Chapter 9
The HEROES Project: Building Mental Resilience in First Responders

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ABSTRACT
The chapter introduces the HEROES Project, an online training resource that develops mental resilience. The goal is to provide the reader with insight into a resource that can be used as an adjunct to employee assistance programs, critical incident stress debriefing, and counseling. The HEROES Project is the first virtual training course that combines the therapeutic tools of clinical and organizational psychology and provides first responders access to a self-driven wellness program. This respects many first responders’ preference for anonymous and private self-care, while the autonomous nature of the training reinforces for all first responders that they are ultimately responsible for maintaining their own wellness.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-9803-9.ch009
PROBLEM STATEMENT

In the course of their careers, first responders are routinely and repeatedly exposed to direct and vicarious traumatic events (Kleim & Westphal, 2011). The stress resulting from such repetitive exposure to trauma can cause a number of physical and emotional challenges, and if left unchecked, the symptoms can lead to changes in behavior. Many of these problems can be ameliorated through skills training, including techniques designed to boost resilience. Skills training, such as use of firearms, emergency vehicle operations, and defensive tactics, typically requiring updates and re-certifications at regular intervals, has long been a mandate for first responders (Gjefle & Vikari, 2012). However, training programs that treat mental resilience as a perishable skill, which requires intermittent training, are not afforded the same level of organizational commitment. The HEROES Project fills this void by helping first responders develop the skills to effectively withstand the negative implications of workplace stress and repetitive exposure to trauma. The intervening influence of mental resilience in the face of critical incidents provides first responders with coping strategies for handling routine and traumatic stressors.

First responders are often reluctant to seek help when experiencing reactions to work-related stressors (Hyland et al., 2015). Common objections to mental wellness initiatives include stigma, fear of receiving a diagnosis, and discomfort with traditional therapeutic approaches to managing the stressors of the job (Wester, Arndt, Sedivy, & Arndt, 2010). The HEROES Project takes a proactive, preventative perspective of critical incident stress management and provides first responders with resilience training through a series of independent online training sessions. Pulling from multiple psychological disciplines, the curriculum is based on the development of Positive Psychological Capital (PsyCap) and utilizes the tools of Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT).

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POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL CAPITAL

Successfully staffing a first-response organization, in a perfect world, means finding top performers who excel at building relationships in the community and who are proficient problem-solvers. Traditionally, meeting those expectations meant honing in on human capital, recognized widely as the level of education and experience an employee brings to the job (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, in high-stress and multifaceted positions where employees are expected to execute the mission autonomously and are likely to be exposed repeatedly to direct and vicarious trauma, proactive measures must be taken to ensure individual wellness. The creation of advanced learning content requires enhancing the mental characteristics that research has shown have the most powerful influence over the body’s response to fear and uncertainty (Hetrick, Purcell, Garner, & Parslow, 2010).