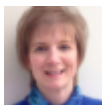


**INTERVIEW:**

# Preventing compassion fatigue is crucial to emergency service workers' mental health



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OPEN



**Victoria Police Detective Sergeant Peter Romanis believes that ‘compassion fatigue’ – a combination of accumulated secondary traumatic stress and burnout – poses the most significant threat to the mental health of emergency services workers, and hope a new report detailing the findings of his research into the issue will prove beneficial to officers and staff, as he explained to Policing Insight’s Sarah Gibbons.**

While emergency service workers might be considered superheroes, it is important they are not considered superhuman, according to an officer at the forefront of tackling compassion fatigue which is believed to be rife in the sector.

Years of responding to traumatic scenes took its toll on Detective Sergeant Peter Romanis, from Victoria Police in Australia; he developed compassion fatigue and is now leading calls for an investigation into uncovering accurate numbers of fellow sufferers both in his own force, and in the wider emergency services family.

A series of workshops and practical resources should be made available in a bid to help keep “even one colleague at work” making a difference to communities, rather than seeing them off sick and struggling potentially with a long-term mental health injury.

DS Romanis told Policing Insight: “I’m a believer in getting an understanding around compassion fatigue in our organisation and wider emergency services. It’s about keeping people in their jobs as well as helping them when they get ill.

“We need to invest in retaining our staff and keeping them in their jobs longer without feeling the job is going to harm them. We can’t remove harm from emergency services work. but there are ways we can reduce that harm.

“Events we investigate will impact us and there’s a difference between impacting you and harming you. We want people to continue the great work the emergency services do, and keep them in their job longer, because we know the valuable contribution they make to society and their communities.

“It’s really sad when you go home on Friday and go back on the Monday to find someone not there because of a mental health injury.”

### **Secondary traumatic stress and burnout**

DS Romanis explained that he was identified as suffering from compassion fatigue at a point when “I wasn’t sick, I wasn’t ill, I just wasn’t feeling myself”.

“I was having trouble sleeping and becoming more cynical about the justice system, policing, the public, and I knew that wasn’t me, the person I wanted to be or who I believe I am.”

Compassion fatigue, he said, is a combination of an accumulation of secondary traumatic stress and burnout. He believes the nature of emergency services work coupled with everyday organisational stresses – such as the challenges posed by under resourcing, and difficult management issues – make staff more susceptible than most to the pressures of compassion fatigue.

Currently working in Victoria Police’s Major Collision Investigation Unit, DS Romanis is used to dealing with fatal and life-threatening collisions; in the past he has worked with a wide variety of rape and other serious sexual assault victims, many of whom were children.

“We see some really horrible things, but the most challenging part of my role is working with families and witnesses who saw those events and we have to record what they saw.

“Dealing with family grief and the indirect trauma we deal with, such as the court process and coronial process, means it can be a two to three-year relationship with families.

“Compound that with repeat collisions we deal with, repeatedly interviewing children about abuse and taking statements from rape victims.

“We are trained about taking statements and working with people reporting these things, but we’re not often equipped with what we do with the information.

“You get compassion fatigue with a chronic accumulation of such secondary stress. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is absolutely there, it’s the end result, but it’s secondary traumatic stress that counts for more people.

“I would imagine people’s journeys to PTSD are an accumulation of secondary traumatic stress rather than primary. Everyone has heard of PTSD or depression and anxiety but not compassion fatigue.”

### **‘Lightbulb moment’**

DS Romanis is hopeful that research he has carried out, and continues to champion, will “fill some gaps in our mental health literacy” around the condition. To fund the work he received a scholarship from the [Emergency Services Foundation](#), a body made up of 15 different emergency services organisations in Victoria wanting to seek proactive mental health interventions to improve the life of emergency services personnel.

He travelled to the US to meet with experts in the field of traumatology and the effects of trauma on the human body in his quest to find out why he has been feeling as he had and to understand the impact compassion fatigue has on police officers and staff plus potential solutions that could be implemented.

He said it was “a real lightbulb moment” learning how trauma interacts with the automatic nervous system, how the body regulates in relation to a threat response, and understanding stress self-regulation techniques.

Having written [a report on his findings](#), Det Sgt Romanis is now building on the research to look at the extent of the issue in Victoria Police. On 31 January this year, Victoria Police had 753 employees off on WorkCover; of that total, 622 were for mental injury and 131 physical injury.

He said: “Let’s get an understanding in Victoria Police about what the extent of the problem is, and what it looks like in our people. Let’s get a foundation to address the problem and see if we can look to solutions after that.

“We don’t put cases before the court before they are fully investigated, and we haven’t got all the evidence yet on the prevalence in our force before we start looking at solutions.”

When it comes to putting solutions in place, he said “it’s important for police officers and staff to hear from someone with lived experience of it”.

### **Prevention rather than treatment**

DS Romanis is keen to follow the Forward-Facing training principle which “aims to help at-risk workers identify symptoms of compassion fatigue, recognise compassion fatigue triggers, identify and utilize existing available resources, review personal and professional history to the present day to identify those at increased risk, master arousal reduction methods, resolve any

impediments to efficacy, initiate conflict resolution, and initiate a supportive aftercare plan – in collaboration with their employer or supervisor”.

He said crucially the approach stands out for its focus on preventing compassion fatigue symptoms rather than solely addressing them: “I believe it will work, and there’s a space for it,” DS Romanis told Policing Insight.

“I want to bypass the stigma of reaching out to mental health professionals. I’m very keen on making it evidence based so people can’t think ‘this is just under course’ with the cynical view of the police.

“Forward-Facing is designed to educate around how trauma interacts with the body and practical ways to self-regulate learning skills to identify where tension is in the body and ways of releasing that, because you can’t be stressed in a relaxed body.

“This creates a safe environment for people to learn about themselves and offers a reflection on how you felt when you took that statement; the next time you are aware of how you are feeling, and can self-regulate in the moment.

“I’m not naive enough to think this work will solve all the problems emergency services personnel face, but if it means learning about it and educating people and someone extends their career by five years then it’s a good thing.”

The five key recommendations from DS Peter Romanis’ research are:

- provide comprehensive training which educates leaders and frontline workers about compassion fatigue
- prioritise the prevention of symptoms for traumatic stress and compassion fatigue
- conduct research as to the prevalence and implications of compassion fatigue for emergency service workers
- seek professional advice from compassion fatigue experts
- encourage employees and volunteers to cultivate self-awareness practices.

*Picture © Emergency Services Foundation / ABC News / YouTube*

This article can be found here:

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