Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

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Studying the Psychological Effects of Conflict Zones
British and U.S. Military Experiences Provide a Useful Guide for Private Security

WORKING in hazardous environments has the potential to cause psychological problems. Whilst the media would have us believe that it is the bombs, explosions and corpses that are the main cause of difficulty, a plethora of evidence which suggests that relationship difficulties, physical health problems and ongoing conflicts with professional colleagues are also important causes of pressure at work.[1] However, hazardous work conditions do increase the potential for employees to be exposed to extreme situations which can, at times, overwhelm an individual's ability to cope.

Private security companies should take into account a number of key psychological considerations when sending personnel to hazardous work environments. Firstly, it is impossible to screen out "vulnerable" individuals. This approach was tried in the Second World War in the United States. By 1943 the U.S. military had run out of troops and therefore allowed all those who had been screened out back into service. About 80 percent did very well without any signs of breaking down.[2] Similar studies carried out in the British Armed Forces on troops deployed to Iraq in 2003 found a similar outcome: only one in five people who would have screened positive for having mental health difficulties before deployment subsequently developed problems after deployment.[3] Evidence also shows that factors related to the event and even more importantly to the event, such as provision of social support and ensuring a "low pressure" recovery environment, are far more important than pre-incident factors.[4]

Screening out "vulnerable" people simply does not work.

Another issue is that of post-incident counseling. Whilst such an approach might seem attractive, robust scientific evidence shows that the majority of people recover well within four to six weeks after a particularly traumatic incident.[5] Therefore it is both unnecessary, and potentially harmful, to "fly in" external counselors in the aftermath of incidents. In past years there was an almost cult-like movement to psychologically debrief anyone who had been exposed to a traumatic event; the evidence has shown that for most people this was not only not useful, it also had the potential to cause harm.[6] So another important lesson is that although mental health professionals do have a place as advisors, providing treatment for the few that need it, the majority of personnel do well by talking to those they trust such as friends, colleagues and family.

Evidence about the effects of deployment on the mental health of military personnel varies considerably between nations. The studies carried out in the British Armed Forces have shown that in the majority of cases, personnel have not been unduly affected by deployment.[7] The same, however, is not true for U.S. troops who appear to have markedly increased rates of psychological disorder if they have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan in recent years.[8] However some similarities between nations do exist. Those who are "in the thick of it" are more likely to be affected than those in safer areas, and also the longer personnel are deployed, the bigger the risk of problems.[9] How these studies of military personnel might translate to the employees of private security companies is less clear. But the message is clear: deploying to unpleasant areas of the world does carry at least some risk of developing mental health problems. Another issue which is perhaps rather worrying is that within the robust environment of the military, many people who suffer with mental health difficulties do not come forward and ask for help. The stigma associated with mental health problems is a real issue for the military and there is no reason to imagine that it is different for PSCs who have many ex-service personnel on their books.[10]

Evidence from both the U.K. and U.S. demonstrates that some groups, such as combat troops and reservists, are more likely to be distressed than the rest; however extensive research shows that there is no epidemic of "psychological disorder" in the British military. How such data translates to British private security companies is unclear. Therefore given the potential for both legal liability and the need to ensure the risk of developing mental health problems, companies continue to deploy able and psychologically fit personnel to undertake difficult duties, if it appears that there is a need for the private security industry to invest in academic research on the issue.

ENDNOTES

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