

# **\*\*MODULE I**

## **FEELINGS AND FACTS ABOUT STRESS AND RESILIENCE**

Stress is an inevitable part of the first responder's Job, and it inevitably flows over into relationships outside the Job – especially family relationships. Rather than attempting to identify and prevent the unavoidable stress triggers that are so much a part of first responders and first responder families, over the next two days we'll focus on building more resilient family relationships to help cope with the effects of this inevitable stress. We'll focus on identifying the stress triggers that influence us as individuals and that in turn have the power to influence our family relationships and we'll focus on developing effective strategies to reduce their impact by promoting the protective factors that increase our resiliency.

First off, for the purposes of this weekend, we will define two terms:

**\*\*Stress:** mental tensions resulting from factors that tend to alter an existent equilibrium, mental strain or pressure caused by anxiety or over work.

**\*\*Resiliency:** the ability to “struggle well” with stressors. Or **resilient:** the ability to recover quickly from set backs.

The idea of learning to deal more effectively and more flexibly with the inevitability of stress is quite different from traditional faulty notions of eliminating or overcoming stress through invulnerability, self-sufficiency and rugged individualism. Building resilience or being resilient is a much more practical, realistic, and effective approach to first responder family stress.

One of the goals of this weekend involves developing effective strategies to reduce the impact of stressors on our lives. **\*\*This includes:**

- Identifying the events, issues and triggers that cause stress.
- Understanding their sources and their effects.
- Finding effective and flexible means to build the kind of resilient relationships that help us deal with these triggers.

We must find ways to step back from stress triggers and to make our relationships a source of strength and support to deal more effectively with the stress we inevitably encounter.

Stress is the **\*\*“nature of the Job”** – it is part and parcel of first responders and the first responder family. Stress is built into the structure of the Job – shift-work, overtime, poor contracts, dealing with the least pleasant issues of society. Some more of these examples are on page 9 in your workbook, page 12 in the facilitator's guide.

Here is a quick overview of the aspects of resilience you should be aware of. This is important because you will be referring to these positive attributes throughout the weekend. There is a complete listing of the following in your workbook on page 10, page 13 in the facilitator's guide.

**\*\*Resilient individuals:**

- Believe they can control their fate and influence events in their lives.
- Have the capacity to anticipate stress triggers and view them as challenges, not crises.
- Have an optimistic view that difficulties can be overcome.
- Forge and nurture close relationships with those who care about them.
- Actively use their close relationships to help deal with stress and stress triggers.
- Have a clear sense of the priorities in their lives.

**\*\*Resilient couples:**

- Work at developing a flexible, connected, and caring family structure.
- Practice clear and honest communication processes.
- Openly and honestly express their positive and negative emotions.
- Express their emotions appropriately – through words, not by 'acting out'.
- Respect the validity of each other's emotional feelings.
- Collaborate with each other in a caring and supportive way to solve problems.

The risk and protective factors in first responder families come from at least three sources: the family, the individual and 'the Job.'

**\*\*Risk factors in the family:**

- Conflicts between job priorities and family priorities.
- Limited knowledge of 'the Job,' its realities, and its demands.
- The first responder's tendency to shield family members from understanding the realities of the Job that trigger stress and diminish open communication.
- Family members' tendency to avoid discussing and understanding the realities of the Job.

**\*\*Risk factors in the individual:**

- Inability or unwillingness to identify and express feelings – especially with family members.

- Denial or avoidance of emotional needs – their own and those of other family members.
- Isolation and emotional detachment or withdrawal from family and friends.
- Limited knowledge of ‘the Job,’ its requirements, and the stress triggers it involves.
- Tendency to express emotions inappropriately – through ‘acting out’ behaviors.

### **\*\*Protective factors in the family**

- Awareness of job-related stress triggers and their effects.
- A family structure that encourages and practices clear, yet flexible, roles and responsibilities.
- Confidence that family members will be supportive and nurturing.
- Commitment to building relationships built on mutual trust, connection, caring, and attachment.
- Healthy communication and conflict resolution skills.
- Recognition that ‘acting out’ behaviors are never appropriate ways to express emotions.

### **\*\*Protective factors in the individual**

- Awareness of job-related stress triggers and their effects.
- Effective, honest, and open communication styles.
- Willingness to seek and accept support from family members.
- Clear sense of the priorities in their lives and of strategies to balance them.
- Avoidance of ‘acting out’ behaviors in favor of verbally expressing emotions.

Now everyone moves on to their small group meeting for Module II.