

Team Talk: Decreasing Chronic Stress Among First Responders

City focus

The vision for Team Talk is to help the North Vancouver City Fire Department (NVCFD) reduce the stigma around mental health and reduce chronic stress for first responders.

Background

The DNV fire and strategic plan 2020-2025 states as one of their values: Wellbeing – Foster physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. First responders experience chronic exposure to stress and traumatic events. Fire fighters are more likely to die from suicide than they are to die in the line of duty. Self-reported data from the North Vancouver city fire department showed that almost 60% of the respondents feel stressed some or most of the time. In 2007 the World Health Organization classified night shift work as a potential carcinogen due to its disruption of the body's circadian rhythm. They also considered working as a firefighter to be a risk.

Overview

Team Talk is a 26-week program that involves firefighters meeting together in groups accompanied by a mental health professional and retiree/veteran to engage in casual, open dialogue about their work week. The purpose of the program is to provide a candid environment for group discussion that promotes the de-stigmatization of mental health and PTSD-related issues without being too intrusive or imposing. The program is adapted from the Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) program and is a proactive approach rather than a reactive approach. It involves one activity, the discussion group emphasizing interpersonal communication within the Health Communication strategies category. After the program concludes, the results from the post-session evaluations will be considered for the continuation or closure of the program.

Project details

A 26-week group discussion program hosted at the fire hall. A mental health professional and a retired firefighter will be present to facilitate the discussion. At 3 intervals a survey will be sent to participants. The responses will reflect the changes in culture and reduction in stigma discussing workplace stressors and their effects on mental health. Throughout the duration of the program the role of the facilitators will gradually diminish as participants become more comfortable being vulnerable with each other when discussing relevant problems. Ideally, after 26 weeks (about 6 months) the participants can carry out these group discussions on their own- thereby integrating it into workplace culture. If there are positive outcomes, we aim to implement this program in additional fire departments.

Next steps

Firstly, we need to implement the Team Talk program at the NVCFD for at least 6 months. Once the program has been implemented and results from the surveys have been collected, we can determine whether the program should continue. Based on the results, if it is to be found that fire fighters resonated with the program and found it helpful at reducing chronic stress, further expansion to other fire departments on the North Shore and in Vancouver would be a possible next step. Continued succession of the program would warrant the implementation of Team Talk both provincially and nationally. Furthermore, if external validity is found to be high, consideration for the implementation of Team Talk in other FRs and even workplace environments in general will be the next step. Overall, this program's expansion relies on the success of the pilot intervention with the NVCFD.