



A Pocket Guide to Mental Resilience

Practical Support for EOC Participants

Who We Are

Chris Marsh, Principal

- Public safety experience of 25+ years including emergency management and fire fighting
- Environmental management – 15+ years

Clear Sky Consulting

- Undertake emergency management planning and program development with First Nations and local governments
- Help to develop plans before events happen
- Recovery management



Who We Are

Mark Stephens – Manager of Emergency Programs

- Local government for 10+ years
- Managed development of Regional Flood Response Plan and Regional Evacuation Plan
- Numerous EOC activations

RDKB Emergency Program

- Provides a regional emergency program and plan for the entirety of the RDKB – about 31,000 residents across eight municipalities and five electoral areas
- Has experienced numerous high-impact events over the past decade including wildfires, floods, hazardous good spills and landslides



Emergency
Management

Acknowledging Traditional Territory

We would like to respectfully acknowledge that we are meeting today on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Syilx Okanagan people. We are grateful to live, work, and gather on this land, which has been cared for by Indigenous people for countless generations.



Talking about tough stuff

- If you need space take it.....

Self Care and Awareness

This province has been through a lot in the last five to ten years.

While this session is intended to promote resiliency, the subject matter can be heavy.

Above all else, please take care of yourself.





TLA's

- EOC: emergency operations centre
- PTSD: Post-traumatic stress disorder
- OSI: occupational stress injury
- RDKB: Regional District of Kootenay Boundary
- CISM – Critical Incident Stress Management

Why built this Pocket Guide – it's the people

After the 2018 Kettle River flood, which directly affected over a 1000 people and damaged over 450 homes and businesses, Boundary Family Services provided funding to the RDKB to undertake a project to improve the mental health of first responders and EOC participants.



Why built this Pocket Guide – it's the people

- Ever known a fellow staff member who quit their job just to “get away from it all”?
- Ever worked with someone who has taken an early retirement for stress related reasons?
- Has anyone ever known someone to take a lower paying job as a way out?
- Do you know anyone who has suffered from either mental health challenges (for example, gone “on leave”) or had unexplained health issues?



Why built this Pocket Guide – it's the people





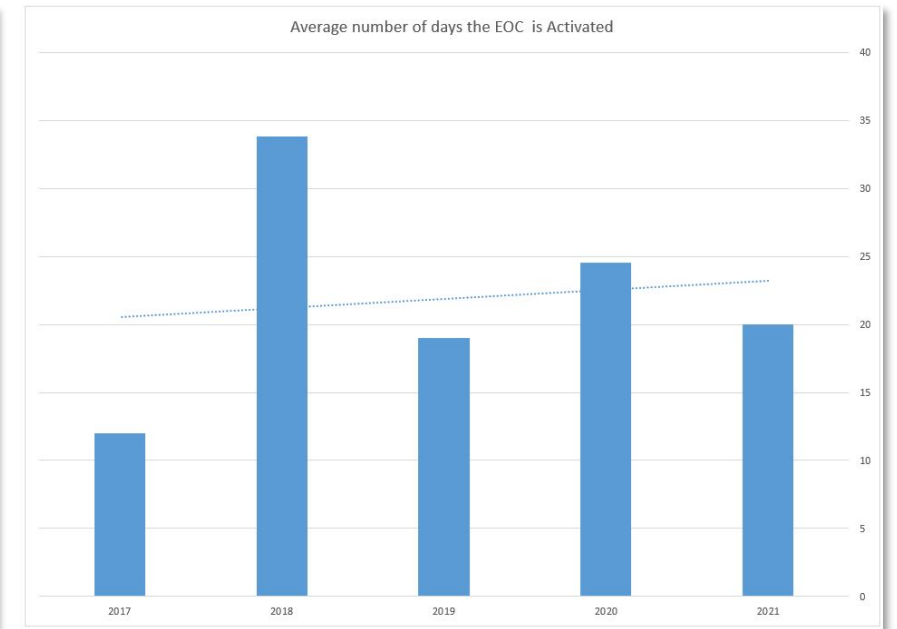
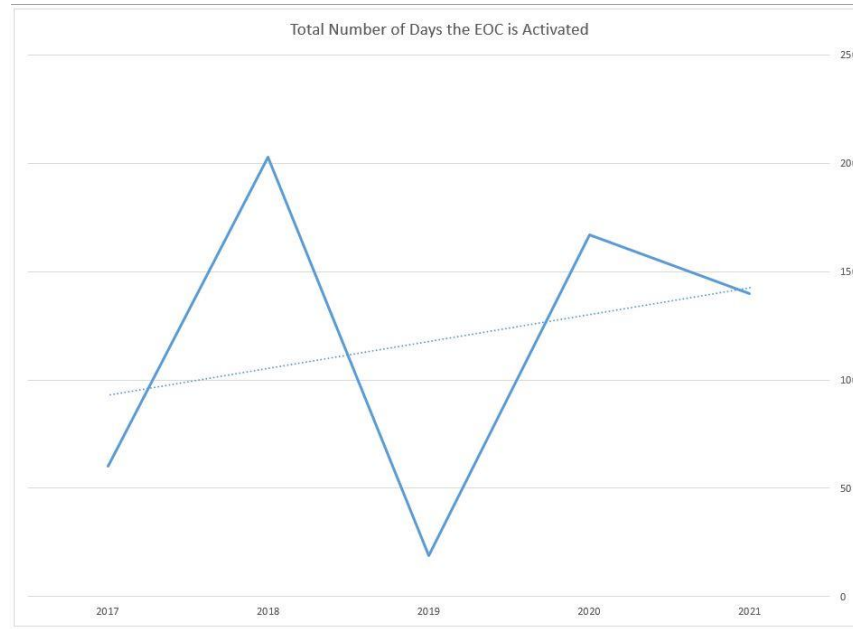
Why did we feel we needed this Pocket Guide?

Anecdotally we know that many staff leave after a major disaster

- For example, following Grand Forks Kettle River Flood in 2018 – CAO, Public Works Manager, Sustainability Manager, Fire Chief, Mayor
- Changes within provincial ministries – turnover and lateral moves
- Many staff request not to be used in future EOC activations
- Requests for support from Disaster Psychosocial Services are frequent

Rising level of EOC activations both in number and duration

In the RDKB we have seen a rise in the number of and duration of EOC activations over the last five to ten years.



Both total days per year and average days per year where the EOC is activated are both increasing. EOC activations (by days) have been over 120 days per year on average over the last 5 years.

First Responders and Second Responders

First responders – police fire ambulance, and emergency dispatchers

In federal government and academia circles – the list of professions includes Canadian Border Service Agents and corrections officers (CIPSRT)

Programs originated primarily in Canadian Armed Forces (R2MR) (this where much of this work was initiated)

Emergency managers and those who work in EOC's are generally excluded from these programs and research

Part Time Practitioner-based assignments and expectations

- Part time practitioner – someone who doesn't work as a professional emergency manager or coordinator – the support staff in an EOC (planners, admin staff, etc.)
- Staff may have any level of EOC training
- Expected shift length and deployment length can be a challenge for them
- Exposure to stress and trauma is not typical for them
- Expectations to return to normal job – can be disorienting and the backlog of work can be challenging.





Building the Pocket Guide – the real why

- A study published in the Journal of Emergency Management highlighted that emergency managers face unique stressors, including prolonged work hours, high-stakes decision-making, and exposure to traumatic events.
- Alarming, studies have shown that 37% of fire and EMS professionals have contemplated suicide, a rate nearly ten times higher than that of the general population.



Building the Pocket Guide – the real why

- Stigma surrounding mental health remains a significant barrier. Approximately one in three first responders experiences stigma regarding mental health, leading to underreporting and reluctance to seek support.
- A significant proportion of emergency managers report experiencing mental health concerns, with notable percentages indicating symptoms of PTSD, OSI's, depression, anxiety, and stress.

The effects of stress on a person

WHAT STRESS DOES TO THE BODY

SHORT TERM

FEELING WORRIED, NERVOUS OR UNABLE TO SWITCH OFF.

HEART BEATS HARDER AND FASTER TO PUMP MORE BLOOD TO THE MAJOR MUSCLES.

BREATHING QUICKENS TO SEND MORE OXYGEN AROUND THE BODY.

TUMMY ISSUES DUE TO THE RUSH OF STRESS HORMONES.

SKIN BECOMES MORE SENSITIVE AND OILY.

PROBLEMS BETWEEN THE SHEETS.

MUSCLES TENSE UP AS IF THEY'RE PREPARING TO MAKE A RUN FOR IT.

LONG TERM

TENSION HEADACHES AND MIGRAINES.

MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS.

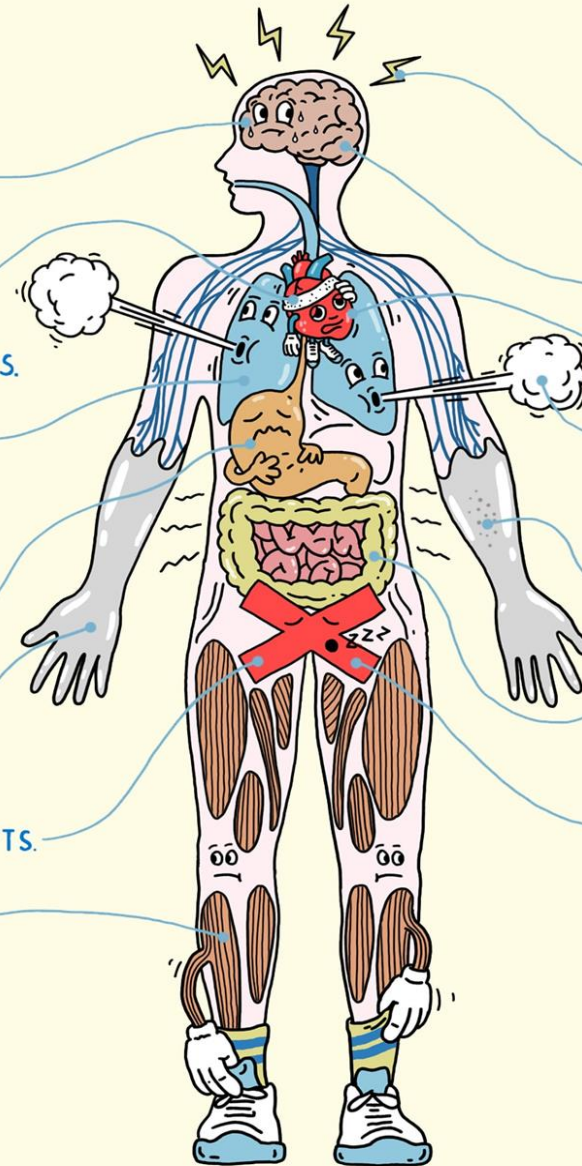
SERIOUS HEART PROBLEMS.

TROUBLE BREATHING, HYPERVENTILATION AND PANIC ATTACKS.

SKIN AND HAIR CONDITIONS EG. ACNE, HAIR LOSS.

INCREASED RISK OF TYPE 2 DIABETES.

FERTILITY PROBLEMS (FOR MEN AND WOMEN).



A Tale of Two Professions

Over the past several years, first responder agencies have done an excellent job in acknowledging the impacts that stress and exposure to their work environment have on their mental and physical health. For example, when a firefighter passes from suicide, cardiac disease or cancer, we say it is a Line of Duty Death (LODD).

But if an emergency manager passes from similar afflictions, we say that they should have reduced their workload, or that they should have led a healthier lifestyle, or that external influences must have been the main contributing factor. Why is there a difference? Why don't we treat emergency manager stress the same as other responders?

Self Care and Mental Wellness Maintenance – it's part of the job

- “Are you cut out for this line of work?”
- Empathy, compassion, and a deep desire to “do right” in this profession are necessary
- Empathy and compassion are so very critical
- Maintaining a mindset of protecting things has led to an overemphasis on response and not recovery (and human wellness)
- We do not do as good a job of looking after people (for example, ESS and recovery)
- Rather than saying that people who fell deeply don't belong, let's find a way to include in them and keep them safe so they can make those connections with people affected by emergency events



Mental Wellness in the EOC Pocket Guide

- Content completed in spring of 2024
- Currently exists in digital form
- Reflects the complexity of EOC staffing – professional emergency managers, part-time seconded practitioners, and volunteers
- Built to be a companion guide that is useful before, during and after an emergency event

Where Can I Find This?

Clear Sky Consulting Home Page

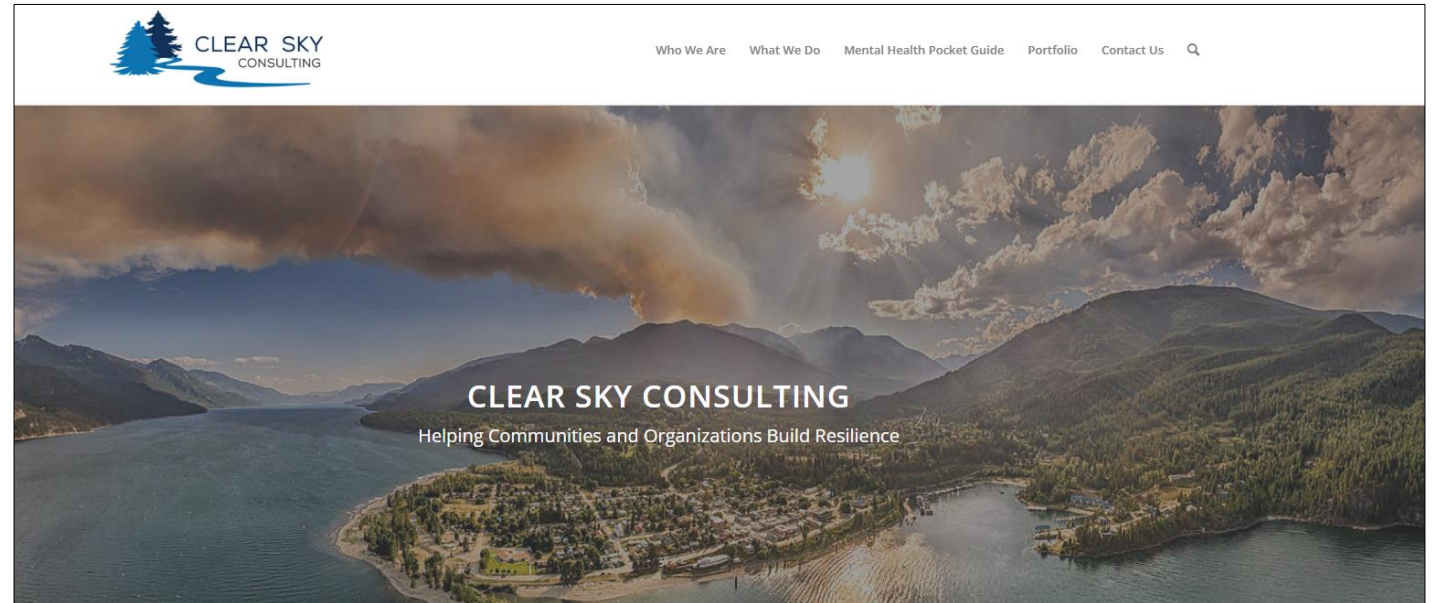
www.clearskyconsulting.ca

Reach out to Mark Stephens:

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Mental Health Pocket Guide

Working or volunteering within the emergency management industry comes with the potential for exposure to stress and trauma. This can have short- and long-term effects on those working in Emergency Operations Centres (EOCs) and with other disaster support systems that assist with emergencies. Our response to mental health strain should be met with compassion and taken as seriously as the crises occurring in our communities.

To assist those who are supporting our communities during disasters, Clear Sky partnered with a team of mental health and emergency management professionals to put together **this Mental Health Pocket Guide**. This resource aims to strengthen mental resilience and break down the stigma of talking openly about mental health. If you feel unsupported or are unsure about how to advocate for your mental wellbeing, or if you would like to take proactive steps for yourself and your colleagues, we invite you to lean on this guide — and take one step closer to getting the care you need.

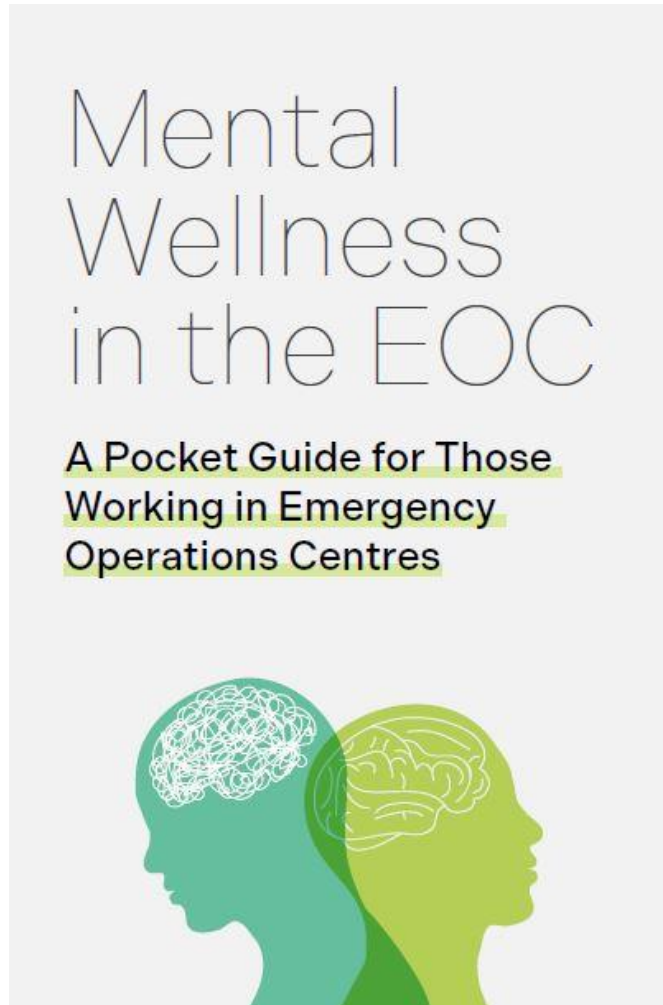
[Download the Mental Health Pocket Guide](#)

Mental
Wellness
in the EOC

**A Pocket Guide for Those
Working in Emergency
Operations Centres**



Mental Wellness in the EOC Pocket Guide Design



5

If you or someone you know needs help

A crisis is any time that you are struggling, having difficulty coping or are feeling overwhelmed.

Access support 24/7 from anywhere in the province by dialling one of these numbers:

- **310-6789 BC Mental Health Support Line**
For emotional support, information and resources specific to mental health and substance use disorders
- **1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433) BC Suicide Prevention and Intervention Line**
For anyone thinking about suicide or for those who are concerned about someone who may be at risk of suicide
- **9-8-8 National Suicide Crisis Help Line**
- **911** for emergency services

How to use this guide

Refer to this guide before, during and after an emergency event as the types and impacts of stress will vary at different times throughout an emergency.

Use the coloured tabs on the right-hand edge of the pages to guide yourself through the document.

You can go to the table of contents by clicking on or tapping the page number in the top-right corner of any page.

Whatever you might be feeling is OK – even if it's a long time after an emergency!

Your feelings are a normal response to abnormal stress conditions.

Keep reading to find out how to take care of yourself.

INTRO
BEFORE
DURING
AFTER
RESOURCES

Mental Wellness in the EOC Pocket Guide Design - Continued

- Wanted the toolkit to be useful for seasoned professionals and EOC newcomers
- Contains sections about where to find resources and help, what to expect in an EOC (for new participants), suggestions for managing stress and stress injuries, types of stress, and other helpful materials
- Was really built with hopes of making a connection with users – either helping to orient new staff and setting expectations or validating what a person may feel after being part of a major disaster response



Mental Wellness in the EOC Pocket Guide Design - Continued

- Adapted “common” mental health support systems to match the needs of emergency managers
- Ensured easy to read language, but also relevant to our roles and experiences

Mental health continuum

The [mental health continuum model](#) can help us assess our mental state and take action for mental wellness. This graphic was adapted from multiple versions of the model (see this [PDF](#) or this [PDF](#)).

Thriving “I’m good!”

- Mood fluctuations feel ordinary
- Feeling in control and able to respond to negative events without deep distress
- Normal sleep patterns
- You have both the motivation and energy to pursue your interests

What to do:

- Maintain a healthy lifestyle and your self-care routines
- Learn new skills and practices
- Build or deepen your support system

Reacting “Something feels off.”

- Frequently irritable, impatient or on edge
- Harder to relax and/or sleep
- Having greater difficulty in adapting to changes or feeling overwhelmed more quickly

What to do:

- Identify and try to minimize stressors
- Use your tools and practices
- Build in extra time for self-care

Injured “I’m struggling to keep it together.”

- Persistent anger, anxiety and/or sadness
- Exhaustion and abnormal sleep patterns
- Numbing out through substances, foods or avoidance
- Struggling with decision-making

What to do:

- Reach out to people you trust and share what’s going on
- Get support without shame
- Take breaks from, defer or reduce commitments so you can take care of yourself

Ill “I’m done.”

- Frequent angry outbursts and/or panic attacks
- Thoughts of self-harm or suicide
- Can’t sleep or always sleeping
- Non-functional in some or many daily aspects of life

What to do:

- Seek help from professionals
- Lean on trusted people to help you with things that feel too hard
- If you can, take time off work

Mental Wellness in the EOC Pocket Guide Design - Continued

- Provided examples so that users could see themselves in the material
- Sometimes, a person's experiences seem surreal or "weird" to them, when in reality they are completely normal
- All stress responses in ourselves are just the mind and body's attempts to manage unfavourable conditions

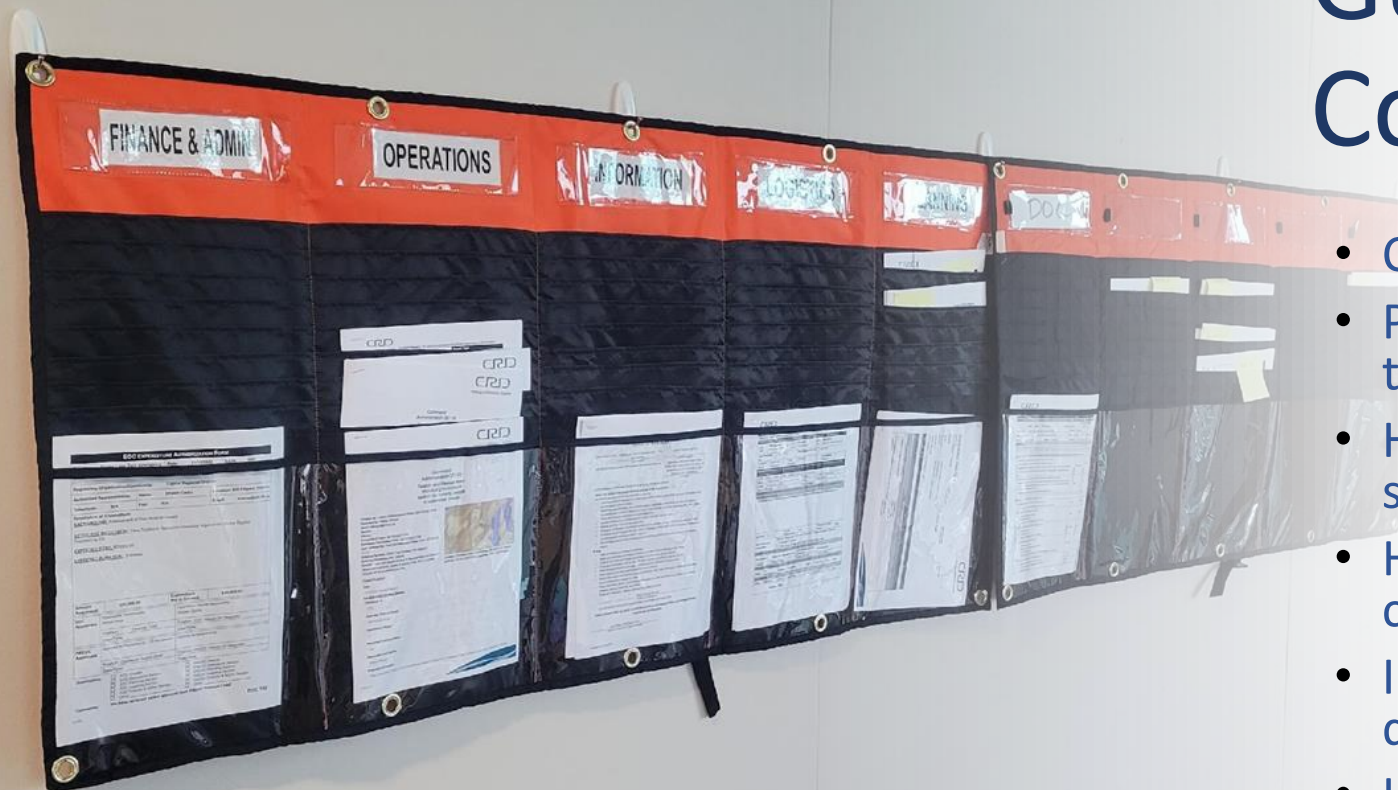
- Responding out of proportion to everyday events (like the sound of a door closing)
- Feeling intense fear, anger or frustration related to things that remind you of these experiences

"About two months after the event, I was at a dinner at a friend's, and someone brought it up.

Everyone always asks what the worst part about it was.

My heart just started pounding. I had to get up and leave the room.

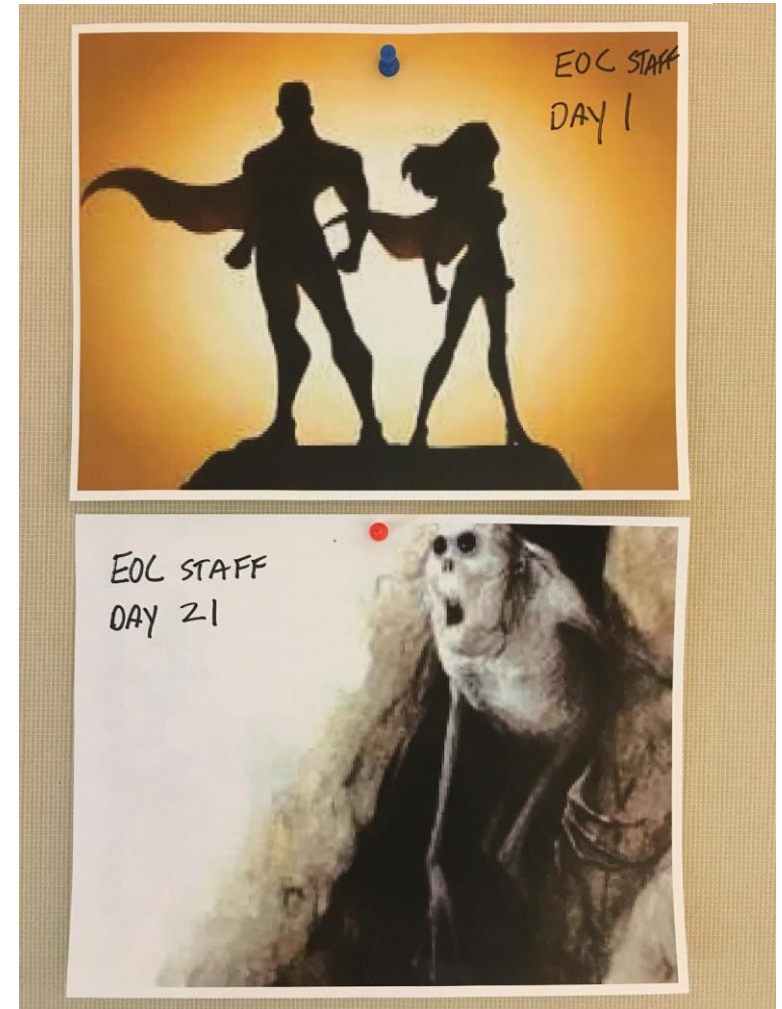
Mental Wellness in the EOC Pocket Guide - Components



- Crisis page right at front
- Purpose – so users can see themselves represented in the toolkit
- How EOC participants are exposed to stress – the EOC pressure cooker
- High levels of stress, activity and concern
- Indirect exposure to trauma, loss, death, injury and destruction
- Impacts to the community, residents, friends and family
- Repeated exposure to negativity
- Decision making

Mental Wellness in the EOC Pocket Guide - Components

- What to Expect for First Time EOC Participants
- Preparing Yourself for a Successful EOC Experience
- Introduction to Trauma
- During an Emergency Event
- After an EOC Deployment
- Restoration techniques
- Mental Health, Illness and Wellness
- Critical Incident Stress, PTSD, Operational Stress Injuries
- Where to find resources – walk in, online, peer support



What are some of the ways we end up with mental health challenges?

- On Call 24/7 - if we call, you'd better answer
- Often, high levels of stress at all times
- Chronic stress – lack of staff, resources, too much work, too great of a scope (Manager of Public Safety, Emergency Management, Community Resiliency, Bylaw Enforcement, Business Continuity and 911 systems)
- Acute stress – 3 am hazmat incident with multiple casualties and significant evacuations
- EOC activations, and then re-immersed into day-to-day roles
- Unclear scope of duties (COVID BCP) (your inability to plan is not my emergency)
- Maybe, just maybe, we all take on more than we should? (Because we are the helpers, right?)



Above all else, just as with any physical injury, you must allow yourself time, space, and energy to restore your mental health. Suppressing or ignoring exhaustion, mental illness, stress, trauma, and negative EOC experiences will not resolve these issues. They will only prolong your recovery from these issues and affect your work and home life, your mental wellness, your readiness to respond to new challenges, and your overall personal resilience.



How This Toolkit Has and Will Be Implemented

- Regional EOC team members will be orientated to the tool kit and the resources it links to, which will give people the time to learn the document before an event will aid them in understanding their own needs during the event.
- Convergent workers and contractors will be given a just-in-time orientation to the tool kit.
- Training people before the event will help to remove the stigma around workplace mental health.



Team Thanks

- Darren Pratt / Boundary Family Services
- Carolyn Sinclair / SBRI Inc.
- Sean Larsen
- Sean Miller
- Margaretha Lundh / PHSA



**Boundary Family and
Individual Services Society**

Boundary Family Centres



Enrich Your Life!

The Bottom Line

- **BCEMS Goals #1: Ensure the health and safety of responders**
- To brace ourselves for more frequent and impactful disasters, we cannot let our highly skilled and experienced staff members:
 - Quit
 - Transfer out
 - Be injured on the job (physically or mentally)
 - We are going to need all the help we can get!
- Losing one emergency manager, part time practitioner or volunteer to these issues – it's one too many.

Thank You! And Take Care of Yourself.

Your comments, questions and feedback
are greatly appreciated.

If you would like more information:

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