

Recognizing early signs of PTSD crucial

By Terra Johnston PhD(c)

Sharing the personal stories of first responders who are coping with post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, is important. It helps reduce stigma and encourages treatment-seeking for the individual affected by PTSD and their loved ones. Mike McIntyre's feature, *Bad call* (July 23), does just that, and I commend him for his in-depth coverage of this critical issue. Most importantly, I thank the first responders who shared their personal stories. It is yet another act of courage in careers marked by bravery and self-sacrifice, and I applaud each of you.

Due to the nature of their work, first responders (e.g., firefighters, paramedics, public safety officers) are uniquely susceptible to PTSD. PTSD involves exposure to psychological trauma, and first responders experience such trauma on a regular ongoing basis over the course of their careers. While not every first responder will develop PTSD, it is important that all first responders and their loved ones recognize its symptoms. It is all too easy for the warning signs to go unrecognized — I speak from experience.

My husband, Tony, a long-serving firefighter for the Winnipeg fire department, was recently diagnosed with PTSD. Around two years ago, he began to suffer nightmares, flashbacks, insomnia, episodes of emotional detachment and bouts of uncharacteristic anger. When I think back to his pre-diagnosed days, I wonder how I did not connect his symptoms to PTSD. I am an experienced social worker, trained in the field of mental health, and yet I missed it.

As the spouse of a first responder, I was always alert to my husband's mood when he returned home from work. I would ask a few gentle questions about his shift and be there for him if he wanted to talk about anything. For the most part, though, Tony left his "bad calls" at work. Once home, he was an attentive father and loving husband — and quite a jokester, an always-laughing sort of guy. Until he wasn't.

Several months ago, I noticed some concerning changes: he was quick to anger, constantly tired yet unable to sleep, disengaged from the world and withdrawn from me and his family. His symptoms of PTSD would no longer be ignored, and I insisted we seek help.

My husband is now on the road to recovery. It's not an easy road — there have been times of tremendous struggle — but we are tackling his PTSD with a team of supports: his health-care provider, his psychiatrist, his counsellor, his co-workers and our family members and friends. Indeed, the outpouring of support we've received from family and friends has been overwhelming, and we are so appreciative of everyone's warm words of encouragement and love.

I am proud of Tony for the way he has openly shared his experience with PTSD with his colleagues. He recognizes the role he can play, as a senior firefighter, in reducing stigma and promoting treatment-seeking within the department, and he generously agreed to share his story through this letter as well.

Recovering from PTSD is possible. I see my husband getting healthier with each passing day. But it does take time, and it does take support. While I wish I had connected my husband's symptoms to PTSD earlier, I am so grateful we did eventually get him the help he needed.

Left untreated, PTSD poses great risk. Research shows the suicide rate of individuals who suffer from PTSD is far greater than that of the general population. Put simply, promoting awareness and treatment-seeking for PTSD saves lives. Spouses and family members of first responders play a key role in the detection of PTSD, and it is imperative everyone in this position is aware of the disorder. Family members of a first responder can access the Canadian Mental Health Association for information on PTSD, including how to recognize the symptoms and where to go for help. Visit www.cmha.ca or call 204-982-6100.

It is also important all first responders and their employers understand an important new change to Manitoba's Workers Compensation Act. As of this past January, the principle of presumptive coverage is now in effect. This means for all Manitoba workers who are exposed to certain types of traumatic events through their line of work, and who are diagnosed with PTSD by a physician or psychologist, their PTSD is presumed to be caused by their employment unless the contrary is proven.

This legislative change has significant implications for those struggling with PTSD. Its aim is to ensure timely access to treatment services and compensation, reduce the stigma attached to PTSD and promote treatment-seeking. First responders with diagnosed PTSD should contact the Workers Compensation Board of Manitoba to submit a claim to ensure they receive their entitlement benefits (e.g., counselling, medication and other related health-care costs).

Another important step toward supporting individuals affected by PTSD is the federal government's pledge to establish a national plan of action. As part of this commitment, provinces, territories and other key stakeholders have recently begun work with the federal government to develop a nationally co-ordinated strategy to enhance and expand the scope of services for PTSD.

Show your support for this national action plan. Our first responders put their lives and their mental well-being on the line for us each and every day. Let's show them we have their backs.

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