



Emergency responders need to lean on each other - expert

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An emergency response worker's best guard against stress is a caring co-worker.

Richard Chagnon of Formation Services-Conseils Inc. of Granby, Que., an organization that specializes in suicidal crisis intervention, said it's important for peers to take notice of changes that may be occurring in a co-worker.

"The best thing is peer support - especially in the first moment after an event," Chagnon said.

"The first thing is to talk. You always think you are alone and that nobody cares, but when you talk about it, other people can react."



« The best thing is peer support »
said Richard Chagnon Ps.ed.

Chagnon's comments follow recent statements by Shannon Pennington, a retired Calgary firefighter and a senior chief with the North American Fire Fighter Veterans Network. He said emergency response

is becoming so stressful that firefighters are taking their own lives.

Pennington said the intensity and pace of society in a post-9/11 world are driving stress levels upward for all emergency service personnel, including police officers and paramedics.

Chagnon believes education is the best tool when it comes to recognizing signs of distress and post-traumatic stress disorder in emergency response officials.

Those signs include increased consumption of alcohol and drugs, a change in eating habits and difficulty in sleeping or staying asleep.

"Stress is a reaction to something you think you are not able to face," Chagnon said.

"You're not scared by it, but you have doubts about yourself."

Chagnon said symptoms are more evident to a co-worker who infrequently sees a colleague.

"They can better evaluate the changes that people are going through," he said.

"Those signs are *very evident for the people* outside. It's tough for somebody who is always with someone to remark that there's a change."

The longer a person waits to get support and see a doctor, the longer it will take to recover, he said.

When someone doesn't get enough sleep, it isn't unusual to think that people are against you and you become more irritable, Chagnon said.

For firefighters, one particular thing to watch for is a lack of caring, such as a disinterest in keeping a fire protection suit clean

"For these people, it is important that all suits are clean," Chagnon said.

"One of the signs is that since they have problems going to sleep, they wake up earlier or not all in the morning. So they skip the shower, or the ironing of their (uniform), or things like this. It is an easy sign for the others that they don't keep hygiene the same as usual. It's important to question people as to what is behind those signs."

Chagnon said it's important to also remember that distress doesn't have to be connected to a dramatic event and could be something at home that has the potential to carry over on the job. That makes the affected individual more vulnerable.

Chagnon said stress among emergency officials is widespread, although it differs somewhat between big and small cities.

In the latter, everyone seemingly knows each other and there's a better chance of seeing somebody you know at the scene of a tragedy.

Emergency officials in big cities have more calls, he said.