

# The Medical Examiner Work Stress and Health Study: From Understanding Mechanisms to Developing Intervention

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**Purpose:** This presentation will describe key findings from the interview and survey portions of the Medical Examiner and Work Stress and Health Study and describe the methods used to develop interventions to address work-related risk factors for post-traumatic stress symptoms. Demonstrations of the intervention program will be provided.

**Methods:** The Medical Examiner Work Stress and Health Study involved survey and interview data collection from medical examiner throughout the US. Over 400 personnel employed either in medical examiner or coroner offices participated. The purpose of the study was to evaluate relative risks for the development of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression and to identify work-related factors which contributed to increased risk.

**Results:** Survey data indicated that working with distressed families predicted 7% of the variance in post-traumatic stress symptoms ( $p < .01$ ), and up to 9% among employees in some job categories. Concerns about being exposed to brutal cases contributed 12% of the variance in depressive symptoms and up to 21% of the variance in post-traumatic stress symptoms ( $ps < .001$ ). Certain types of cases, including infant accidental deaths, were associated with higher rates of mental health symptoms. Exposure to these types of cases elicited a perception of being stigmatized by the work. In turn, stigmatization increased risk for depression. Together, concerns about working with families, stress from emotionally demanding cases, and perceptions of stigmatization predicted 30% of the variance in symptoms of depression and post-traumatic stress ( $ps < .01$ ). Results from interviews with over 50 medical examiner and coroner personnel provided additional qualitative information explicating the relationships between work stress and health.

**Conclusions:** The specific research findings were used to develop a web-based intervention aimed at facilitating medical examiner employees' ability to work with the families of the deceased and to address the cognitive and affective responses to very disturbing cases. The intervention includes a series of exercises based on the latest research and theory in preventing post-traumatic stress symptoms. The intervention includes training in relaxation skills, recognition of emotion, modulation of emotional responses, examination of underlying beliefs and attitudes, communication skills training, and values clarification. The training exercises are specifically tailored to the work experiences of employees' in medical examiner offices.