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The experience of trauma in forest firefighters through indirect exposure

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One of the characteristics of work in the extinction of forest fires is the exposure of forest firefighters to situations that require a great demand of personal resources, both physical and psychological, which is an important source of stress for these professionals. On occasion, forest firefighters face critical situations that can be a traumatic experience capable of generating deep discomfort, both individually and collectively. This type of negative events can cause invisible emotional scars, difficult to erase and complex approach. Now, we know that an inadequate management of empathy towards victims can facilitate the initiation of a process of secondary traumatic stress in firefighters, due to emotional contagion. This paper deals with indirect exposure to trauma through the indiscriminate consumption of images and traumatic stories offered by the media (press and TV) or social networks. Our research team was able to observe how Forest Fire Brigades, which participated as Control Group in a study on emotional impact in forest firefighters after a forest fire in Spain with fatalities, manifested post-traumatic symptomatology, almost at the same level as those firefighters who participated directly in the works of extinction of that fire. The conclusions indicate that indirect exposure to trauma, uncontrolled empathy towards victims, and social or professional identification with victims may have (both in emergency professionals and in the general population) emotional consequences, similar to those produced in the direct victims of the fire, as well as a latent predisposition to manifest maladaptive behaviors before similar situations or that remember the lived experience. Finally, guidelines are offered on "what to do" to avoid emotional contagion due to indirect exposure to trauma, such as, for example, a dosed and unrepeatable consumption of news and images with a heavy dramatic load.

Biography

Psychologist and Master in Psychopathology and Health. He did doctoral studies in the Department of Personality, Evaluation and Psychological Treatment of the UNED, related to Stress and the Immune System, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Mood. Chief of Brigade in the Forest Fire Service of the Generalitat Valenciana, with more than 20 years of experience. With multidisciplinary training at the Master's level in areas such as: Occupational Health and Safety, Emergency Management, Sport Psychology, Human Resources Management, Mediation, Conflict Resolution and Coaching. Postgraduate in Environmental Consulting and Criminology. As a psychologist, he collaborates with several private clinical centers. Also, with several companies and institutions in the area of training in Psychology in Emergencies and Human Resources management. He is Professor at the University of Valencia in the Master in "Intervention and operational coordination in emergencies and catastrophes" and other postgraduate courses on emergencies. Director and President of the International Scientific-Professional Committee of the National Symposium on Forest Fires (SINIF). He is part of the Editorial Board of several international scientific journals and published numerous articles on forest fires, stress, psychosocial risks and emotional trauma, mainly in relation to emergency services and natural disasters. Member of the Spanish Society for the Study of Anxiety and Stress (SEAS), and the Spanish Association of Clinical Psychology and Psychopathology (AEPCP).

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