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# Understanding Spiritual Well-Being Among Critical Incident Stress Management-Trained First Responders

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# Understanding Spiritual Well-Being Among Critical Incident Stress Management-Trained First Responders

by Harvey Burnett

**EMERGENCY FIRST RESPONDERS** (i.e., law enforcement, firefighters, emergency medical services (EMS) and 911 dispatchers) are exposed daily to various community-based traumatic events that may make them more susceptible to developing traumatic stress reactions. In order to help reduce the impact of such trauma-provoking incidents among these professionals, a cross-section of their peers are trained to provide Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM), psychological first aid and other crisis intervention services. Unfortunately, these CISM-trained first responders are not only susceptible to the adverse reactions to the critical incidents they respond to as part of their primary profession but are also at risk of developing vicarious or secondary traumatization from providing crisis intervention services.

Recently, the research team of Harvey Burnett, Justine Jaeger and Kristen Witzel, from the Andrews University School of Social & Behavioral Sciences, investigated how spiritual well-being may be an important proactive resilience component to help CISM-trained first responders reduce their vulnerability to developing post-traumatic and secondary traumatic reactions. This study was also import-

ant in adding knowledge to the trauma field since spiritual wellness literature among this population is very sparse.

Utilizing a mixed-methods design, the researchers collected data from 107 CISM-trained police officers (55), firefighters (17), EMS (18) and 911 dispatchers (17) who were members of the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation and from the Michigan Crisis Response Association. The participants completed questionnaires on their demographics, resilience, spiritual well-being, frequency of spiritual practices, purpose in life, self-acceptance, personal relationships with others, and the level of social disruption due to COVID-19 through an online platform. They also wrote extensively to the following question: "Please describe, how do you maintain your spiritual wellness? Feel free to write in as much detail as possible."

Demographically, the majority of participants were white, female, married, college graduates and Protestant. The average age was 46. Participants also had an average of 20 years of experience in their profession and eight years of providing CISM services. Approximately 99 percent of participants were considered essential workers during the coronavirus pandemic.



Justine Jaeger & Harvey Burnett



Kristen Witzel

A major finding of the study was based on transcendental phenomenological analysis of the responses to the spiritual wellness question. Justine Jaeger, Master of Science in Community & International Development graduate student, was able to extract 82 significant statements from the 107 verbatim responses, thereby formulating the meanings into clusters which resulted in six themes. The first theme was

prayer (e.g., "I reach out in prayer to God"). Prayer was also found as the most common spiritual wellness routine used among all CISM-trained first responders. The next theme was attending religious services (e.g., "going to church as often as possible"). A third theme was participating in religious study groups (e.g., "I attend a Bible study group several times"). The fourth theme was exercise/fitness (e.g., "exercise"). A fifth theme that emerged was outdoor activities (e.g., "hiking, camping, and canoeing"). The final theme was spending time in nature (e.g., "getting out in nature").

The study concluded that spiritual wellness is a key proactive resilience component that is vital in building immunity among CISM-trained first responders against the negative effects of trauma response work. The study was recently published in "Crisis, Stress, and Human Resilience: An International Journal." ■