

MENTAL HEALTH IN THE SECURITY INDUSTRY

Mike Hurst discusses the importance of mental health support in the industry and how organisations can better support staff

I suspect that there has been a mental health issue in the security sector for a long time but, speaking personally, it has only appeared on my radar in the last couple of years. That said, I have been an Ambassador of the veterans' mental health charity, PTSD Resolution, for many years.

Earlier this year I was a judge at the ACS Pacesetters Officers of Distinction awards and one thing that struck me, over and above the great service many of these officers were providing, was the number of them who have had to deal with a mental health challenge. I would estimate that of the 90 entries I judged, around a third of the Officers were being recognised for their actions dealing with often very severe episodes of such, for example, suicide attempts.

Moreover, many more people are feeling that they are able to share their own mental health stories with the sector. This is something that – despite still being hard to do – would undoubtedly have been more difficult a few years ago. Whilst I won't name them in this article, many of these individuals have shared examples of what they had experienced and how they have dealt with it in articles, social media posts and through online forums such as webinars.

In 2021, an abstract I submitted for ASIS International GSX (Global Security Exchange) in Orlando, Florida, Addressing the Mental Health and Wellbeing Crisis within the



Security Profession was accepted for the conference. Whilst, due to travel restrictions, I was unable to attend in person, it gave me the opportunity to work alongside my colleague, Yolanda Hamblen, in preparation for a presentation that we pre-recorded for delivery during GSX – this was very well received. Many of the references and much of the content below came as a result of this collaboration, so I thank Yolanda for her contribution and commitment in tackling this important issue.

The purpose of the presentation and this article was to draw attention to the issue of mental health and wellbeing, to highlight the extent of the problem, reference recent research and articles and to also showcase some strategies and good practices for businesses.

The bigger picture

One thing that is certain is that there is a fair amount of information regarding physical attacks on

security personnel; this is something that we can correlate with mental health issues across the industry. MIND, the mental health charity, lists several possible causes of mental health issues which include experiencing discrimination and stigma, severe or long-term stress, drug and alcohol misuse/self-medication, significant trauma as an adult (such as military combat, being involved in a serious incident in which you feared for your life or being the victim of a violent crime) and physical causes.

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, the pressures on frontline security personnel increased. In December 2020, The UK Office of National Statistics reported that "in the elementary occupations group, those who worked in elementary security occupations had the next highest rate of death involving COVID-19, with 93.4 deaths per 100,000 males (153 deaths). Most of these deaths were among security guards and related occupations (140 deaths; 100.7 deaths per 100,000 males)."

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In addition to these overwhelming statistics, The Security Industry Authority's 2019 Safer Nights Out campaign, to promote safer workplaces, reported that 70% of security staff have been assaulted at work, 34% of security staff have been hospitalised by an assault at work and 45% of security staff have been assaulted with a weapon at work. Whilst these are physical assaults, it is important to





understand that they can have a major impact on mental health and wellbeing.

Another survey by the "Working the Doors" group showed that 36% of Door Supervisors were attacked "at least monthly" and that 51% say they are abused verbally every time they worked. Moreover, 57% say that their mental has been affected more than 24 hours after an incidence of abuse, with 48% saying that they have suffered flashbacks.

According to the 2019 report, "Violence, abuse and the implications for mental health and wellbeing of security operatives in

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the United Kingdom: the invisible problem," By Risto Talas, Mark Button, Mark Doyle & Jaideep Das, physical attacks "have left many of the security operatives suffering from poor mental health and wellbeing and in a surprisingly large number of cases, diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder." What is an even more staggering finding is that over 50% of workers in the UK say that their organisation offers no mental health and wellbeing training or support and that only 31% of managers' report being trained to recognise signs of poor mental health.

The work of organisations

From a global perspective there are some examples of large organisations taking steps to improve the situation. For example, Starbucks has transformed mental health benefits for US employees when it announced in 2020 that the major business would provide "all US partners and eligible family members access to 20 sessions a year with a mental health therapist or coach through Lyra Health, all at no cost to the user."

Network Rail's "Small Talk Saves lives" campaign has also had a



major impact and there are now 23,000 railway employees and stakeholders who are trained in suicide prevention techniques. In addition to these initiatives, Johnson & Johnson recruited 1,000 Mental Health Ambassador employees in 32 countries and trained more than

350 employees in Mental Health First Aid training whilst Deloitte Partnered with Thrive Global to "release content around how to mitigate stress and practice resilience within the workplace".

Some of the most important things that organisations can do to support their staff include: treating people as people and not as symptoms; offering their staff mental health first aid training; introduce peer support systems; provide greater access to welfare and counselling services; appoint mental health champions; encourage a safe culture that people can speak about issues; mental health awareness training.

The International Foundation for Protection Officers (IFPO), where I work as the UK and Ireland Director, has launched a new program as part of its IFPO Learn, elearning platform. Developed by Nuology, "Understanding Mental Health and Wellbeing for Security Teams" is the first of a three-part program aimed at addressing these issues. This is a classic example of a problem, where the longer you leave it, the worse it will get. The sooner we get to grips and start to address the issues, the better.

To find out more information about the work that IFPO is doing, please visit: <https://learn.ifpo.uk/>