



**For ICSO Personnel Only**

# **IMPERIAL COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE (ICSO) PEER SUPPORT • WELLNESS • RECOVERY**



**NO ONE FIGHTS ALONE HERE**

## **Invisible wounds: How trauma affects the brain**

It's no secret that trauma exposure is par for the course for first responders.

Despite the plethora of scientific evidence [...], there's still a pervasive misconception in first responder culture that managing trauma-related symptoms is merely a matter of will-power. This misconception only serves to bolster the cultural stigma that merely experiencing trauma-related symptoms and/or seeking help for them is a sign that someone is weak, "crazy," unfit for duty, or similar judgments.

### **WHAT IS TRAUMA EXPOSURE?**

There are two types of trauma exposure, which we'll call "Big T" trauma and "Small T" trauma.

"Big T" trauma is defined as exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence. This exposure can occur through direct experience: witnessing it happening to others, learning that it occurred to a close family member or friend, or experiencing repeated exposure to aversive details of traumatic events through the job.

Examples of "Big T" trauma include:

Physical or sexual abuse, recovering dead bodies, suicide of a close friend or family member, dispatching a call from a victim in an active emergency, line of duty death of a crewmember, using force to resolve a criminal incident that results in physical harm or death to the suspect.

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## **Resources**



Aetna - A guide to providing services ([PDF](#))

Aetna Resource For Living ([PDF](#))

Televideo Counseling ([PDF](#))

Inner Strength - Mental Health awareness guide ([PDF](#))

For more information,  
Call: 1-800-342-8111 or,

Log on to:  
[www.resourcesforliving.com](http://www.resourcesforliving.com)

Username: county of imperial  
Password: eap

The Imperial County Sheriff's Office Peer Support is a team of ICSO staff who play a vital role on our employees and their families in need of emotional support.

To obtain further assistance, please visit

[www.icsopeersupport.com](http://www.icsopeersupport.com)

## **Interested in becoming a Peer Support Member?**

### **Contact:**

Sgt. Gonzalez - [Egonzalez@icso.org](mailto:Egonzalez@icso.org)

Lt. Erro - [Cerro@icso.org](mailto:Cerro@icso.org)

or

[ICSOPEERSUPPORT@icso.org](mailto:ICSOPEERSUPPORT@icso.org)

(...continued)

“Small T” trauma involves highly distressing events that affect people on a personal level but that are not inherently threatening to life or bodily integrity. They can exacerbate the effects of a “Big T” trauma and over time can accumulate and mimic reactions of “Big T” trauma.

Examples of “Small T” trauma include:

Infidelity, divorce, losing a child custody battle, emotional and psychological abuse (e.g., name-calling, manipulation, gas lighting), death of a loved one (e.g., a grandparent), death of a beloved pet.

### COMMON REACTIONS TO TRAUMA

The following are some common reactions that someone may notice after experiencing some type of trauma: Irritability and anger, intrusive thoughts and memories, diminished pleasure and enjoyment in activities that you used to enjoy, decreased motivation, feeling disconnected from others, forgetfulness, withdrawing from friends and family, [...] and more. Many first responders experience one or more of these reactions at some point during their careers.

[...]

### TRAUMA TAKEAWAYS

There are several key points to observe and accept about trauma in this context:

1. Overcoming the effects of trauma is not a matter of strength or willpower. Traumatic stress has a tangible and observable impact on our most complex organ – our brain.
2. Being affected by trauma is normal. Having trouble sleeping after a heart-pumping structure fire is normal. Feeling a mixture of difficult emotions after responding to a triple homicide is normal. These are normal reactions to abnormal events. It is completely unrealistic (and, frankly, inhuman) to expect that you will be completely unaffected by the trauma of the job.
3. Posttraumatic stress injury is not a lifelong sentence. The brain is malleable and never stops changing in response to learning, [...] neuroplasticity. Neuroplasticity promotes the ability to recover from trauma or brain damage, helps us learn new things, and strengthens areas where function is lost or has declined.

Openly discussing these points are key to reducing the stigma associated with experiencing trauma-related symptoms.

### HOW TO MITIGATE THE EFFECTS OF TRAUMA

- Seek treatment
- Find a grounding technique
- Engage in relaxing activities
- Exercise regularly

[Click here for full article](#) by Brooke Bartlett, Ph.D.



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