

RESILIENT MINDS:

Giving First Responders a toolbox for managing stress and trauma

Firefighters in Vancouver Fire and Rescue Services, one of the busiest fire services in North America, are exposed to a very high number of traumatic, critical incidents when responding to calls — many were struggling with PTSD and other stresses and mental health issues. Critical incident stress management interventions were available as a response to “bad calls,” but there was nothing in place to proactively provide tools to bolster mental health; the culture didn’t encourage an “it’s okay not to be okay” attitude or openly talk about the particular challenges faced by First Responders at work and in their personal lives.

In 2015, a report was released by the International Association of Fire Fighters and Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs showing that firefighters had a 30% higher risk of suicide and experienced mental health problems 50% more than the general population. When the B.C. Professional Firefighters’ Association looked closer at their crews, they saw a gap — only 24% of professional firefighters in the province had taken part in resiliency training.

Steve Fraser, a 22-year veteran in the department and a long-time critical incident stress management facilitator, knew something had to shift to give firefighters the knowledge and tools they needed to better understand trauma and how it affects the body and mental health. He wanted to develop something that could help firefighters support each other on the floor, respond empathically to members of the public, and catalyze a shift toward open dialogue about mental health and wellness in firefighting services.

“I knew about CMHA and the local services and supports they offered in communities,” says Steve. “Things had hit a tipping point. I literally walked into a local CMHA branch and said ‘we need this.’ Over the next year and half, we worked together to co-develop the curriculum in consultation with firefighters and mental health professionals.”

With the support of CMHA and Steve’s team, by 2017 Vancouver Fire and Rescue Services was rolling out the *Resilient Minds*

training. By the end of 2019 the training will have been delivered in nearly all fire halls in Vancouver and throughout the province. One trainer pointed out that as fire service workers’ awareness and understanding of mental health tools and strategies has reached a critical mass, more are acting as advocates, marking a sea change in how mental health and trauma is being addressed on and off the job.

Danielle Dubé, a firefighter trained to deliver *Resilient Minds* to firefighters in Richmond, B.C., describes the training as “designed in a really smart way,” reflecting the experience and culture of firefighters. “It’s just enough, not too much. Sometimes people come into the training not realizing how much they need it, and then at some point in Module 1 a lightbulb goes off and you can see people begin to connect to the curriculum and open up.”

Participants in the first cohort of *Resilient Minds* trainings reported remarkable outcomes. All reported lower levels of work-related stress, and 95% said they had learned how to better deal with stress when it came up. About 70% said they’d

used what they’d learned in *Resilient Minds* at work and in their personal lives, including strategies like breathing techniques, being aware of the mental health of others, practicing mindfulness, being aware of triggers, and reaching out for help.

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Other First Responders and support staff deal with every day are unique. Crews work together in many situations that are life or death — there needs to be trust amongst the crew and an ongoing atmosphere of shared understanding, compassion and respect, not just among workers, but also with the public. From Danielle Dubé's perspective, *Resilient Minds* has “created an atmosphere of kindness that informs natural peer support that harkens back to the way firehalls used to be — like a caring family.”

Seia Roots, who worked with Steve Fraser to develop the training, says that one of the reasons the trainings have been so effective is that there's more public discourse on mental health broadly, “Ten years ago, something like this may not have been particularly well received, but people are talking more about mental health now. The narrative has changed, and people understand that where First Responders are concerned, the trauma is real. A ‘suck it up buttercup’ attitude is not helpful — there's a culture shift around what strength is, and stigma around mental health and illness is lifting.”

Brandon Currie, a firefighter and master *Resilient Minds* “train-the-trainer,” who has worked in downtown Vancouver and on the lower east side, says that as a result of the training, the culture has shifted. People now have a framework for having conversations and are taking steps to heal, restore, and support one another to get the help they need after a traumatic incident.

“The Critical Incident Stress Management Team that's called in to support firefighters after a bad call used to be referred to as the ‘cry-baby team’. People didn't feel comfortable saying they needed it. Captains would ask in an off-hand way: ‘We don't need the CISM, do we?’ Now, captains are calling it in, they're following up with their crews one-on-one...crew-mates are supporting each other when they see signs a colleague is struggling.”

“Leadership has really taken on the responsibility of psychological health and is managing staff differently,” says Danielle Dubé. “They support what we've done through the *Resilient Minds* curriculum, and they've taken the training too. I think it helps them to better understand trauma, the signs, how to respond, and how to create a space for dialogue. We wouldn't see the cultural shift we have without support from leadership.”

There are numbers to back up the experience of people on the floor. In 2012, before *Resilient Minds* was launched, only 12 firefighters identified that they'd been exposed to critical incident stress in the official log of exposures. In 2017 and 2018, the numbers tell a different story; an average of over 887 firefighters identified this stress annually. Because of *Resilient Minds*, firefighters are better able to identify that they're experiencing stress, and take action to mitigate and deal with it. Captains and chiefs are also calling in the CISM team for diffusions and debriefings much more regularly. Prior to the implementation of *Resilient Minds*, that number of calls sat at around forty to fifty per year. Now, that number sits at around one hundred.

As the stigma lifts and conversations about mental health around the “kitchen tables” in firehalls become the norm, firefighters have not only shown more compassion towards their own and others' traumas, they're also better able to respond to the public, and to balance the demands of their jobs with their personal lives.

“*Resilient Minds* has far-reaching impacts on the community and on the lives of First Responders,” Dubé points out. It promotes mental health and prevents mental health issues and illness from reaching a crisis point. “I'd like to see *Resilient Minds* brought to all First Responders in B.C. and across Canada,” says Steve Fraser.

There are plans to expand and adapt the program offerings for volunteer firefighters and other fire services

staff, and to respond to requests for refresher training. After the success of *Resilient Minds* in B.C., fire services teams across Canada have been reaching out to see how they can bring the program to their own jurisdictions.

As *Resilient Minds* scales up, support from Canada Life will be fundamental, allowing CMHA to ensure the consistency and high-quality of the program through competency-based evaluation criteria for master, train-the-trainer and facilitator certification and re-certification, a review and adaptation of the curriculum and program materials for new audiences, as well as a review and update of the business plan and pricing models.

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