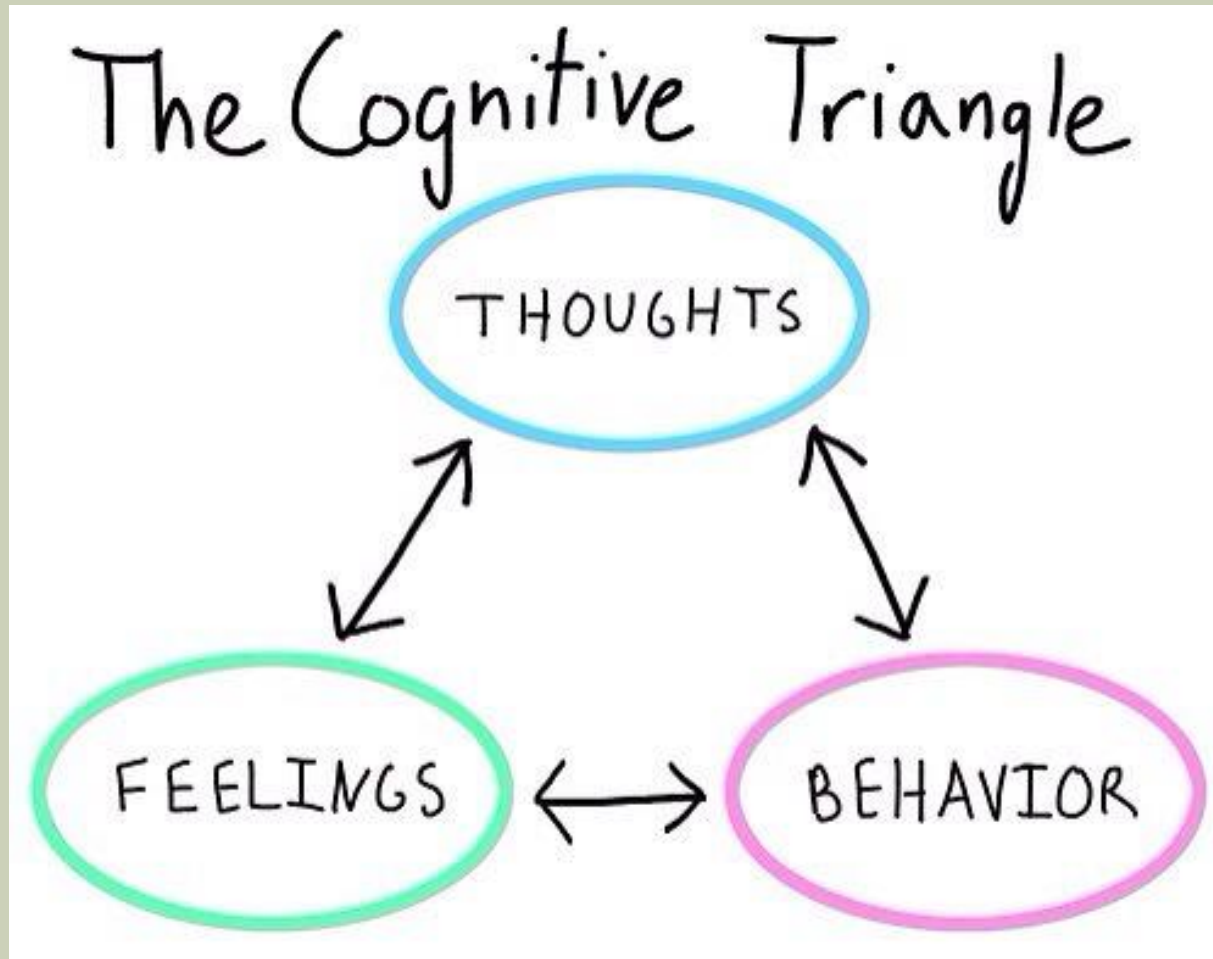


HELP IS HERE WHEN YOU NEED IT

A number of programs are available that are jointly funded by our Union and the Employer:

1. Members Family Assistance Program (MFAP)
2. Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM)
3. Manulife Extended Benefits for Mental Health
4. Wellness Peer Trainers and Mental Health Wellness Manual
5. Annual Fitness Testing

THE NATURE OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE



HOW FIRE CULTURE CHANGES US

1. The Behavioral Element

Training to the point that fire ground and first responder behaviour become automatic reactions in stressful situations

2. The Analytical Mind (Thoughts)

The ability to quickly and efficiently solve complex problems

3. The Emotional Mind

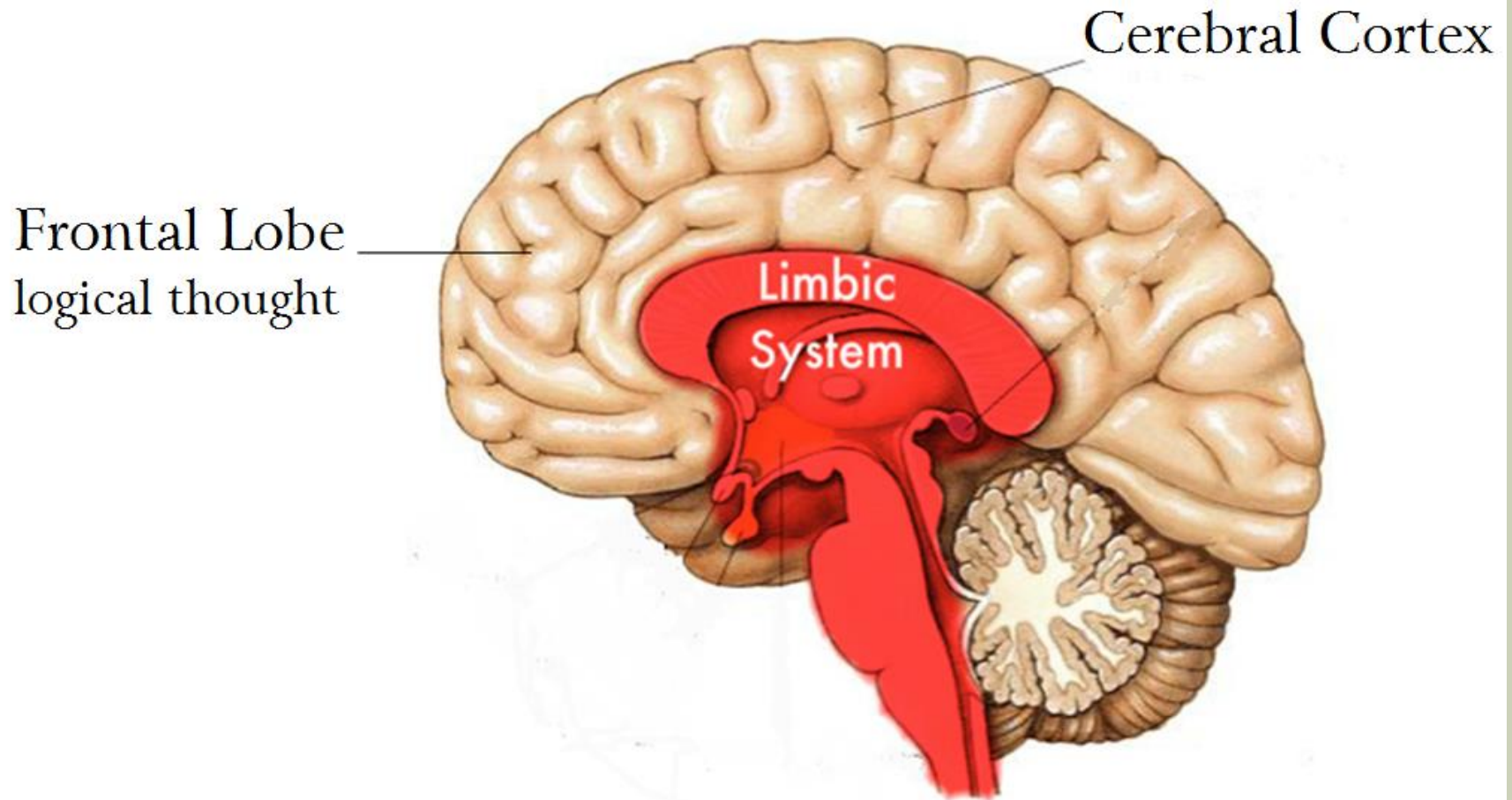
Suppressed at many fire ground and first responder calls, as well as narrowed in traditional fire hall culture

STRESS

Stress – the introduction of strain/tension on systems (has a psychological and physiological basis)

Tends to be autonomic activations, but with experience, stress reactions can be altered

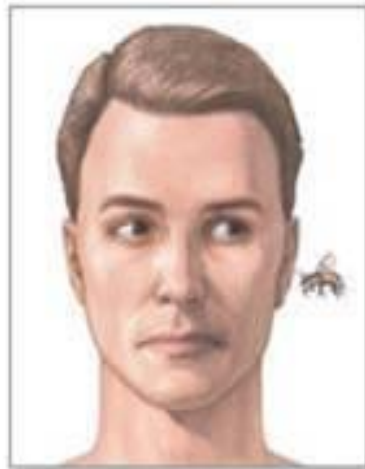
STRESS REACTIONS AND THE BRAIN



WHAT HAPPENS TO OUR MIND UNDER STRESS?

- Different parts of our brain activate in a scattered manner
- The ability to control our emotions decrease
- Our emotional range is greatly reduced
- Prevents us from learning and increases fear-based responses
- Self awareness of thoughts and feelings decrease
- Constantly driven by a sense of threat
- Results in chronic hyperarousal

WHEN STRESS CROSSES INTO ANXIETY



Stress is caused by an existing stress-causing factor or "stressor"



Anxiety is stress that continues after the stressor is gone

THREE FUNDAMENTAL STRESS RESPONSES

The body's way of rising to the challenge of a situation which lacks control and predictability

1. Freeze
2. Flight
3. Fight

* We are exposed to an unknown, potentially traumatic event on a fairly regular, but unpredictable basis – prime breeding ground for heightened anxiety

**WE DON'T GET TO PICK OUR CALLS
WE DON'T GET TO RUN AWAY OR FREEZE!**

TRAUMATIC EVENTS

“any event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others... response involves intense fear, helplessness, or horror”

Majority of the trauma on the job happens at a VICARIOUS level

COPING MECHANISM

Conscious

**DISSOCIATIVE
BARRIER**

Unconscious



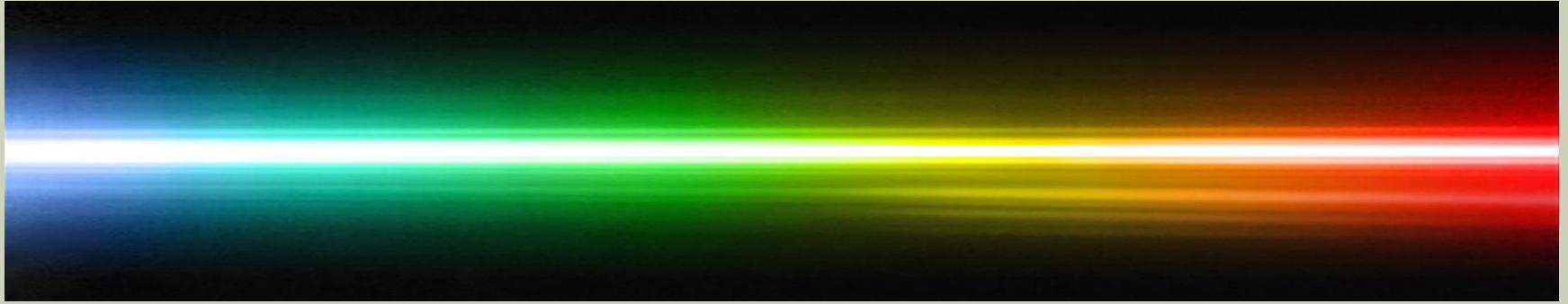
Behaviours

Analytical Mind

Autopilot

Personal Feelings
and Values

THE TRAUMA SPECTRUM



- Studies (US) show that 90% of population is exposed to at least one traumatic event with many being exposed to more than one
- Trauma can build cumulatively, making the emergence of challenging thoughts, feelings and behaviours more likely
- Despite this high incidence, PTSD rarely occurs in people who are exposed to traumatic events

COMMON EMOTIONS FOR THE TRAUMATIZED INDIVIDUAL

Frustrated

Angry

Anxious

Afraid

Helpless

Sad

Disgusted

Surprised

Horrified

Regretful

Guilty

Excited

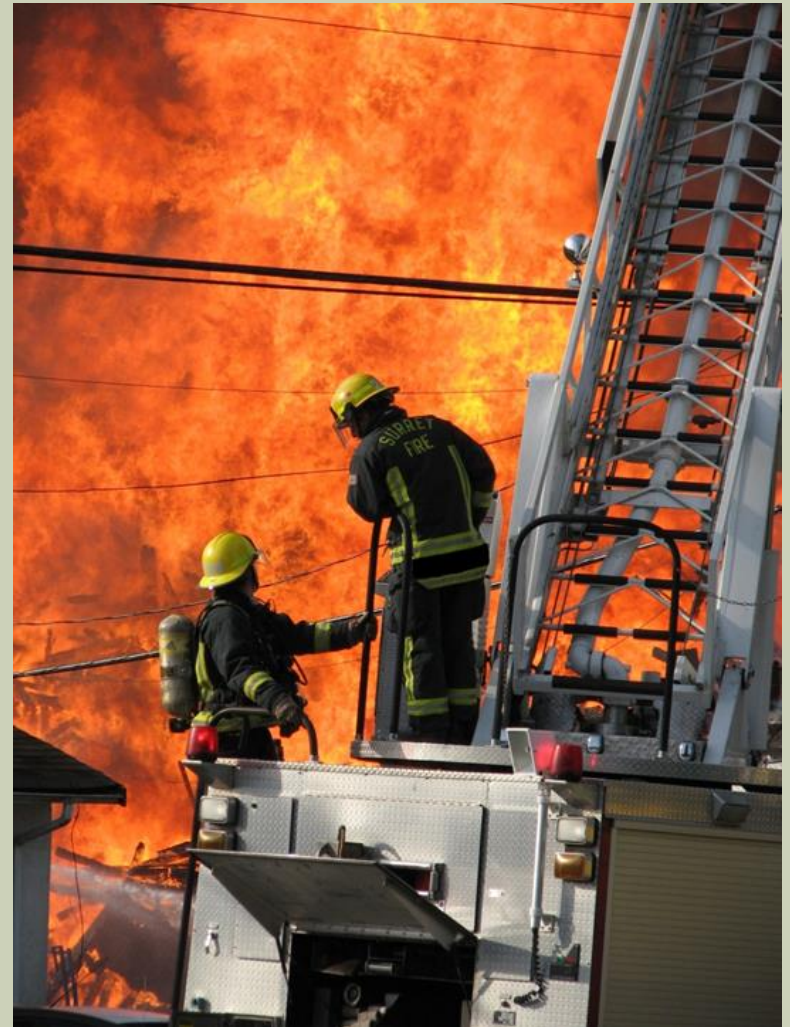
Ashamed

Numb

THE COMPLEXITY OF TREATING FIRST RESPONDER TRAUMA

- The “Tipping Point” is usually the surface trigger
- Once the crisis point is reached, the treatment plan has to be comprehensive
- Trauma can become ingrained in our nervous system, making talk therapy largely ineffective
- Therapy Goal: to learn how to accept the condition of uncertainty with calls and life

KEY: ACCESS HELP PRIOR TO YOUR JAR OVERFLOWING



RISK FACTORS

“Trauma” is not a sufficient determinant of ASD or PTSD

Risk Factors Associated with Vulnerability:

1. Severity and type of traumatic event encountered
2. Personal characteristics
3. Life experience **and life situation**

What are some Protective Factors that Build Resiliency?



COMMON LIFESTYLE FACTORS OF HEALTHY INDIVIDUALS

- **Breathing exercises** - cardiovascular activities
- **Creativity** - wood working & restoration activities
- **Healing imagery** - music, photography & cooking
- **Compassion** - volunteering and helping others
- **Connecting** - spending time with loved ones & friends
- **Nature engagement** - camping, fishing & hunting
- **Physical healing** - massage therapy & yoga
- **Spiritual** - religious practices & setting time aside to experience silence

HOPE AND MEANING CAN COME FROM TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE



FIRE FIGHTERS SHOULD SEEK THE HELP OF A MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL WHEN:

- Difficulty sleeping including frequent nightmares & night terrors
- Unwanted thoughts & feelings that affect concentration
- Flashbacks & powerful, troubling imagery
- Chronic fatigue & loss of interest in usually enjoyable activities
- Irritability towards others including co-workers & loved ones
- Addictions including alcohol, drugs & body enhancement supplements
- Self-isolating behaviours, including a lack of interest in social connectedness
- Frequent feelings of hopelessness, shame and/or guilt
- Compulsion to work excessively at the expense of important relationships

RESILIENCY

- The ability to adapt to stress and adversity (family, relationships, health issues, work, finances)
- Can be learned and developed
- People who demonstrate resilience are people with optimistic attitudes and positive emotionality; effectively balance negative emotions with positive ones



POSITIVE EMOTIONS

- Promotes flexible thinking and problems solving
- Aids in physical and psychological recovery
- Decreases the physiological element of the stress response
- Facilitates adaptive coping
- Builds enduring social resources



HEALING THROUGH MEANING

- The ability to regain a comprehensive “world view” and return to homeostasis
 - Enhanced sense of “meaning” creates life balance
 - The world makes sense again and seems predictable
- * This state can be the most elusive when we are at the depths of struggle because attentional focus narrows

HOME SUPPORT – STAYING IN TOUCH

- The changes noted in adapting one's world view can have a positive impact on personal relationships or..... it can be catastrophic!
 - The need for regular communication is paramount
 - Spouses can be traumatized by our stories
- *Think about what to share and know the limitations

LEARNING NEW PATTERNS

- The motivation to make these changes are inversely correlated with mental health
- The need to communicate with loved ones as well as colleagues is critical (no one can do it alone)

ON STAYING HEALTHY

- There is a need to be self aware -
Physically, Psychologically, Emotionally
and Personal Beliefs wise
- Be careful not to “pathologize” your
feelings and reactions. They are mostly
normal, but if in doubt, check-in with
family members or a physician

SUMMARY

- The nature of being a fire fighter is inherently risky physically and psychologically
- The field of trauma and trauma treatment is changing with scientific advancements
- With the right combination of protective factors, your chances of developing a psychological disorder is nearly zero (resiliency)
- There is no magical combination of protective factors; it depends on personality – Key is to know yourself!
- If you are struggling, the Surrey Fire Service has comprehensive programs that can be accessed in a short period of time
- Always remember that meaning and growth can come from difficult times