Responding To Our Mental Health

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The question is often asked, “when should I look for resources beyond peer counselling?” The question, while initially appearing simple is actually mufti-faceted and requires a number of different answers.

On one level, as to WHEN should I look for resources…, the answer is last week. What sort of emergency responder waits until they are in the middle of a crisis to arrange for the necessary supplementary resources to deal with it?

While the oft touted ideal is that we should keep our work separate from our home life and our home life separate from our work, the reality is that who we are at work effects who we are at home and who we are at home effects who we are at work. The professional seeks to minimize the negative consequences of each context upon the other, but to try to live up to an unrealizable ideal is to set oneself up for failure. The professional also seeks to manage the interacting contexts in the best way possible. Only a fool does not utilize the best resources available in order to achieve the best outcome possible. When we let our ego get in the way and drive decisions that is when we run a higher risk of getting into trouble and the potential for damage greatly increases. Sometimes all we can do is make the best of available resources, but to ignore available resources for whatever reason is unprofessional, and irresponsible. We probably all know people whose egos drove them to be in places and attempt to do things well beyond their abilities and resources. If it didn’t end up being a disaster, it was probably due to sheer luck, rather than design.

Then the question becomes “what sort of resources should we be looking for?” At a minimum the first responder should have access to a doctor, or doctors, including a sports medicine specialist, a culturally competent counsellor/psychologist, possibly a psychiatrist, and a chaplain. Which resource or resources you use will naturally depend upon the nature of the issues needing to be addressed. Naturally, the first resource is a doctor; many of the stressors which can affect the first responder may have a physical, biomedical component so arranging for a good doctor who is familiar with and has experience in dealing with the relevant issues will be essential. If your doctor is not a sports medicine specialist, then have them refer you to one, because they will have the specialized expertise to deal with the physical issues first responders face. Even if you don’t have any particular physical issues now, arrange to meet with them so that you can develop a good working relationship. It will allow them to establish a baseline from which to assess any future issues you might have.

The same goes for a psychologist or registered clinical counsellor. Many insurance plans allow for a certain number of visits per year. Use that opportunity to interview the counsellors available in your area. This will allow you to determine which one or ones you can work with prior to your needing one. When you are in the midst of a crisis it is not necessarily the best time to be making decisions about whom you can or cannot work with. In subsequent articles, I will discuss what to look for in a counsellor for yourself and your organization, but again, I would suggest that you start looking for the right one now so that when you need them you can have the confidence that you will get the care that you need. Another thing to consider is, ask them about "positive psychology." Positive psychology, rather than dealing with a client's deficits or psychological injuries, seeks to build on the strengths the client already has, and in so doing can help the client be better prepared to face some of the challenges that all first responders face. Again, seeing them before you are having difficulties, allows them to have a baseline from which to assess your condition when you are in the midst of dealing with challenges.

What other resources should you be looking for? Are there any good couples therapists in your area? Even if your current relationship is great, knowing who you can turn to with confidence should issues arise can be a great help. Again, it gives the counsellor the opportunity to have a baseline of where you and your partner are, and to have a sense of what changes have taken place. They may also assist you with strategies for heading off difficulties if and when more stressful times arise. What about credit counsellors or financial planners. Financial issues can be one of the major stressors in our lives and having someone to turn to when you are having difficulty, or someone who can help you avoid difficulties can be invaluable. What about a lawyer? Sometimes legal issues can arise in the course of discharging ones duties. What resources are available to you through unions, associations, etc.?

While the above list is certainly not exhaustive, I think you get the picture. Start lining up support systems in various areas now. In the middle of a crisis is the last place you want to be when you discover that resources you are relying on are not up to the task.

Returning to the basic question, the answers will depend upon who you are and the role you are playing in that situation.

For the peer counsellor, the question is, in which situations should I be referring the person I am counselling to other resources? Naturally, that will depend upon the situation which presents itself. Peer counsellors are at their best when they are helping their peers deal with issues that have arisen from situations and incidents on the job. Here they have the credibility to be able to relate to what their colleague is dealing with because they have faced it themselves. There are many instances when having the empathetic ear of

someone who has not only talked the talk, but walked the walk can be of immense benefit. But when should the peer counsellor look for backup? I would suggest that when you start to run into issues or events that are outside of work, such as family issues, issues from their past, or other issues which are not directly work related then it is probably time to look for assistance. The peer counsellor should not look on this acknowledgement of their limits as a sign of weakness, but recognition of their speciality which allows them to concentrate on what they do best and not waste time or energy in areas best dealt with by others. It is also a way to help the peer counsellor avoid burn out by not taking on issues beyond their resources. The peer counsellor should have their own list of resources which they have checked out so that they can refer their coworkers to them with confidence.

The other question is then, when should I be looking for resources other than a peer counsellor to deal with the issues I am facing? If the issues are primarily related to issues outside of work, then it is likely I am going to be able to find the best help from resources other than a peer counsellor. Obviously if the issues are physical, financial, relational, or social then I need to look for the appropriate resources in my community. The peer counsellor may well have suggestions as to where or to whom you might go, and they may be your first stop in seeking those resources. Their willingness to refer you on to other resources will also be an important clue as to the quality of
help they will be able to provide. If they are reluctant to, it could be due to ego issues, and if it is, unfortunately they are doing peer counselling for the wrong reasons, and you will be better off seeking help elsewhere. If they are willing to help you find the best resources, then it shows that their primary concern is for you to get the best help possible, rather them gaining the self-satisfaction from being the helper.

Another way to look at it is: even though peer counsellors are committed to confidentiality, are the issues the sort of thing that you wouldn't want to be known around the fire-hall? Is it the sort of thing that if it became known and the peer counsellor was aware of it, that it could have an adverse impact on the peer counsellor? Is it something that puts the peer counsellor in an awkward position in the fire-hall?

The above is certainly not exhaustive, and also should not be considered hard and fast rules. There are a variety of factors which can determine the applicability of each of these principles to any given situation, but hopefully they will provide some clues as to how to take better care of ourselves and those we work with.

Future articles will address what should I look for in a counsellor for myself, and for my organization.

Please direct any comments, criticisms, or questions to me at info@wperickson.com. I look forward to any and all feedback. In the meantime, be safe, and thank you for your service.

- **Contact**

paul@wperickson.com
604-719-6695