

National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health

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911 Dispatchers Frequently Experience Emotional Distress in Response to Domestic Violence Calls, A Recent Study Reports

A recent study published in the *Journal of Traumatic Stress* examines the frequency with which 911 telecommunicators experience emotional distress in response to emergency calls as well as symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Participants in the study were asked whether they had received certain types of calls and whether they had experienced fear, helplessness, or horror in reaction to the calls. Domestic violence calls were among the most common type of call received with nearly all (95.3%) survey respondents reporting that they had received these calls and more than one-third (38.6%) of respondents reporting that they experienced feelings of fear, helplessness, or horror while responding to domestic violence calls.

The study also found that 3.5% of survey respondents were currently experiencing symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Although researchers did not ask whether respondents had experienced symptoms of PTSD during the last 12 months or during their lifetime, the high rate at which survey respondents were currently experiencing symptoms of PTSD indicates that 911 telecommunicators may in fact experience PTSD at a higher rate than the general population (which has a 12-month prevalence rate of 3.5%). Acknowledging that the participants for this study were self-selected and were all currently working in the field, the authors of the study speculated that the rate of PTSD symptoms may have been higher among a sample that was not selected out of convenience and that included telecommunicators that had left their job due to burnout.

The study has clear implications for domestic violence advocates, whether they are answering hotline calls or working with survivors in a program or shelter setting. The Center offers training and technical assistance to support advocates in their work with survivors of domestic violence around issues of vicarious trauma.

Recommended resources:

Webinar: Developing Trauma-Informed Practices and Environments: First Steps for Programs by Terri Pease, PhD, *Director of the Training Institute*, National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health

Pease, T. (2009). **Reflective leadership as a strategy for accountability.** *The Voice: The Journal of the Battered Women's Movement*, 4-6.

<http://www.ncadv.org/files/Accountability%20Issue%20Spring%202009.pdf>

Van Dernoot Lipsky, L. (2009). **Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others.** San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

<http://traumastewardship.com/the-book/inside-the-book/>

Link to the study:

Pierce, H. & Lilly, M.M. (2012). Duty-related trauma exposure in 911 telecommunicators: considering the risk for posttraumatic stress. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 25, 1–5. doi: 10.1002/jts.21687

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/jts.21687/abstract>