



Smith, E., Dean, G. and Holmes, L., 2021 '[Supporting the mental health and well-being of first responders from career to retirement: a scoping review](#)', *Prehospital and Disaster medicine*, vol. 36, no. 4, pp. 475-480

The first two pages of [this paper](#) reviews evidence about mental health risk and prevalence among first responders.

The two pages after that covers what interventions work. This summary is focused on the latter: the state of evidence regarding current best practices for supporting first responder well-being throughout the first responder career and into retirement.

Methodology

A scoping literature review was undertaken using the PubMed database (1966 to 1 October 2020). Of the 172 publications that were retrieved by the combined search strategies, 56 met the inclusion criteria and informed the results of this scoping review.

High level findings

“Overall, the evidence encourages a holistic and integrated approach to supporting the mental health and well-being of first responders and offers an evidence-based framework to guide both preventative measures as well as supportive interventions for first responders.”

Other findings:

Lack of Knowledge: First up, the article notes that evidence about what works, and how best to teach prevention skills to first responders, remains under-developed relative to our extensive knowledge on what risk factors predict the onset of mental illness. This is partly due to limited objective evaluations conducted and published on the effectiveness of initiatives.

Psychological services have limited value as an early intervention strategy: Research highlights clinical therapies do not provide the tools or strategies for people to make lifestyle changes associated with good mental health and wellbeing outcomes. They are useful for short-term treatment.

Resilience-building holds promise: Although limited in scope and depth, research on building resilience and positive mental health with first responders has shown some promising results. Evidence suggests that training in resilience building can significantly benefit first responder organisations by improving judgment and decision making and decreasing the frequency of on-the-job accidents.

Retreat-based formats work: Wellbeing retreats provide targeted and holistic care in a dedicated facility. They work because they approach mental health holistically and proactively. They are holistic because they offer a range of interlocking mental health promoting activities for emergency services workers that utilise a holistic, mind-body approach. These activities include clinical therapies, mindfulness-based activities, physical exercise, and other complimentary health classes



and sessions. They are proactive because they ‘reach in’ and prompt emergency service workers and volunteers to take the time to focus on their mental health. They also equip people with information and the skills to better look after, or manage, their own mental health into the future.

A trusted person in the organization: Supportive workplaces routinely make opportunities for staff to have conversations with a range of support providers, preferably encouraging a holistic approach to well-being. These relationships are most useful when they become a trusted and normal part of debriefing on a routine basis, as well as when staff are in crisis.

Self-care: “Yoga for First Responders” and “Blind Tiger Yoga” for example, have taught first responders how to stay calm under pressure and stress, and equips them with the tools need to manage being exposed to personal triggers and for self-regulation of emotion.

Retirement stress can be eased by:

- *Retirement preparation programmes:* should be offered even several years before they reach retirement age. They should be tailored to address the unique mental health and well-being challenges for first responders forced into early retirement, possibly due to ill health, and the needs of responders once they do retire.
- *Employment preparation programs:* to train responders and build transferable skills to aid them in finding other careers (if they want) after they retire.
- *Counselling programs* for themselves and their family members following retirement.
- *A transitional phase of ‘pre-retirement’* has helped paramedics in Ireland adjust from working full-time to retiring. This type of approach allows responders to slowly reduce their hours over time, making the transition to retirement a smooth one.
- *Ceremonies that recognise retirement:* Provide options for formal retirement ceremonies that recognises service and mark the beginning of retirement.
- *Social organisations for retired first responders:* Form organisational groups specific to a career as a first responder can reduce feelings of isolation that is often felt after retirement and provide ongoing support and connection. These groups could offer voluntary welfare programs, social meetings, and gatherings to retired responders.

Conclusion

This review emphasises the need to utilize a positive approach to supporting mental health by:

- encouraging emergency service organisations to actively promote well-being as a part of “core business
- highlighting the need to encourage first responders to both “reach out” when in crisis as well as recognizing the need for organisations to “reach in” to responders

These points emphasise the need to see wellbeing as a shared responsibility of both the individual responder and the emergency service organisations.