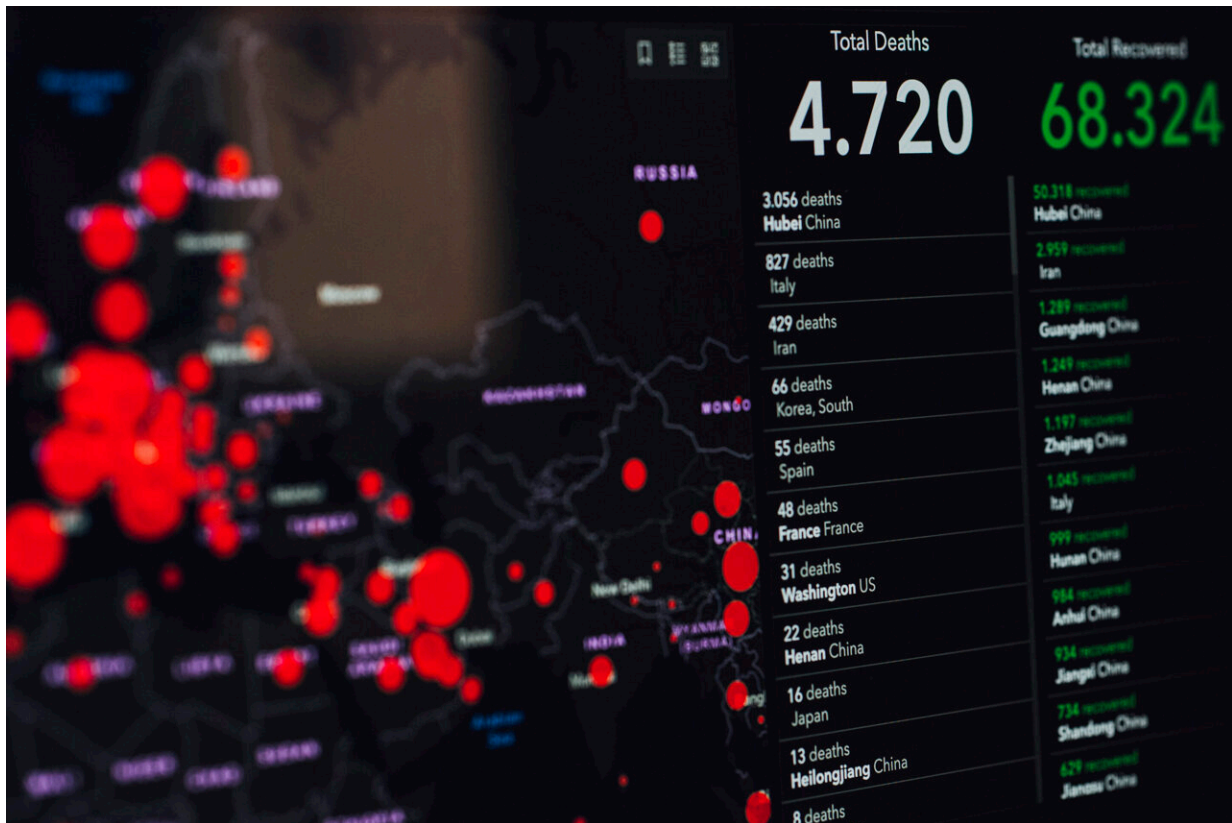


Early screening spots emergency workers at greater risk of mental illness

June 28 2016



Credit: Markus Spiske from Pexels

Study offers new direction for preventative interventions to increase mental resilience to stress and trauma

Emergency services workers who are more likely to suffer episodes of mental ill health later in their careers can be spotted in the first week of [training](#). That's the conclusion of a Wellcome Trust funded study carried out with trainee paramedics.

Researchers from the University of Oxford and King's College London wanted to see if they could identify [risk factors](#) that made people more likely to suffer post-traumatic stress (PTSD) or major depression (MD) when working in emergency services.

Dr Jennifer Wild from the University of Oxford explained: 'Emergency workers are regularly exposed to stressful and traumatic situations and some of them will experience periods of mental illness. Some of the factors that make that more likely can be changed through resilience training, reducing the risk of PTSD and depression. We wanted to test whether we could identify such risk factors, making it possible to spot people at higher risk early in their training and to develop interventions that target these risk factors to strengthen their resilience.'

The researchers followed a group of around 400 new ambulance staff through the first two years of their three-year training period. During the initial six-week classroom phase of the training, the students were given a number of assessments to establish their thinking styles, coping behaviour, psychiatric history and personality traits.

Follow up sessions were carried out every four months for the next two years to see if any of the participants had had PTSD or depression. After two years, a final assessment looked at quality of life, as well as smoking, alcohol and drug use, days off work, weight change, burnout and insomnia.

Professor Anke Ehlers said: 'While just under one in five experienced PTSD or depression in the two years, most got better by the next four-

month follow-up.

'However, there were still lasting effects. Those who had reported mental ill health were more likely to have sleep problems at 2 years. They were also more likely to have days off work. Paramedics who developed an episode of PTSD were also more likely to report gaining weight and smoking.'

The team found that even accounting for past psychiatric history, people were more likely to experience PTSD and depression if they had lower perceived resilience to trauma, or if they dwelled on stressful events from the past before they started their training. Significantly, the number of traumatic incidents they experienced could not be used to predict PTSD but was relevant to predicting MD, suggesting a cumulative risk of different exposures to trauma for depression.

Dr Wild said: 'This is not about screening out particular people in training. Early assessment means that those who are more at risk can be offered training to improve their resilience to stressful and traumatic experiences. That has the potential to reduce episodes of PTSD and major [depression](#) and improve the long term health of a valued and essential workforce.'

More information: J. Wild et al. A prospective study of pre-trauma risk factors for post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, *Psychological Medicine* (2016). [DOI: 10.1017/S0033291716000532](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291716000532)

Provided by University of Oxford

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