



Dispatchers Don't Need Stress Training - Right?

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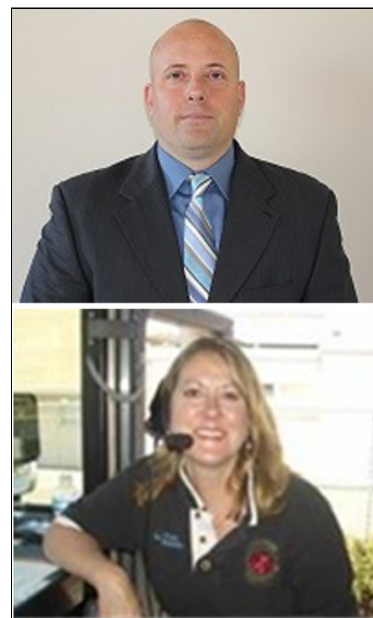
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9-1-1 dispatch centers across the United States employ many unsung heroes of events in which decisions under high stress can be the difference between life and death. These decisions are no less important than those made by the police officers or fire fighters in the field; yet emergency dispatchers rarely receive that level of recognition. Hence, emergency dispatchers often do not receive the ongoing perishable skills training that their brethren are often mandated.

An emergency dispatcher's environment is unique as very few jobs require such attention to detail and task accuracy performed in an expedited manner. Calls for police, fire or EMS response require precision and care, often under difficult situations. A wrong address, a missed word from a complainant, as well as failure to get pertinent information from officers in distress may lead to serious injury or death for those involved. Add this level of expected perfection in performance to the level of stress associated with a screaming caller, shots fired, or a mass casualty situation and the potential for human error increases drastically due, in part, to what is commonly referred to as the "fight or flight" response.



Fight or Flight: Dispatchers too?

Human beings are prone to committing error; we slip, trip and fall, bump into things, forget things, and even fail to see things right in front of us. These errors happen in everyday life and are only increased in high stress environments when the body's natural fight or flight mechanism is activated. Yes – fight or flight applies to the emergency dispatch environment as much as any other stress related field. Fight or flight is simply a name given to an evolutionary internal human reaction to stress. Our response to stress can cause deficits in cognition, attention, motor skills, and memory.

While it may have been essential for our caveman ancestor's survival, it can make modern stress related tasks more difficult. We do have several options to reduce these deficits with stress based training being identified as most effective.

Stress & Stress Inoculation Training

Stress is defined by 3 elements; Perceived demand, perceived ability to cope, and the perceived importance of the task. As you can see by this definition, being "stressed" in a situation is as much driven by the individual as it is by the incident. Training, preferably in a realistic environment, can mitigate the stress dispatchers experience and increase their performance while reducing human error. Intuitively, the goal is to decrease the individual's perceived demand and ability to cope, even as the importance of the task remains the same. One excellent method of decreasing the stress response is often referred to as stress inoculation training.

Methods of creating "stress inoculation training" in an emergency dispatch environment can range from very simple to much more complex reality based training. One example of a low cost and expedient repetitive training opportunity is the inclusion of on-duty dispatchers in departmental training. Fire and Police often conduct extensive training scenarios several times a year in which they use an instructor as a makeshift dispatcher. The inclusion of dispatch (training channel) in a scenario requires no more than a bit of scripting. Consideration for keeping this dispatcher available for real world calls is also important as it will keep the scenario situation stressful and realistic. Currently, emergency responder scenario training should be identified as a dispatch centers most prolific missed opportunity for training.

Regardless of all the excuses made not to train, we must remember that errors in this field can and have had deadly consequences. The civil liability from this may far exceed the cost of yearly training. All of us, regardless of position, need to understand the limits of human performance under stressful conditions while providing the appropriate training to mitigate deficits. Repetitive, stress based and realistic training is a great method of reducing human error. Make sure your emergency dispatch center is included in your yearly training matrix.

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