



Psychological Challenges Faced by Paramedics in Emergency Cases

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Abstract

Paramedics play a crucial role in emergency medical services (EMS), often working in high-stress environments where they encounter life-threatening situations, traumatic injuries, and emotionally challenging cases. The unpredictable nature of their job, coupled with frequent exposure to death, suffering, and violence, can lead to significant psychological distress. Common mental health issues faced by paramedics include Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, emotional burnout, compassion fatigue, and sleep disorders. Despite these challenges, many paramedics hesitate to seek help due to stigma and fear of being perceived as weak. This article explores the psychological challenges faced by paramedics, their impact on mental well-being, and strategies for coping with these stressors. By increasing awareness and providing adequate mental health support, the healthcare system can ensure that paramedics maintain both their professional efficiency and personal well-being.

Keywords: Paramedics, Emergency Medical Services (EMS), PTSD, Stress, Burnout, Anxiety, Depression, Compassion Fatigue, Mental Health, Psychological Well-being

Introduction

Paramedics are frontline healthcare providers who deliver emergency medical care in life-threatening situations. Whether responding to accidents, heart attacks, violent incidents, or natural disasters, they must make split-second decisions that can mean the difference between life and death. While the focus is often on the physical demands of their job, the psychological toll is equally significant and often overlooked.



The nature of emergency medical services exposes paramedics to repeated traumatic events, unpredictable work conditions, and high-pressure decision-making. These stressors can lead to severe psychological challenges, including PTSD, anxiety, depression, emotional burnout, and even suicidal tendencies. Studies show that paramedics have higher rates of mental health issues compared to other healthcare professionals due to the intensity and unpredictability of their work.

Despite these challenges, paramedics often face barriers to seeking psychological help, such as stigma, fear of job repercussions, and lack of mental health resources. This article aims to explore the various psychological challenges faced by paramedics in emergency situations, the impact on their mental well-being, and potential strategies for coping with stress and trauma. By understanding these challenges, healthcare organizations and policymakers can implement effective mental health support systems to ensure the well-being of these vital frontline workers.

Common Psychological Challenges Faced by Paramedics

Paramedics play a critical role in emergency medical services (EMS), often working in high-stress environments where they encounter traumatic injuries, life-threatening conditions, and emotionally distressing situations. The unpredictable and intense nature of their job makes them highly susceptible to psychological challenges. Below are some of the most common psychological issues that paramedics face in the field.

1. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

One of the most significant mental health concerns among paramedics is **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**. Paramedics frequently witness human suffering, gruesome accidents, and death, which can have a lasting impact on their mental health. The repeated exposure to traumatic events can lead to PTSD, characterized by:

Symptoms of PTSD in Paramedics:

- **Flashbacks** – Reliving traumatic incidents in their mind.
- **Nightmares and Sleep Disturbances** – Difficulty sleeping due to distressing dreams.
- **Hypervigilance** – Being overly alert and sensitive to triggers.
- **Avoidance Behavior** – Avoiding places, people, or situations that remind them of traumatic events.
- **Emotional Numbness** – Difficulty experiencing emotions or feeling detached from loved ones.



Causes of PTSD in Paramedics:

- Witnessing multiple fatalities in road accidents.
- Handling critical cases involving children or family members.
- Responding to violent crimes and mass casualty incidents.
- Experiencing a patient's death despite their best efforts.

If left untreated, PTSD can lead to long-term emotional distress, affecting both work performance and personal life.

2. High Levels of Stress and Anxiety

Paramedics often work under extreme time pressure, where every second can mean the difference between life and death. The constant demand for quick decision-making and exposure to critical emergencies can result in **chronic stress and anxiety**.

Common Stressors for Paramedics:

- **High-Stakes Decision Making** – Paramedics must make immediate life-saving decisions without hesitation.
- **Fear of Errors** – A wrong decision can cost a life, leading to self-doubt and excessive worry.
- **Hostile Environments** – Treating patients in crime scenes, natural disasters, or chaotic public settings can heighten stress levels.
- **Workload and Shift Stress** – Long hours, irregular schedules, and lack of rest increase stress and fatigue.

Symptoms of Anxiety in Paramedics:

- Racing thoughts and restlessness.
- Shortness of breath and rapid heartbeat.
- Difficulty focusing or making decisions.
- Irritability and mood swings.

Chronic anxiety can interfere with a paramedic's ability to function effectively and may lead to long-term mental health issues if not managed properly.

3. Emotional Burnout and Compassion Fatigue

Burnout is a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged exposure to stress. **Compassion fatigue**, on the other hand, occurs when paramedics become emotionally drained due to constant exposure to human suffering.



Signs of Burnout in Paramedics:

- **Physical exhaustion** – Feeling tired even after a full night's rest.
- **Reduced empathy** – Losing emotional connection with patients.
- **Increased cynicism** – Feeling detached or indifferent towards work.
- **Decreased job satisfaction** – Losing interest in emergency response work.

Causes of Burnout and Compassion Fatigue:

- Attending multiple traumatic incidents in a short time.
- Emotional exhaustion from dealing with grieving families.
- Repeated exposure to suffering without emotional support.
- Constantly working overtime due to staff shortages.

If left unaddressed, burnout can result in **decreased performance, increased absenteeism, and even suicidal thoughts.**

4. Depression and Feelings of Guilt

Paramedics often develop **feelings of guilt and self-blame** when they are unable to save a patient, even when they have done everything within their power. This can lead to **depression**, a mental health condition characterized by:

Symptoms of Depression in Paramedics:

- Persistent sadness and hopelessness.
- Loss of interest in work and social life.
- Low self-esteem and excessive guilt.
- Difficulty sleeping or excessive sleep.
- Suicidal thoughts in severe cases.

Factors Leading to Depression in Paramedics:

- **Survivor's Guilt** – Feeling responsible for a patient's death.
- **Repeated Exposure to Tragedy** – Constantly witnessing loss of life.
- **Personal Trauma Triggers** – Cases that remind paramedics of personal losses.

Depression can negatively impact a paramedic's ability to perform their duties and enjoy a fulfilling personal life.



5. Workplace Trauma and Exposure to Violence

Paramedics frequently work in **unpredictable and potentially dangerous** environments. They may respond to medical emergencies in areas where violence, crime, or drug abuse is prevalent.

Common Risks of Workplace Trauma:

- **Physical Assaults** – Dealing with intoxicated, aggressive, or mentally unstable patients.
- **Verbal Abuse** – Facing hostility from patients or their families.
- **Exposure to Crime Scenes** – Witnessing shootings, stabbings, or violent altercations.
- **Handling Disturbing Cases** – Child abuse, suicides, or extreme physical trauma.

Repeated exposure to violence can lead to **chronic anxiety, PTSD, and emotional desensitization**.

6. Sleep Disorders and Fatigue

Paramedics often work **long and unpredictable shifts**, including nights, weekends, and holidays. This irregular schedule disrupts normal sleep patterns, leading to **chronic sleep deprivation**.

Effects of Sleep Deprivation on Mental Health:

- **Impaired Decision-Making** – Increases the risk of medical errors.
- **Irritability and Mood Swings** – Increases frustration and emotional instability.
- **Weakened Immune System** – More prone to illness, increasing absenteeism.
- **Higher Risk of Anxiety and Depression** – Sleep deprivation worsens mental health conditions.

Lack of sleep and physical exhaustion significantly affect a paramedic's ability to respond effectively to emergencies.

7. Stigma and Barriers to Seeking Mental Health Support

Despite facing severe psychological challenges, many paramedics **do not seek mental health support** due to stigma and workplace culture.

Barriers to Seeking Help:

- **Fear of Being Judged** – Concern about appearing weak in a high-pressure profession.
- **Job Security Concerns** – Fear of being deemed unfit for duty.
- **Lack of Mental Health Resources** – Limited access to counseling or support programs.



- **Workplace Culture** – Many paramedics believe they should "tough it out" and suppress emotions.

This reluctance to seek help **increases the risk of long-term psychological distress**, making it essential to promote mental health awareness in EMS professions.

Conclusion

The psychological challenges faced by paramedics are significant and can have serious consequences on their mental health, job performance, and personal lives. PTSD, anxiety, depression, burnout, workplace trauma, and sleep disorders are all common among paramedics due to the high-stress nature of their work. Despite these challenges, many paramedics hesitate to seek help due to stigma and fear of professional repercussions.

Addressing these psychological challenges requires **strong mental health support systems**, including professional counseling, peer support programs, stress management training, and workplace policies that promote well-being. Recognizing and addressing these mental health concerns is essential to ensure that paramedics can continue to provide life-saving care while maintaining their own mental and emotional health.

Barriers to Seeking Psychological Support

Despite the severe psychological challenges faced by paramedics, many do not seek professional help or mental health support. Several factors contribute to this reluctance, including stigma, workplace culture, fear of professional consequences, and lack of access to appropriate resources. These barriers prevent paramedics from receiving the care they need, increasing the risk of long-term mental health issues such as PTSD, depression, anxiety, and burnout. Below are the key barriers to seeking psychological support among paramedics.

1. Stigma and Fear of Judgment

One of the most significant barriers preventing paramedics from seeking mental health support is the **stigma associated with mental illness**. Many paramedics believe that admitting to psychological distress will make them appear weak or incapable of handling their job.

Reasons for Stigma in EMS Professions:

- **Perception of Strength and Resilience** – Paramedics are expected to be tough and emotionally strong, which discourages them from expressing vulnerabilities.
- **Fear of Being Labeled as "Unfit"** – Concern that seeking mental health support will make colleagues or supervisors doubt their ability to perform in emergencies.
- **Cultural Norms in EMS** – The emergency medical services (EMS) field has a culture of "suck it up" or "push through" instead of addressing mental health concerns.



- **Embarrassment and Social Pressure** – Paramedics may fear being judged by peers for seeking therapy or counseling.

As a result, many paramedics **suppress their emotions**, leading to increased psychological distress and long-term mental health consequences.

2. Fear of Career Consequences

Many paramedics avoid seeking psychological support because they **worry about potential negative effects on their career**.

Concerns About Job Security:

- **Fear of Being Declared Unfit for Duty** – Mental health concerns could lead to medical leave, temporary suspension, or reassignment to non-clinical roles.
- **Risk of Losing Employment** – Some paramedics believe that disclosing psychological struggles could lead to job termination.
- **Concerns About License and Certifications** – In some regions, mental health conditions must be reported to licensing boards, potentially affecting certification renewal.

These fears discourage paramedics from seeking necessary mental health treatment, **worsening their condition over time**.

3. Lack of Awareness and Education on Mental Health

Many paramedics do not seek psychological support simply because they **lack awareness about mental health issues** and the available resources.

Reasons for Low Mental Health Awareness:

- **Insufficient Training on Mental Health in EMS** – Paramedics receive extensive training on treating physical injuries but little education on coping with emotional trauma.
- **Failure to Recognize Symptoms** – Many paramedics do not realize that symptoms such as nightmares, anxiety, or irritability are signs of PTSD or depression.
- **Lack of Emphasis on Self-Care** – Many EMS organizations focus on patient care but neglect paramedic well-being.

Without proper education on mental health, paramedics may **ignore warning signs** and continue working despite severe psychological distress.

4. Workplace Culture and Peer Pressure

The **work environment in emergency medical services (EMS)** plays a crucial role in shaping paramedics' attitudes toward mental health support. Unfortunately, many workplaces **discourage open discussions about emotional struggles**.



Factors Contributing to Negative Workplace Culture:

- **Expectation to Remain Emotionally Detached** – Many paramedics are told to separate personal emotions from professional duties.
- **Lack of Mental Health Conversations** – Mental health is rarely discussed in training programs or team meetings.
- **Pressure from Colleagues** – Paramedics may feel discouraged from seeking help if their peers dismiss mental health concerns.

A toxic workplace culture makes it difficult for paramedics to reach out for support, leaving them **isolated and vulnerable to severe mental health conditions**.

5. Limited Access to Mental Health Services

Even when paramedics recognize their need for support, **they may not have access to mental health services** due to various barriers.

Challenges in Accessing Mental Health Services:

- **Financial Constraints** – Many paramedics cannot afford private therapy sessions.
- **Insurance Limitations** – Some healthcare plans do not cover mental health treatments or have restrictions on the number of therapy sessions allowed.
- **Shortage of Mental Health Professionals** – Some regions lack trained therapists specializing in first responder trauma.
- **Scheduling Difficulties** – Irregular shifts and long working hours make it difficult for paramedics to attend therapy appointments.

Without proper access to mental health care, paramedics may **continue to struggle in silence**, leading to **burnout, PTSD, and even suicidal thoughts**.

6. Fear of Losing the Ability to Help Others

Many paramedics **prioritize their patients' needs over their own mental health**. They may feel guilty about taking time off for self-care or seeking psychological support.

Why Paramedics Avoid Help to Continue Working:

- **Sense of Duty** – Many paramedics feel obligated to serve their community, even at the cost of their mental health.
- **Guilt for Taking Time Off** – Some paramedics believe that taking leave for mental health reasons will burden their colleagues.



- **Desire to Maintain Professionalism** – Paramedics may not want to appear vulnerable in front of patients or coworkers.

This mindset can prevent paramedics from acknowledging their struggles, leading to **severe emotional exhaustion and decreased job performance**.

7. Fear of Being Prescribed Medication

Some paramedics worry that seeking psychological support will result in **being prescribed medication**, which may affect their ability to work.

Concerns About Medication:

- **Fear of Dependence** – Worry about becoming reliant on antidepressants or anti-anxiety medications.
- **Side Effects** – Concerns about drowsiness or other effects that could impact job performance.
- **Restrictions on Duty** – Some medications may have workplace restrictions, preventing paramedics from performing fieldwork.

Due to these concerns, some paramedics **avoid seeking therapy altogether**, even when they need professional help.

8. Self-Medication and Maladaptive Coping Mechanisms

Instead of seeking professional help, some paramedics **turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms** such as alcohol, drugs, or risky behaviors.

Common Maladaptive Coping Mechanisms:

- **Substance Abuse** – Using alcohol or drugs to "numb" emotional pain.
- **Risk-Taking Behaviors** – Engaging in reckless activities as a form of emotional escape.
- **Social Withdrawal** – Isolating from friends and family to avoid discussing mental health struggles.

These behaviors **worsen mental health conditions over time** and can lead to serious consequences such as addiction, deteriorating relationships, or even self-harm.

9. Resistance to Therapy or Counseling

Even when mental health support is available, some paramedics **resist the idea of therapy or counseling**.



Reasons for Resistance to Therapy:

- **Skepticism About Effectiveness** – Some paramedics believe that therapy will not help their unique struggles.
- **Discomfort Discussing Emotions** – Many paramedics are not used to talking about their feelings.
- **Belief That They Can Handle It Alone** – Some paramedics believe that they should be able to manage stress without external help.

This resistance to therapy **prevents early intervention**, leading to **worsening mental health conditions** over time.

Conclusion

Despite the high levels of psychological distress faced by paramedics, **many do not seek professional help due to stigma, fear of job repercussions, workplace culture, and lack of mental health resources**. Addressing these barriers is essential to ensure paramedics receive the support they need.

Ways to Improve Access to Psychological Support:

Reducing Stigma – Promoting open conversations about mental health in EMS.
Improving Workplace Policies – Implementing mental health programs and peer support initiatives.

Providing Confidential Counseling Services – Ensuring paramedics can access therapy without fear of professional consequences.

Increasing Mental Health Education – Training paramedics to recognize early symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, and depression.

By addressing these barriers, **EMS organizations can create a healthier work environment** that prioritizes both patient care and paramedic well-being.

Coping Strategies and Mental Health Support for Paramedics

Paramedics are often exposed to high-stress environments, life-and-death situations, and traumatic incidents. The demanding nature of their work makes them susceptible to mental health issues such as **post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, emotional burnout, and compassion fatigue**. To ensure their well-being and job effectiveness, paramedics must adopt **coping strategies** and seek **mental health support** when needed.

This article explores **effective coping mechanisms** and **mental health support systems** designed to help paramedics manage stress, process trauma, and maintain their overall well-being.



1. Coping Strategies for Paramedics

Coping strategies can help paramedics **manage stress, prevent burnout, and improve resilience** in their profession. These strategies can be categorized into **personal coping techniques, workplace support, and lifestyle changes.**

A. Personal Coping Techniques

1. Practicing Emotional Awareness

- Recognizing and acknowledging emotions instead of suppressing them.
- Understanding emotional triggers and how they affect mental health.

2. Talking About Experiences

- Sharing feelings with trusted colleagues, friends, or family members.
- Using peer support groups to discuss difficult calls and seek reassurance.

3. Mindfulness and Relaxation Techniques

- Deep breathing exercises to calm the nervous system.
- Meditation and mindfulness to stay present and manage anxiety.
- Progressive muscle relaxation to relieve physical tension.

4. Developing Healthy Coping Mechanisms

- Engaging in hobbies and activities that promote relaxation and joy.
- Journaling about experiences to process emotions.
- Listening to music or engaging in creative outlets like painting or writing.

5. Setting Emotional Boundaries

- Learning to detach emotionally from distressing cases without losing empathy.
- Avoiding over-identification with patients and their suffering.

B. Workplace Support and Professional Coping Strategies

1. Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD)

- Conducted after a traumatic event to help paramedics process their emotions.
- Allows paramedics to talk about their experiences in a structured way.

2. Peer Support Programs

- Connecting with fellow paramedics who understand the unique challenges of the job.



- Providing emotional support, advice, and shared coping techniques.
- 3. **Mental Health Training and Workshops**
 - Educating paramedics on recognizing early signs of mental distress.
 - Providing resilience training to handle emotional trauma effectively.
- 4. **Access to Counseling Services**
 - Encouraging the use of Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) that offer free therapy.
 - Normalizing psychological counseling as part of routine wellness.
- 5. **Improving Communication with Supervisors**
 - Encouraging an open-door policy where paramedics can discuss stressors.
 - Providing a non-judgmental environment where mental health concerns can be addressed.

C. Lifestyle and Self-Care Strategies

- 1. **Prioritizing Physical Health**
 - Regular exercise to reduce stress and boost mood (e.g., running, yoga, strength training).
 - Maintaining a balanced diet to support energy levels and overall well-being.
 - Ensuring adequate hydration to avoid fatigue and mental fog.
- 2. **Establishing Healthy Sleep Patterns**
 - Creating a consistent sleep routine despite shift work.
 - Using blackout curtains and white noise machines for quality rest.
 - Avoiding caffeine and screen time before bedtime.
- 3. **Avoiding Substance Abuse**
 - Reducing reliance on alcohol, drugs, or excessive caffeine to manage stress.
 - Seeking healthy alternatives like herbal teas or relaxation techniques.
- 4. **Taking Regular Breaks and Vacations**
 - Using time off to disconnect and recharge.
 - Engaging in leisure activities and spending time with loved ones.



5. Practicing Work-Life Balance

- Avoiding excessive overtime and ensuring time for personal life.
- Setting boundaries to prevent work from consuming personal time.

2. Mental Health Support for Paramedics

Mental health support is essential for paramedics to cope with the psychological demands of their profession. Organizations and healthcare systems must implement strategies to **improve mental health access, reduce stigma, and promote well-being.**

A. Organizational Mental Health Programs

1. Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)

- Provides confidential access to counseling and therapy services.
- Helps paramedics cope with work-related stress, trauma, and personal challenges.

2. Peer Support Networks

- A structured system where paramedics can talk to trained peers.
- Reduces isolation by providing emotional support from those with similar experiences.

3. Trauma-Informed Training for Leaders

- Educating EMS leaders to recognize mental health struggles in their teams.
- Promoting supportive leadership that encourages well-being.

4. Anonymous Mental Health Resources

- Offering mobile apps or hotlines where paramedics can seek help anonymously.
- Reducing fear of professional consequences by ensuring confidentiality.

5. Providing On-Site Mental Health Professionals

- Embedding psychologists or counselors in EMS departments for easy access.
- Conducting routine mental health check-ins.

B. Community and External Mental Health Support

1. Counseling and Therapy Services

- Regular therapy sessions to address PTSD, depression, and anxiety.
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to reframe negative thought patterns.



2. Crisis Intervention and Helplines

- 24/7 mental health helplines for paramedics experiencing distress.
- Immediate crisis support for suicidal thoughts or severe emotional distress.

3. Support Groups for First Responders

- Connecting with other emergency personnel who face similar challenges.
- Sharing coping techniques and experiences in a safe environment.

4. Family Support and Education

- Educating families on how to support paramedics dealing with stress.
- Encouraging open conversations at home to improve emotional well-being.

C. Policy and Advocacy for Mental Health

1. Reducing Stigma Around Mental Health in EMS

- Encouraging open discussions about psychological struggles.
- Promoting a culture that prioritizes mental well-being.

2. Legislative Support for Paramedic Mental Health

- Advocating for laws that provide better mental health coverage.
- Ensuring disability benefits for paramedics affected by PTSD.

3. Mandatory Mental Health Screenings

- Routine psychological evaluations to detect early signs of distress.
- Encouraging proactive mental health care instead of crisis management.

4. Funding for Mental Health Resources

- Government and EMS agencies investing in mental health programs.
- Providing financial assistance for therapy and wellness initiatives.

Conclusion

Paramedics face immense psychological pressure due to their high-stress, trauma-exposed work environment. Without effective coping strategies and proper mental health support, they are at significant risk of **burnout, PTSD, depression, and anxiety**. Implementing a combination of **personal resilience techniques, workplace mental health programs, and systemic policy changes** is essential to safeguard paramedics' well-being.



Organizations must work towards **reducing stigma, providing accessible counseling services, and fostering peer support networks** to ensure paramedics feel comfortable seeking help. Additionally, **government policies and funding** should support mental health programs tailored specifically for first responders. By addressing these challenges proactively, the EMS community can **enhance mental health awareness, improve paramedic resilience, and ultimately lead to better patient care and job satisfaction.**

Key Recommendations:

Encourage mental health awareness and training in EMS education. Provide easy access to counseling, therapy, and peer support groups. Foster a workplace culture that prioritizes psychological well-being. Implement mandatory mental health screenings for paramedics. Advocate for policies ensuring financial and legislative support for paramedic mental health.

By integrating these strategies, paramedics can receive the support they deserve, allowing them to **continue their lifesaving work while maintaining their mental health and overall well-being.**

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