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RAP

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When Trauma at Work Hits Hard: Dealing with Reactions and Calling Upon Resilience

Dr. Brian H. Williams, Associate Professor of Surgery at University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, found himself in the media spotlight while he was still reeling from the shooting deaths of five Dallas police officers. Williams was on duty as a trauma staff surgeon at Parkland Memorial Hospital the night many of the wounded arrived in the ED. It was the deadliest event for police officers in the United States since September 11, 2001.

In an emotional TV interview, Williams spoke out against violence and hatred, and his desire for it to stop. "This is not the kind of world we want to leave for our children. Something has to be done," he urged.

Six weeks after the July 2016 shooting incident, Williams reflected on the experience and its lessons for other doctors.

"Right after it happened, I was still intensely grieving," he says. "My mind was still occupied—I was on autopilot. The media attention was something I was not prepared for. Once the press conference occurred, it was like a rocket ship took off and I was along for the ride."

How Can Doctors Prepare?

"Physicians who primarily work in ERs or trauma units are prepared by training to deal with the unexpected which is usually the result of violence, accidents or other life-and-death types of issues," says Tonya Teal Slawinski, Ph.D., Associate Clinical Director at R3 Continuum.

"Trauma is expected, however the overload of

Did you know? RAP has specialists trained in critical incident stress management. Available 24/7, RAP is your local, caring and confidential resource. Trauma can take its toll on your work life and personal life. Yet there are healthy ways to prepare for it and deal with its effects. RAP professionals can help.

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patients with traumatic injuries isn't typically routine," Slawinski says. "The best way to prepare is to have a plan in place that allows for support that is structural, practical and informational. Having the correct resources and support available is the best preparation for a resilient response."

"When an event like this occurs, everyone moves into action—it's our job," Williams says. "Sometimes it's easy to forget that the people you work with are going through the same thing. There's pressure to go back to work, yet we need to support one another and be able to express how we feel about traumatic incidents."

Williams says doctors can prepare emotionally for intense



Someone who has experienced trauma also has gifts to offer all of us — in their depth, their knowledge of our universal vulnerability, and their experience of the power of compassion.

- Sharon Salzberg

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When Facing Intense Trauma, Resilience Matters

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situations. That doesn't mean shutting down emotions, though. "It's not healthy to be emotionally detached," he explains. "That impairs your ability to provide quality care. You can be focused on the job but not emotionally detached."

Define Your Support System

A reliable support network is essential, says Williams. "You can define that any way you want—family, spouse, or friends. It doesn't have to be professional counselors. But if you have no option but to internalize what you've been through, it's not healthy in the long run."

The type of support needed will differ for each individual. "There has been a tendency to pathologize reactions following a disruptive or

traumatic event," Slawinski notes. "This is not to say that physicians don't have a reaction, but we can't assume they will all react the same. There is no 'group reaction' and the majority of reactions subside quickly. Each physician is different in their management of reactions. We all have things that are more sensitive to us and those closest to us will be the most aware of how we are responding."

"If a doctor decides to seek professional help, typically there is an employee assistance program that can guide referrals into treatment if that is needed," says Slawinski. (This is one of the benefits the Resident Assistance Program at USF Health provides.)

"It's important however, to make sure that the therapist fully understands the physician's role and reactions, and does not attempt a one-size-fits-all approach to treatment," Slawinski cautions. "There are many approaches used in professional practice which are not evidence based or supported by research."

Gaining perspective afterward

Support from his wife helped Williams most, he says. "She knows me better than anyone."

He has also received hundreds of emails, letters, text messages and phone

calls. "As I read notes from strangers, I've found it very moving," Williams says. "I'm starting to accept that what I said had an impact beyond what I ever imagined. I'm focusing less on me, because I now see there's a much wider issue that's important to a lot of people."

Williams says he's thought a lot about what he's going to do next. "I don't have all the answers," he says. "I've been talking to a lot of people about what can be done. Going back to the status quo is unacceptable, and I know I will be more active in working to change it."

Moving Forward With Purpose

Resilient individuals often find ways to channel sadness, anger and other strong emotions into a positive, outer-focused response. In *Bouncing Back*, Linda Graham, MFT, writes: "Our mature resilience—the ability to courageously meet challenges and solve problems as they arise—supports us in taking compassionate action in the world. We become agents of change who evoke changes in others."¹

¹ *Bouncing Back: Rewiring Your Brain for Maximum Resilience and Well-Being*; Linda Graham, MFT; New World Library (2013).

Resources:

Dr. Brian Williams video: <http://www.utsouthwestern.edu/life-at/video/bmwc-brian.html>
R3 Continuum www.r3continuum.com
Common Signs and Signals of a Stress Reaction <https://www.foh.hhs.gov/NYCU/StressReaction.asp>

Your Resident Assistance Program

The RAP newsletter is provided as a benefit to medical residents at the USF Health Morsani College of Medicine and their dependents.

We welcome your comments on newsletter topics, however, we cannot provide RAP services by email.

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