

Considerations When Treating First Liners

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First Liners (First Responders, Health Caregivers and Caregivers) must have the capacity to replenish and recharge their systems even as they are concerned about the welfare of those who need and are receiving their services. It is important that First Liners who are inundated for hours, weeks, days or months with the same problem be on some kind of systematic debriefing and decompressing schedule. As exhaustion approaches the First Liners, emotional reactions such as depression triggered by fatigue, a sense of hopelessness is inevitable. B.F. Skinner showed this in his classic and “shocking” (pun intended) experiment in comparative psychology using mice. To this extent, First Liners must function as part of a reciprocal team to insure that their needs are met, to allow them to function at a maximum level of efficiency.

Front Liners are entitled to and need mental health treatment as much as anyone else; the stigma attached to receiving such treatment needs to be eradicated especially at such times as this. In my posted article, “Time for Leisure Time,” Hugh Prathers is paraphrased by the question, “why do I feel that doing nothing is wasting time.” Of course, it is not wasting time; it is practicing self-care and is necessary especially during periods of prolonged engagement.

The tip of “caregiver” iceberg is what comes to mind when I think of First Liners. They are the most visible part of the response “chain;” and there are other people on the “team” ready to recharge, refresh and to provide various types of support when needed. First Liners who are experiencing emotional reactions have likely had a shift in their perception of the essential nature of what they are doing in the “trenches. The uncertainty and lack of a clear definition of the problem makes their task hard to define. Today's stressors create situations that do not fall under the typical job duties; rather the demands are best placed under that last paragraph, “other duties as assigned.”

The therapeutic task becomes to help redefine and / or reshape their perception of what they are doing. Self-care, including physical, emotional, mental and spiritual care, is very necessary during this time of prolonged engagement as a front liner. Practicing CBT to refresh, and replenish one's physical, emotional, mental and spiritual systems is effective. Supportive talk therapy establishes rapport and is essential to identify and treat possible antecedents.