



[“Peer support facilitates post-traumatic growth in first responders: A literature review”](#), *Trauma*, 2022, Vol. 24, No 4, pp. 277– 285. Nicole Donovan (University of Seattle, Canada)

## INTRODUCTION

Peer-led programs are widely available to offer support to first responders following a critical incident. This article looked at stand-alone peer support programs over others (author cites the Critical Incident Stress Management Program (CISM) as an example of another type).

Little research has been done to determine the benefits or limitations of stand-alone peer support programs on the mental health of first responders.

*This study aimed to understand what characteristics of peer support (both formal and informal interactions) facilitates post-traumatic growth (post-traumatic growth) in first responders.*

## Definition of post-traumatic growth

It is a process that involves the experiencing of a traumatic event, enduring a psychological struggle and then experiencing growth because of the challenge to their belief system.

Post-traumatic growth can be viewed as a “coping process of positive reinterpretation, positive reframing, interpretive control, or reconstruing of events”.

## Methodology

*Step one* - A literature search including literature published since 2006 that references post-traumatic growth in first responders, and/or their preferences for support, their coping styles, and organizational impacts on growth.

*Step two* - Thematic analysis of the final 10 research papers.

## Limitations of study

- Limited research to review (which reveals a gap in the research)
- Papers reviewed do not always distinguish between talking to trained peer support versus talking to colleagues.
- Varied demographics - the type of first responder, age, gender and marital status of the samples varied considerably between studies.
- Used nonprobability sampling - this can result in a lack of generalizability to a larger population. Non-probability sampling is the non-random selection of participants based on convenience or specific criteria to collect data.

## Findings

Five themes that emerged, all link to post-traumatic growth.

### 1. *Peer support assists first responders with the processing of traumatic events*

Studies suggested that the reasons why critical incident stress debriefings were found to mitigate PTSD symptoms and support post-traumatic growth in first responders are because debriefings:

- “Provide the individual with an opportunity to re-construct their life narrative, in a manner that allows the integration of the traumatic experience”.



- Provide an opportunity to discuss the difficult characteristics of a critical incident, which lessens the potential shame and self-criticism that first responders might experience following these events.
- Contain an element of camaraderie, which provides the benefits of encouraging positive relationships, feelings of belonging, access to resources and ‘advice that can help individuals process the trauma and facilitate adaptive coping’.

### **2. Peers provide support with managing organisational stressors**

Organisational stressors, which include a lack of (or perceived lack of) agency support increase stress symptoms in first responders. On the other hand, social support has a strong positive effect on levels of occupational stress.

When it comes to supporting first responders with organisational stress symptoms, peers are less important than support from supervisors. A study found that supervisors who listened and offered tangible help, social integration support, provided opportunities for more responsibility at work and the reassurance of skills were more effective than support from peers.

### **3. Social support increases the use of coping strategies**

According to one study, peers provide advice that can help “individuals process the trauma and facilitate adaptive coping”.

Another study found that recommendations from peers may assist firefighters in “taking action to resolve feelings of distress, manage emotions, clarify values and life priorities.

Using adaptive coping behaviours increases self-efficacy which is a “belief in one’s capacity to handle situations and accomplish tasks”.

Social support provision may increase personal coping strategies, but this relationship is linked to other variables such as interaction with personality traits. For example, one study found that firefighters who exhibit extroversion and optimism are more inclined to use adaptive coping strategies while avoidant behaviours reduce support seeking and may lead to increased PTSD.

### **4. Active engagement with peers encourages growth**

Receiving and seeking social support both contribute to post-traumatic growth in first responders. This is likely an interaction between these two functions.

Active engagement leads to a sense of self-efficacy, and all the other benefits of social support.

Giving social support – in the sense of listening to the distress of others throughout the workday – was found to negatively predict post-traumatic growth in first responders.<sup>1</sup>

### **5. Relational safety encourages disclosure**

Feeling safe among peers is a necessary component for developing social relationships that lead to post-traumatic growth and disclosing about distressing events experiences at work.

Studies in this review found that first responders showed a preference for:

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<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare-finch J, Rees A and Armstrong D. 2015, “Social support, self-efficacy, trauma, and well-being in emergency medical dispatchers”, *Social Indicators Research*, Vol 123, no 2, pp. 549–565.



- Informal over formal social support, even though formal interventions such as debriefings were found to contribute to post-traumatic growth in first responders.
- Social support from family members over peers, even though support from peers is more beneficial for operational stressors and mental health issues.
- Close relationships characterised by selfless listening, indirect banter, acceptance, trust and humour.
- Humour, which may be used in both formal and informal interactions was especially important and significantly predicts post-traumatic growth in first responders because:
  - It provides an opportunity to re-appraise potentially traumatic events in a way that is non-threatening
  - It “diverts attention away from negative emotional processing and can evoke positive emotions’

### **Conclusion**

This systematic review revealed that peer support can promote post-traumatic growth in first responders by encouraging discussion, modelling positive coping behaviours, and encouraging first responders to receive and seek support. Peers provide a buffer to ongoing stressors, encourage self-efficacy, and providing first responders with alternative perspectives or advice. Formal debriefings encourage the processing of traumatic workplace events. The willingness of first responders to engage with peer support (based on their personality traits) is also related to post-traumatic growth.

This review indicated the significant value in using peer support to assist first responders with the processing of difficult events. It also highlighted the limits of the type of support that peer support can provide to first responders. Of significance is the finding that social support alone may not lead to PTG in first responders but requires the mediation of self-coping variables and organizational support. Further research needs to be done to differentiate between the effects of trained peer support and support from colleagues.