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INDUSTRIAL AND OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH

Coping With On-Call Work: Current Knowledge to Support Women in the Emergency Services

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Introduction: All Fire and Emergency Services (FES) personnel must balance FES work with their other responsibilities. Given that women tend to take on a greater responsibility for management of household/domestic activities than men, the on-call component of their FES work may be associated with very different challenges. Despite this, women have rarely been the focus of on-call research.

Aim: To explore women's on-call experiences in the FES by examining coping styles and strategies, with the goal of helping to innovate the way women are supported in FES roles.

Methods: Relevant findings from two studies are included. The first study involved FES personnel from two agencies in Australia (n=24) who participated in a semi-structured interview. The second study was an anonymous online survey to determine work characteristics, sleep, stress, and coping in on-call workers more broadly, with workers from all industries across Australia (n=228) invited to participate.

Results: Interview data identified two major themes in terms of coping with on-call work. Support (from family, social, and work), planning, and preparation were identified as important in helping women cope in the context of on-call unpredictability. Results from the survey (43% women) showed that on-call workers were an engaged group in terms of their coping, with 67% classified as having a positive coping style and 58% of women indicating that they agreed/strongly agreed with the statement, "I cope well with on-call work."

Discussion: Taken together, these data highlight engagement with positive coping by women who do on-call work, including in the FES. Importantly, positive coping strategies, such as talking about emotions, problem-solving, and seeking support have been linked to increased shift work tolerance in other populations. Coping style and strategies represent modifiable variables which could be specifically applied to assist women to manage the unique challenges associated with on-call work in the FES.

Towards a Taxonomy of Workplace "Pressure" in Complex, Volatile, and Emergency Situations

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Introduction: Pressure in the workplace has been studied in a number of settings. Many studies have examined pressure from physiological and psychological perspectives, mainly through studies on stress. Performing under pressure is a fundamentally important workplace issue, not least for complex, volatile, and emergency situations.

Aim: This research aims to better understand performance under pressure as experienced by health and emergency staff in the workplace.

Methods: Three basic questions underpin the work: (1) how do health and emergency workers experience and make sense of the 'pressures' entailed in their jobs? (2) What impacts do these pressures have on their working lives and work performance, both positively and negatively? (3) Can we develop a useful explanatory model for 'working under pressure' in complex, volatile, and emergency situations?

The present paper addresses the first question regarding the nature of pressure; a subsequent paper will address the question of its impact on performance. Using detailed interviews with workers in a range of roles and from diverse settings across Ecuador, this study set out to better understand the genesis of pressure, how people respond to it, and to gain insights into managing it more effectively, especially with a view to reducing workplace errors and staff burnout. Rather than imposing pre-formulated definitions of either 'pressure' or 'performance,' we took an emic approach to gain a fresh understanding of how workers themselves experience, describe and make sense of workplace pressure.

Results: This paper catalogs a wide range of pressures as experienced by our participants and maps relationships between them.

Discussion: We argue that while individuals are often held responsible for workplace errors, both 'pressure' and 'performance' are multifactorial, involving individuals, teams, case complexity, expertise, and organizational systems, and these must be taken into account in order to gain better understandings of performing under pressure.