

# Emergency dispatchers suffer from symptoms of PTSD, study reveals

March 29 2012

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Dispatchers who answer 911 and 999 emergency calls suffer emotional distress which can lead to symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a new study reports. The research, published in the *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, reveals that direct exposure to traumatic events is not necessary to lead to post-trauma disorders.

The research was conducted by Dr Michelle Lilly from Northern Illinois University and researcher Heather Pierce, a former 911 dispatcher.

"Post-Traumatic [psychological disorders](#) are usually associated with front line emergency workers, such as police officers, fire fighters or [combat veterans](#)," said Dr Lilly. "Usually research considers links between disorders and how much emotional distress is experienced on the scene of a traumatic event. However, this is the first study on emergency dispatchers, who experience the trauma indirectly."

The research analyzed the responses of 171 currently serving emergency dispatchers from 24 US states. The majority of the sample was female and Caucasian, with an average age of 38 and over 11 years of service.

The dispatchers were asked about the types of potentially traumatic calls they handle and the amount of emotional distress they experienced. They were also asked to rate the types of calls which caused the most distress and to remember the worst call they had dealt with during their career.

The most commonly identified worst calls were the unexpected injury or

death of a child, 16.4%, followed by suicidal callers, 12.9%, shootings involving officers, 9.9%, and calls involving the unexpected death of an adult, 9.9%.

The results showed that levels of peritraumatic distress, distress experienced during or after an event, reported by dispatchers was high and occurred in reaction to an average of 32% of potentially traumatic calls. A further 3.5% of the sample reported symptoms severe enough to qualify for a diagnosis of [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder](#).

These results are a valuable contribution to the ongoing debate on defining a traumatic event, which takes place as official guidelines are set to be published in 2013. This research supports a broad definition as it shows dispatchers experience significant levels of emotional distress at work even though they are not physically present during a traumatic event, or even know the victim of a trauma.

"Our research is the first to reveal the extent of emotional distress experienced by emergency dispatchers while on duty," concluded Pierce. "The results show the need to provide these workers with prevention and intervention support as is currently provided for their frontline colleagues. This includes briefings and training in ways to handle [emotional distress](#)."

Provided by Wiley

Citation: Emergency dispatchers suffer from symptoms of PTSD, study reveals (2012, March 29) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-03-emergency-dispatchers-symptoms-ptsd-reveals.html>

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