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COMMUNICATING A CRISIS:

THE PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER'S PERSPECTIVE

by

SUSAN HALE

Under the Direction of Greg Lisby

ABSTRACT

Established research on certain professions – such as police officers, firefighters, and emergency rescue workers (also called "first responders") – suggests that psychological trauma is related to traumatic events experienced on the job. This has led to research on journalists who have experienced comparable psychological effects due to repeated traumatic exposure that comes from reporting on crimes, murders, car accidents, natural disasters, or other stressful situations – the same events experienced by first responders. This study examines public information officers and any similar psychological effects since this occupational group is a near professional cousin to journalists. Using an online survey, public information officers' exposure to traumatic events experienced on the job was measured as well as the frequency and intensity of trauma exposure.

INDEX WORDS: Mental health and well-being, Stress, Trauma, Public information officer, Public affairs officer, Spokesperson, Public relations, Media relations, Crisis communication, Post-traumatic stress disorder, Intrusion, Avoidance

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# THE PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER'S PERSPECTIVE

by

SUSAN HALE

A Research Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2007

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# COMMUNICATING A CRISIS:

# THE PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER'S PERSPECTIVE

by

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December 2007

# DEDICATION

This has truly been a labor of love. I did not enjoy every minute of graduate school, but I certainly feel as though I am a better person for it. I want to thank so many people for standing by me, but since this journey has taken much of my memory and my energy, I will just note those who have gone above-and-beyond to keep me moving forward and from not giving up.

- *To my friends,* for acknowledging that this was an important goal to me and for understanding why I couldn't always "come out to play." For three years, it was always a "school night!" Anna, Christy, Lisa, and Lynda – thank you for being my constant cheerleaders.
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# CHAPTER 1:

# INTRODUCTION

Police officers, firefighters, and emergency rescue workers witness emotionally disturbing events as a routine part of their jobs (Haslam & Mallon, 2003; McFarlane & Bookless, 2001; Renck, Weisæth, & Skarbö, 2002). While these "first responders" are common at the scenes of deadly automobile accidents, fires, or violent crimes, there are often journalists and public information officers at the scene as well. The nature of these professions places journalists and public information officers in unique situations where they may witness traumatic events and then must communicate about them, often not fully realizing the potential long-term effects of what they have seen or experienced. Consider this journalist's account of reporting a story where a car was struck by a train (Dworznik, 2006). The driver, a popular teenager, died at the scene.

> "Fridays are supposed to be easy." That is what I was thinking as I stared at the remains of a black Dodge Daytona. A closer look revealed I was also looking at some of what remained of its driver. "So this is what happens when you get hit by a train?" remarked my photographer, as he busily went about his business of shooting video of the car. I closed my eyes and turned my face to the sun.
>
> That was fall of 2000 and I was a reporter for the NBC affiliate in Toledo, Ohio. It was a beautiful afternoon; perfect for high school football. And that's exactly where the driver of that Daytona should have been. Joe, the famed center of the Lake High School football team, was dead after having misjudged the speed of an oncoming Amtrak train. The train was traveling 75 miles per hour and rescue workers at the scene said Joe never had a chance. The twisted remains of the car looked almost fake, almost surreal. But the blood covering the seats was as real as it gets. It is an image I can still see when I close my eyes.

Dworznik noted that the accident scene drew news media in addition to emergency responders. Though not specifically noted, it is likely that several public information officers also were present. A public information officer (sometimes called "spokesperson" or "press secretary") is often the key communicator for an organization and commonly represents government agencies such as police, fire, and emergency response departments. They are also

common among hospitals, school systems, utilities companies, and other public-type organizations that serve the community. Public information officers regularly work with the news media, frequently responding to questions from television news reporters, newspaper journalists, or radio reporters. For illustration, Appendix A provides a sample of an average job description for a public information officer.

As the first responders do their jobs to rescue or care for victims, the journalists and public information officers are busy with their own jobs. The journalists take notes and transcribe every detail of the scene, record witnesses' testimonies, and photograph wreckage or other carnage, while the public information officers also collect information to determine what happened and why so they can effectively respond to questions from the news media. At the accident scene described by Dworznik, a police department public information officer would be there to manage information related to the actual accident and a hospital public information officer would respond to questions regarding any medical attention given to the driver or passengers. A school system public information officer would become involved as the news media request personal details about the deceased teen, such as what kind of student he was, whether he was well liked, how he will be remembered by his classmates, and how his death will impact the school.

*Significance of Study*

Because of their jobs, both the journalist and public information officer often share the same space at an incident scene; both witness much of the same images, sounds, odors, and other sensory information. Public information officers, however, have greater access to confidential or sensitive information as well as restricted areas due to their employment with the agency they represent. And because their job "marries" them to any situation involving their agency, the public information officer's work – and trauma exposure – may continue long after the journalist

has filed his story or submitted photographs for the late edition. An *Associated Press* story released during the height of the Hurricane Katrina crisis chronicled the suicide of Sergeant Paul Accardo, a public information officer for the New Orleans Police Department (Burdeau, 2005).

> Back when life was normal and structured, Accardo served as one of the Police Department's chief spokesmen. He reported murders, hostage situations and rapes in measured words, his bespectacled face benign and familiar on the nightly news.
>
> A public information officer…turns the senseless – murder, rape, mayhem – into something orderly for the public. … But in New Orleans for the past week, the chaos seemed endless. Like the rest of the Police Department, Accardo worked hard and long days – sometimes 20 hours. He waded through the mass of flesh and stench in the Louisiana Superdome. He saw the dead in the streets. … Unable to stop the madness and hurt, Accardo sank into depression.

Though the article was a news report on an apparent suicide, the unwitting result is that attention was drawn to public information officers and the psychological affects of communicating during a crisis. A New Orleans television station web site posting the AP story even ran the headline, "Officer who delivered bad news daily found Katrina's news too much to take," taking note of the irony that a public information officer who reported the news had himself become a news story (www.wwltv.com, 2005).

This study examines the psychological effects of those who communicate tragic news events and crises – in particular, the public information officer. Numerous studies have been conducted on professions, including journalists and first responders, that respond to violent and traumatic situations and the psychological effects that can result (Haslam & Mallon, 2003; McFarlane & Bookless, 2001; Renck, Weisæth, & Skarbö, 2002; Simpson & Boggs, 1999). But unlike first responders or journalists, little is known about how public information officers respond to the unique stresses of their jobs. In addition, little is known about their coping responses and any specific training or support programs available to them.

# CHAPTER 2:

# REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To date, no known research about public information officers has been conducted. It is not known why this profession has not been studied, other than to assume that no group or individual has yet been interested in the similarities between journalists and public information officers and how they may parallel in respect to communicating during difficult times. As a result, this literature review primarily focuses on the public information officer's nearest professional cousin – the journalist – in the hopes that similar conclusions may be drawn.

## *Professional Similarities and Differences*

Both journalists and public information officers are part of the communication field and have similar professional goals – to inform and to educate. Training also is comparable; both generally have the same journalistic foundations in fact-gathering and information compilation. Communications departments at colleges and universities often require the same basic writing courses for students majoring in journalism or public relations, as strong writing and reporting skills are necessary for success in both vocations. In addition, both professions experience tight deadlines and the challenge of sometimes communicating sensitive and difficult information to their audiences.

Public information officers routinely have direct communication with the news media and the public in times of emergency or crisis. Like journalists, they often are witnesses to gruesome and horrifying events, yet must carry out their communication duties. But as a main difference between the two professions, public information officers are part of the "responding team" during a crisis and often have direct access to confidential information, crime scenes and other areas or information that is off-limits to journalists, which furthers their exposure to

traumatic events. Whereas a journalist may cover a story and move on to a completely different topic or issue once the deadline is met, the public information officer continues with the original story – often for days, weeks, or even years. As an example, journalists who covered the April 1999 Columbine High School shootings reported on the story as long as it was of major news interest, but once it was no longer a top headline, they moved on to other non-Columbine stories. Meanwhile, the public information officers for both the Jefferson County School System and the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office are still heavily involved in any recurring story relating to the incident. For these public information officers, the Columbine tragedy never ends.

*Indications of Traumatic Stress*

Journalists are still a relatively unstudied group when it comes to determining the psychological effects of their jobs, particularly those that come from exposure to traumatic events. Simpson and Boggs (1999) were among the first researchers to make a correlation between emergency first responders' psychological well-being and that of journalists. The professions share similarities in their emotional responses to trauma, and both groups are prone to symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other psychological problems (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

The American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Ed. (1994) characterizes post-traumatic stress disorder through four main criteria: re-experiencing the stressful event, persistent avoidance, increased anxiety and arousal, and impairment. Specific symptoms include recurring recollections or dreams and intense distress over reminders of or actual re-exposure to the event (i.e., re-experiencing the event). Symptoms also include an effort to avoid thoughts and feelings related to the event as well as an inability to remember important aspects (i.e., persistent avoidance). Sleep difficulties and problems with concentration are reported, as well as being preoccupied with personal safety, having

exaggerated startle responses, and exhibiting irritability and/or outbursts of anger (i.e., increased anxiety and arousal). The combined symptoms can cause distress and/or impairment in social, occupational, or other critical areas of functioning (i.e., impairment).

In 1994, the American Psychological Association added a diagnosis for acute stress disorder (ASD), which is used to identify people who have experienced trauma and are at risk for developing post-traumatic stress disorder. Acute stress disorder differs from PTSD by its focus on dissociation, a coping strategy where individuals dissociate or "remove themselves emotionally" from a situation. Individuals affected by acute stress disorder experience a sense of numbing or detachment, reduced awareness of their surroundings, loss of reality, depersonalization, or dissociative amnesia (American Psychological Association, 1994; Bryant, 2003).

Journalists have unique job responsibilities that often put them in harm's way, creating a higher likelihood for trauma-related disorders. The documentary nature of journalism calls for the study and review of cultures, conflicts, and situations that are unstable, unpredictable, and ever-changing (Collins, 2001; Owens, 2001). While many journalists appear to enjoy the challenges brought on by potential risk, the true danger is that too much exposure to trauma and violence may have negative consequences on mental and physical health. Research has shown that journalists are increasingly prone to experience post-traumatic stress disorder or other psychological problems due to repeated exposure to traumatic events (Feinstein & Nicolson, 2005; Feinstein & Owen, 2002; Feinstein, Owen, & Blair, 2002; Simpson, 2004; Simpson & Boggs, 1999). Since public information officers are often at the same incidents as journalists, it might be assumed that they too experience prolonged exposure to stress or trauma.

*Physical and Psychological Pressures*

Pressures are increasing on journalists as they find themselves in new territory, literally, due to the onset of 24-hour news coverage and the demand for international war reporting and

coverage of disasters around the world. Technology allows journalists to report from nearly anywhere, at any time. Imbedded reporting is becoming a common assignment, requiring that journalists live and travel with military groups for extended periods (Feinstein & Nicolson, 2005; Ghaffar & Feinstein, 2005). Not only are these journalists prone to witnessing horrific war events, there are the added pressures of meeting tighter than normal deadlines in keeping with 24-hour reporting. And there is the ultimate anxiety – keeping safe, or even alive, in a war zone where violence against journalists is on the rise (Collins, 2001). The 2002 beheading of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl in Pakistan and the 2006 Iraq roadside bomb that seriously injured ABC News' Bob Woodruff and cameraman Doug Vogt are both chilling reminders of the new dangers facing international journalists. Feinstein, Owen, and Blair (2002) studied wartime journalists and concluded that the pressures of the job directly contribute to symptoms of PTSD. Journalists who were eyewitnesses to state-ordered executions were similarly affected and found to suffer PTSD and/or acute stress disorder (Freinkel, Koopman, & Spiegel, 1994).

Public information officers are not dissimilar to journalists in relation to imbedded reporting and adhering to strict deadlines. Military groups have public affairs officers which serve the same function as public information officers. Unlike journalists, public affairs officers are not temporarily assigned to the military unit; they are full-time military staff. They do, however, often live and travel with the unit, similar to an imbedded reporter.

During situations of extreme crisis, public information officers work around the clock to satisfy the hunger of a 24-hour news media and their deadlines. A reporter's deadline becomes the public information officer's deadline. Consider this example posted on CNN's Special Reports web site (www.cnn.com, 2001):

> The Columbine story was covered around the clock, and the demand for new information was constant. In the first two days alone, [public information officer Steve] Davis did 134 on-camera interviews in addition to his hourly briefings. … After several 20-hour days, Davis received help from Sgt. Jim Parr, who had

> filled the Sheriff's PIO slot before Davis. As the crisis wore on, Parr served as the back-up, on-camera spokesman. Davis started work at 4 a.m., and then Parr came in at noon. The two worked together for several hours to insure they were dispensing consistent, accurate information, and then Davis would go back to his office for a few hours and then home to sleep. Meanwhile, Parr took over the reigns [sic] as spokesman for the late afternoon and evening.
>
> The high media interest was immediately evident. By 11:33 a.m., local media had contacted dispatch asking for information about the shootings; by 11:42 a.m., the first national news organization had called. Soon news helicopters were flying over the school, and other media figures – including Jay Leno and Larry King –were calling to request interviews with responding officers and Sheriff [John P.] Stone. By midnight, 339 media calls had come into dispatch from more than 60 countries.

In addition to emotional strain, stress manifests itself physically in journalists. Journalists experience severe physical fatigue due to the increasing demands of a global village of news consumers and 24-hour news coverage. Other work-related health problems include headaches, sleeping and concentration difficulties, short temper, upset stomachs, and low morale and job dissatisfaction (Collins, 2001). Public information officers may suffer from these symptoms as well due to long-term stress exposure.

Pyevich, Newman, and Daleiden (2003) studied the frequency and intensity of exposure to job-related traumatic events and its relationship to developing PTSD or PTSD symptoms. Their conclusions were that frequency and intensity of exposure to traumatic events did indeed affect development of PTSD among journalists since they are at a higher risk of exposure than the general public due to their unique job responsibilities.

Identifying PTSD or PTSD symptoms, however, is not a simple process and has many compounding factors. Marais and Stuart (2005) found that a journalist's biological factors and emotional temperament has an impact on an individual developing PTSD; that exposure to the traumatic event itself was not the only origin of PTSD. Similarly, Pyevich, Newman, and Daleiden (2003) studied journalists' cognitive mindsets, such as whether the journalist was a positive-minded or negative-minded individual, to predict the likelihood of experiencing PTSD.

The studies are relevant because they provide an alternative view to how and why some journalists are heavily affected by reporting on traumatic events, and why others are seemingly unaffected. It is possible that the traumatic event was not the only cause of traumatization or stress; the journalist may be predisposed to psychological impact because of existing biological factors, such as depression or generalized anxiety disorder. The studies also suggest that there is a relationship between personal beliefs and positive/negative outlooks on life with the development or prevention of post-traumatic stress disorder among journalists.

In addition to PTSD, research suggests that journalists can suffer from "vicarious traumatization," also called "secondary traumatization," as a result of interviewing victims of a crime or crisis (Lerias & Byrne, 2003; McMahon, 2001). Vicarious traumatization is most often associated with those who routinely work with victims, such as firefighters, rescue workers, hospital staff, and therapists (Palm, Polusny, & Follette, 2004), but Simpson and Boggs (1999) noted that journalists can suffer from it as well. The personal nature of interviewing leads some journalists to identify with the victim and absorb their feelings of pain, anxiety, or guilt. Similarly, Ochberg (1996) indicated that journalists are especially prone to suffer from a form of PTSD known as "secondary traumatic stress" or "compassion fatigue." Lerias and Byrne (2003) concluded that vicarious traumatization can be a precursor to developing post-traumatic stress disorder. Although public information officers do not routinely interview victims, they do spend an extended period of time with those affected by traumatic situations. The nature of their employment with the responding agencies gives public information officers extensive access to the incident scenes and to any parties involved, whereas journalists often have temporary or limited access. This makes the notion credible that public information officers also may suffer from aspects of vicarious traumatization, secondary traumatization, secondary traumatic stress, or compassion fatigue.

News photographers, including videographers, also have been found to experience job-related stress (Feinstein & Owen, 2002; Newman, Simpson, & Handschuh, 2003). Schwanbeck's (2004) article on journalists' reactions to reporting on The Station nightclub fire – the 2003 Rhode Island fire where 100 people died due to faulty pyrotechnics – notes the special challenges facing photojournalists.

> For the people that are taking the visuals, there's that sense (that) interposing that sheet of glass between you and what's happening is going to protect you to a degree, but it doesn't. … In fact…reporters can turn away from a gruesome scene but it's the photographer who ends up seeing everything.

This study is relevant in that it documents the effects of witnessing a traumatic scene. As mentioned, public information officers have greater access to restricted areas, which indicates that they may witness more gruesome details than the average journalist.

*Coping Behaviors*

Little is known about the coping responses used by public information officers. For journalists, it is known that post-traumatic stress disorder and acute stress disorder both trigger emotional responses of dissociation, which prompt avoidance, defined as ignoring or consciously pushing away negative feelings (Freinkel, Koopman, & Spiegel, 1994; McFarlane, 1992). Both behaviors serve as a coping mechanism for dealing with highly stressful or traumatic events. Some journalists have reported "feeling numb" as a result of experiencing high levels of traumatic events; that when an emotional response is warranted they often feel nothing at all. This desensitized response, according to Simpson and Boggs (1999), is an emotional reaction in itself and one that promotes avoidance, allowing the journalist to cope with what was experienced by pushing away the uncomfortable feelings.

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping lends additional insight into how emotional temperament and cognitive mindset affect an individual's psychological disposition.

The person's primary appraisal of the event judges its significance and whether it is "stressful, positive, controllable, challenging, benign, or irrelevant" (Wenzel, Glanz, & Lerman, 2002). The secondary appraisal then assesses the "controllability" of the situation and how he or she will allocate emotional resources to coping. Coping efforts include problem management (aiming to change the stressful situation) and emotional regulation (changing the way one thinks or feels about the situation). These efforts are important in that positive-minded individuals likely will choose healthier, more positive coping strategies such as problem solving, talking about the issue with others, or seeking professional help. Negative-minded individuals likely will turn to emotional avoidance or dissociation rather than facing the stressor.

Another coping strategy is the act of finding meaning within a traumatic event – called "meaning-based coping" in the Transactional Model. Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) suggest that an individual can reframe or re-interpret the event to align with their own values, beliefs, and goals; therefore providing the individual a sense of mastery or control and that the event was ultimately a positive occurrence. Likewise, "stress-related growth" can be a coping strategy when an individual gains acceptance and positive re-interpretation over the stressful event by associating it with a perception of personal change or growth (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2004).

Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) suggest that coping also occurs in the actual act of writing a narrative; referred to as a "talking cure" in Himmelstein and Faithorn's research (2002). This holds special significance for journalists, and perhaps for public information officers, as the nature of journalism requires that information be assimilated, analyzed, and then reported. This act allows the journalist to confront what they have encountered and then make sense of it so they can report it effectively. The cathartic behavior helps minimize the psychological effects of the traumatic event and is unique to the communication profession; emergency first responders do not have a similar process imbedded in their job duties.

Dworznik's study (2006) on journalism and trauma suggested that journalists cope by reframing their experience through narratives. Using Baumeister and Newman's (1994) autobiographical narratives study as a framework, Dworznik interviewed journalists to learn what their individual accounts of a traumatic event revealed about coping styles and behaviors. She found that the journalists used meaning-based coping strategies by reframing the event in their memory as one of four motivations – goal achievement ("getting the story," giving a victim or the victim's family an opportunity to share their story); fulfillment (learning something about themselves or their lives, learning to value their own/others' lives, learning to perform their job better); justification (doing whatever it took to get the story, shifting blame or responsibility); control/lack of control (maintaining or losing composure under stress); and self-worth (congratulating self on good performance). Public information officers might benefit from "talking cures" or using narratives as they prepare for press briefings, write media statements, and give interviews to the news media.

Like others facing traumatic stress, some journalists are prone to excessive alcohol or drug use to relieve the psychological impact of what they have seen or heard. Studies on wartime journalists indicate that they are likely to self-medicate with alcohol or marijuana and share "war stories" – in this case, literally – with colleagues to deal with work-related stress (Feinstein & Nicolson, 2005; Ghaffar & Feinstein, 2005; Himmelstein & Faithorn, 2002). This act of colleague bonding and search for social support becomes a way to cope with the traumatic events they witness. By sharing their stories and drinking together, the journalists are able to confront the horrors instead of dissociating from or avoiding their memories.

*Support Programs and Training Organizations*

Coping strategies are being addressed by educational programs for journalists, such as the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma (Simpson, 2004). Located at the University of Washington

in Seattle, the Dart Center provides journalism students preparing to enter the workforce, as well as veteran journalists, with resources and training on how to work with victims (Maxson, 1999). The program also teaches how to recognize and cope with job-related stress. Similar programs are located at Michigan State University and the University of Central Oklahoma (Johnson, 1999). For photojournalists, the National Press Photographers Association created the Critical Incident Response Team, a volunteer network of experienced, trained photographers who provide counsel and support (National Press Photographers Association, 2004).

Programs are established internationally as well. Newscoverage Unlimited was founded in 2000 by a Montreal journalist in response to a Nova Scotia jetliner crash that killed 229 people. The support organization began informally, almost unintentionally, as journalists covering the accident continually gathered and discussed what they saw or experienced (Sibbald, 2002). The Dart Center (spelled 'Centre' outside of the United States) has offices in London and Sydney to continue its training and research programs among a more global audience of journalists.

No known centralized support and training programs, such as those offered through the Dart Center, have been formed primarily for public information officers. Several professional organizations exist for public information officers of different industries, such as the National Information Officers Association (emergency responders) and the National School Public Relations Association (school systems). Each has an annual conference devoted to professional development and training. With the exception of the National Information Officers Association, none has a focus on support related to communicating during a crisis. As an example, the following was listed in the organization's 2007 conference agenda (www.nioa.org, 2007):

> "Caring for the Caregiver: Surviving the Stress of Being an Emergency Spokesperson." Being around the big incidents and adrenaline-pumping events – although it's one of the main reasons people in our business become PIOs, it's also the main reason we burn out. The stress doesn't come entirely from external sources, but internal demands as well.

> In this session, meet Chaplain George Doebler from the University of Tennessee Medical Center. He will provide important tips on how to maintain our emotional balance when forces are pushing from every angle. Doebler spent more than 10 years at the National Institute of Mental Health and has spent the last 20 years counseling doctors and other medical professionals at the medical center's Level I Trauma Center. In addition to training chaplain residents, Doebler spends much of his time lecturing to groups across the country about dealing with stress. If the NIOA could mandate attendance at one session at the conference, this would be it!

The last line, "If the NIOA could mandate attendance at one session at the conference, this would be it!" illustrates the importance of training and support programs in this communication field.

*Research Objectives*

While journalists' emotional responses to traumatic events have been studied, currently there is no known research about the job-related psychological effects on public information officers. Therefore, the specific aims of this preliminary research study were to study the effects on public information officers who have duties to communicate tragic news events and crises. For the context of this study, it was public information officers that were examined rather than members of the public relations professional community at large.

The established research on journalists may provide insight into the experiences of public information officers; however, conclusions needed to be drawn by new studies targeted toward this specific group. After a review of the literature and a discussion with other public information officers, three research questions were posed in this preliminary study:

RQ1: How frequently – and at what magnitude – are public information officers exposed to job-related traumatic events?

RQ2: Are public information officers psychologically affected by traumatic events? How are they affected?

RQ3: When faced with traumatic events or stress, what coping behaviors are used by public information officers?

# CHAPTER 3

# METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional "Public Information Officer Survey" (see Appendix C) was used to measure public information officers' personal and professional backgrounds, coping behaviors, and exposure to traumatic events experienced on the job. It also measured the intensity of trauma exposure. The survey was hosted on a web site, rather than distributed as a traditional paper survey, because web surveys allow more convenience for both the participant – in taking the survey – and the researcher – in reaching the target audience and then analyzing the results. In addition, online survey companies offer data analysis features that reduce error on the part of the researcher and decrease tabulation time.

QuestionPro was chosen as the host web survey site because of its previous work with companies such as Microsoft, U.S. Bancorp, Quest Communications, UBS Investment Bank and other large, prominent companies. The researcher received a free, but limited, six-month subscription to use the web survey software due to her affiliation with Georgia State University's graduate programs. QuestionPro's "student research sponsorship" subscription allowed basic data analysis, such as calculating means and percentages for each question's answer options, but did not allow data to be filtered by gender, age, ethnicity, education level, professional organization, etc., to see if those factors had any additional influence.

## *Participants*

Members of the National Information Officers Association (NIOA) and the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) were targeted for the online survey. NIOA was chosen because its members consist of public information officers for fire, police, and emergency response agencies. NSPRA was similarly identified because their members are the

communications officers for public school systems. At the time of this study, NIOA reported 600 members and NSPRA reported 1,960 members nationally – a combined population of approximately 2,500. NIOA and NSPRA represent communications officers who work in the public sector and have specific duties to communicate to the general public and/or news media, rather than private shareholders or other insulated audiences. Their members are more likely to be "true" public information officers; meaning, the members' job responsibilities require communication to various publics during times of a crisis or emergency. They have different responsibilities than a general public relations professional who manages publicity, marketing, or advertising campaigns. Therefore, the memberships of other general public relations organizations were not targeted for the survey.

*Procedure*

The survey was made available online for approximately two weeks to all NIOA and NSPRA members. Contact was made with the organizations' leadership to request cooperation and assistance with the survey. The organizations sent their entire membership an invitation email (see Appendix B) encouraging participation. The email message provided a brief introduction to the study as well as a web link leading to the QuestionPro web site hosting the survey. In return for their assistance, the researcher agreed to share the survey results with the organizations' leadership so that they may address possible professional development needs identified through the study. Survey responses were confidential and no personally identifiable information was collected unless the respondent provided it voluntarily.

Prior to beginning the survey, participants read and approved a consent form posted on the web site. They were informed of the study's general purpose, how their responses were being used, and that participation could be discontinued at any time. After completing the survey, participants were directed to a screen that provided debriefing information and allowed for

voluntary feedback on the survey process. If desired, they also could provide contact information so that the completed study could be shared with them.

*Measures*

The survey measured four key areas: exposure to trauma experienced on the job, intensity of exposure, attitudes toward traumatic events, and coping behaviors. Demographic data also were collected.

*Exposure to trauma.* Exposure to trauma experienced on the job was assessed using a scale modified from Pyevich, Newman, and Daleiden's (2003) Journalist Trauma Exposure Scale. Questions 12-25 of the survey examined exposure to different types of traumatic events that public information officers might experience while performing their jobs. The scale required slight modification since it was framed in the context of a journalist's experiences and job responsibilities. The statements were restructured so that they reflected the nature of the public information officer's job to communicate as an agency/organization spokesperson, rather than as a news reporter. Participants responded using a nominal "Yes / No / No Answer" scale.

*Intensity of exposure.* Intensity of exposure also was examined using Pyevich et al's Journalist Trauma Exposure Scale. Questions 26-36 provided types of extreme situations possibly encountered by public information officers as they perform their communication duties. Participants responded using a nominal "Yes / No / No Answer" scale.

*Attitudes toward traumatic events.* Attitudes toward traumatic events were collected through an Impact of Event Scale originally developed by Horowitz, Wilner, and Alvarez (1979). Specifically, the scale looked for "intrusion" and "avoidance," which are indicators of post-traumatic stress disorder. Simpson and Boggs (1999) modified the scale to measure the occurrence of PTSD symptoms among journalists. The "Adapted Impact of Event Scale" required very little adjustment for this study. The only change made was the time period

respondents used for recalling intrusion and avoidance indicators. Simpson and Boggs asked respondents to only think back over the most recent week. However, in the scale used in this study, respondents were not limited to recall only the past seven days. Participants were presented 15 statements concerning their attitudes toward stressful events and responded to a five-point Likert scale. These were addressed by questions 37-51 in the survey.

*Coping behaviors.* Attitudes toward coping behaviors, as well as increases in alcohol and/or drug use, were assessed through questions 52-63 using a nominal "Yes / No / No Answer" scale. The questions were developed through discussions with other public information officers and Georgia State University professors while setting the study's parameters.

*Demographic data.* Demographic data, such as years of work experience and general information about the respondents' company/organization (questions 1-11), and gender, age, ethnicity, education, and income (questions 64-69), also were collected.

# CHAPTER 4:

# RESULTS

*Demographic Data*

According to web analysis reports, 83 individuals completed the online Public Information Officer Survey during the two-week period. Forty-three responses (51.8%) were received from the National Information Officers Association and 37 responses (44.5%) were received from the National School Public Relations Association. The remaining participants did not identify an organization. Of the 83 respondents, 44 were male and 39 were female, with a mean age of 45.4 years (oldest reported age was 65 and youngest was 25). Responses were received from 75 Caucasian/White participants (90.3%), three African-American/Black participants (3.6%), and one Hispanic/Latino participant (1.2%). Four participants (4.8%) did not identify their race or ethnicity.

The mean tenure for having public relations or communications as part of the respondents' professional duties was 14.7 years, with the longest reported tenure being 38 years and shortest being six months. Sixty-nine percent reported an annual salary in the range of $50,000-$100,000, with 15.6% reporting higher than $100,000. Ninety-six percent were employed full-time in the communications field.

More than half (57.8%) of the respondents reported that 100% of their work is devoted to communications or public relations and 79.5% were employed in upper or middle management positions. Most participants reported that, during an average week, they communicated most regularly with the news media (36.1%) followed by the community (27.7%), internal employees (19.2%), and senior management (13.2%).

Overwhelmingly, most participants reported working in the public sector (91.5%) with the remaining working for privately-held businesses/corporations or not-for-profit organizations.

Public safety (42.1%) and primary/secondary education (42.1%) were the industries respondents most closely identified with, with the remaining 15.8% working in marketing, media, local government, public health, or emergency management capacities. Organizational size ranged from fewer than 100 employees (7.2%), to 101-1,000 employees (45.7%), 1,001-5,000 employees (33.7%), 5,001-10,000 employees (7.2%), to more than 10,000 employees (3.6%). At least one survey response was received from half of the 50 states, with Georgia (15.6%) and Florida (13.2%) providing the most responses. Most participants (49.4%) reported serving suburban communities, with others serving communities in urban (30.1%) and rural (18%) areas.

Education levels varied among the participants. Nearly 76% were college graduates with their highest level of education completed being a Bachelor's program (50.6%), Master's program (22.8%), or Doctoral program (2.4%). Three percent held only a high school diploma, 12% completed some coursework toward a college degree, and 8.4% earned an Associate's (two-year) degree. Sixty-five percent of those with a college degree reported studying journalism or public relations, or having had other formal communications training.

*Exposure to Work-Related Traumatic Events*

Table 1 presents 14 statements describing different types of traumatic events that public information officers commonly are called on to communicate as part of their jobs. Of the 83 survey respondents, 80 answered that they had experienced one or more events listed in Table 1 at least once during their communication career. According to survey data, the top four events public information officers had communicated about were "motor vehicle accident" (87.9% of respondents had experienced), "injured or dead child" (83.1% had experienced), "other events where a person had been hurt or killed" (79.5% had experienced), and "physical assault" (75.9% had experienced). The results were not unexpected considering that those targeted for the survey were largely public information officers representing the public safety field and school systems (see discussion in

Chapter 5). The four least experienced events were “mass casualties” (66.2% of respondents had never experienced), “torture or kidnapping” (63.8% had never experienced), “other mass-transportation related accidents” (63.8% had never experienced), and “employee lay-offs” (62.6% had never experienced).

Table 1
*Communication Events Providing Exposure to Trauma or Stress* (*N* = 83)

| Q# | Communication Event | Yes (%) | No (%) | No Answer (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 12 | Injured or dead child | 69 (83.1) | 14 (16.8) | 0 (0.0) |
| 13 | Mass casualties | 28 (33.7) | 55 (66.2) | 0 (0.0) |
| 14 | Motor vehicle accident | 73 (87.9) | 10 (12.0) | 0 (0.0) |
| 15 | Other mass transportation-related accident, i.e. train, subway, airplane, etc. | 30 (36.1) | 53 (63.8) | 0 (0.0) |
| 16 | Person hurt or killed on the job | 56 (67.4) | 27 (32.5) | 0 (0.0) |
| 17 | Violence in the workplace | 41 (49.4) | 42 (50.6) | 0 (0.0) |
| 18 | Life-threatening illness affecting an employee | 48 (57.8) | 35 (42.1) | 0 (0.0) |
| 19 | Murder | 40 (48.1) | 43 (51.8) | 0 (0.0) |
| 20 | Employee lay-offs | 31 (37.3) | 52 (62.6) | 0 (0.0) |
| 21 | Physical assault | 63 (75.9) | 20 (24.1) | 0 (0.0) |
| 22 | Sexual assault or sexual harassment | 59 (71.0) | 24 (28.9) | 0 (0.0) |
| 23 | Torture or kidnapping | 29 (34.9) | 53 (63.8) | 1 (1.2) |
| 24 | Natural disaster | 51 (61.4) | 32 (38.5) | 0 (0.0) |
| 25 | Other events where a person has been hurt or killed | 66 (79.5) | 16 (19.2) | 1 (1.2) |

Nearly half (48.1%) of those responding ‘yes’ to an event had communicated about at least 10 of the 14 events in Table 1 at least once – “motor vehicle accident” (87.9%), “injured or dead

child" (83.1%), "other events where a person has been hurt or killed" (79.5%), "physical assault" (75.9%), "sexual assault/sexual harassment" (71.0%), "person hurt or killed on the job" (67.4%), "natural disaster" (61.4%), "life-threatening illness affecting an employee" (57.8%), "violence in the workplace" (49.4%), and "murder" (48.1%). "Murder" and "violence in the workplace" were the only events where nearly an equal amount of respondents reported communicating about it at least once or reported that they had not communicated about it at all. Forty respondents (48.1%) said that they had communicated about murder at least once while 43 (51.8%) had not. Forty-one respondents (49.4%) reported communicating about violence in the workplace whereas 42 respondents (50.6%) had not.

*Intensity of Exposure*

Table 2 presents 11 statements that describe situations where public information officers may face a higher level of intensity while performing their communication job duties. For example, the statement "communicated traumatic event 'at the scene' " describes a situation where the public information is not only communicating about a particular event or issue (such as those listed in Table 1), but also is facing additional pressures because the communication is occurring at the scene rather than at a neutral location. All respondents provided 'yes' or 'no' answers to each of the events except "performed communication duties when the victim/perpetrator was someone I knew" and "performed communication job duties when the victim/perpetrator physically resembled or reminded me of someone I knew." One respondent selected 'no answer' for the first statement and three respondents selected 'no answer' for the second statement.

As would be expected for a public information officer, who has working with the news media as a major job responsibility (see Appendix A), more than a third (77.5%) of all participants reported communicating at the scene of a traumatic or stressful event. This was not unexpected since reporters typically gather where the news event occurred and public

information officers often must be physically on site to meet the media's communication needs. In addition, survey data showed that 65% of the participants have handled more than one of the communication events listed in Table 1 during the same week.

Table 2
*Situations Adding Intensity to Work-Related Traumatic or Stressful Events* (*N* = 80)

| Q# | Situation | Yes (%) | No (%) | No Answer (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 26 | Communicated traumatic event "at the scene" | 62 (77.5) | 18 (22.5) | 0 (0.0) |
| 27 | Communicated more than one of the events listed in questions 12-25 (Table 1) within the same week | 52 (65.0) | 28 (35.0) | 0 (0.0) |
| 28 | Physically attacked while performing communication job duties | 4 (5.0) | 76 (95.0) | 0 (0.0) |
| 29 | Verbally threatened while performing communication job duties | 29 (36.2) | 51 (63.7) | 0 (0.0) |
| 30 | Injured while performing communication job duties | 2 (2.5) | 78 (97.5) | 0 (0.0) |
| 31 | Witnessed a dead body or seriously injured individual while performing communication job duties | 49 (61.2) | 31 (38.7) | 0 (0.0) |
| 32 | Witnessed someone hurt or killed while performing communication job duties | 17 (21.2) | 63 (78.7) | 0 (0.0) |
| 33 | Personally announced news of death to relatives or friends of the victim | 18 (22.5) | 62 (77.5) | 0 (0.0) |
| 34 | Witnessed a particularly gruesome scene | 40 (50.0) | 40 (50.0) | 0 (0.0) |
| 35 | Performed communication job duties when the victim/perpetrator was someone I knew | 37 (46.2) | 42 (52.5) | 1 (1.2) |
| 36 | Performed communication job duties when the victim/perpetrator physically resembled or reminded me of someone I knew | 22 (27.5) | 55 (68.7) | 3 (3.7) |

Data also showed that 61.2% of the respondents reported witnessing a dead body or a seriously injured individual as part of their communication job duties and 21.2% had witnessed a person get hurt or killed while working. Physical harm to oneself was not highly reported among the participants. Five percent of the respondents had been physically attacked while performing

their communication duties and 2.5% actually were physically injured on the job. However, 36.2% of public information officers reported being verbally threatened at least once.

The number of public information officers witnessing a "particularly gruesome scene" was equally split among those who had (40 responses; 50%) and those who had not (40 responses, 50%). Likewise, there was not a great difference between those who reported knowing the victim/perpetrator that they were communicating about (37 responses; 46.2%) and those who did not know the individuals (42 responses; 52.5%). There was, however, a larger difference in responses to the question, "I have performed communication job duties when the victim/perpetrator physically resembled or reminded me of someone I knew." Nearly 69% of the respondents indicated they had never encountered that situation.

*Avoidance and Intrusion Indicators*

Table 3 depicts public information officers' emotional experiences when recalling stressful or traumatic events. The most frequent response was "not at all" in 10 of the 15 statements. "Rarely" was the second most frequently reported answer, occurring in three statements, while "sometimes" and "often" were reported as the most common answer in one statement each. A larger number of respondents selected 'no answer' to this series of questions than others within the survey. The reason is not known – perhaps it was due to the participants growing tired of answering questions and desiring to get to the end or it could be due to a larger issue relating directly to avoidance; that not answering the question is a way of avoiding memories of the situation.

In addition, participants responding with an affirmative answer (i.e., 'rarely,' 'sometimes,' or 'often,' as opposed to 'not at all' or 'no answer') were counted together and reported as a percentage to indicate the number of participants who agreed with that statement on some level.

However, a high percentage answering affirmatively to the statements did not necessarily mean that a high level of psychological trauma had been experienced (see discussion in Chapter 5).

Table 3
*Statements Measuring PTSD Intrusion and Avoidance Indicators* (*N* = 80)

| Q# | Intrusion and Avoidance Indicators | Not at all (%) | Rarely (%) | Some-times (%) | Often (%) | No Answer (%) | Mode | # Answering Affirmatively (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 37 | I find myself thinking about things when I don't mean to | 10 (12.5) | 25 (31.2) | 35 (43.7) | 5 (6.2) | 5 (6.2) | Some-times | 65 (81.2) |
| 38 | When I think about things I don't mean to, I try not to get upset | 16 (20.0) | 10 (12.5) | 20 (25.0) | 23 (28.7) | 11 (13.7) | Often | 53 (66.2) |
| 39 | There are things on my mind that I keep trying to remove from my memory | 25 (31.2) | 34 (42.5) | 10 (12.5) | 5 (6.2) | 6 (7.5) | Rarely | 49 (61.2) |
| 40 | There are things that come into my mind that keep me from falling asleep or staying asleep | 29 (36.2) | 21 (26.2) | 19 (23.7) | 4 (5.0) | 7 (8.7) | Not at all | 44 (55.0) |
| 41 | I have waves of strong feelings about these things | 24 (30.0) | 30 (37.5) | 15 (18.7) | 4 (5.0) | 7 (8.7) | Rarely | 49 (61.2) |
| 42 | I have dreams about these things | 41 (51.2) | 26 (32.5) | 6 (7.5) | 0 (0.0) | 7 (8.7) | Not at all | 32 (40.0) |
| 43 | I stay away from reminders about these things | 38 (47.5) | 12 (15.0) | 16 (20.0) | 3 (3.7) | 11 (13.7) | Not at all | 31 (38.7) |
| 44 | I feel as if these things haven't happened or aren't real | 52 (65.0) | 10 (12.5) | 5 (6.2) | 4 (5.0) | 9 (11.2) | Not at all | 19 (23.7) |
| 45 | I try not to talk about these things | 36 (45.0) | 16 (20.0) | 18 (22.5) | 4 (5.0) | 6 (7.5) | Not at all | 38 (47.5) |
| 46 | Pictures of these things pop into my mind | 22 (27.5) | 29 (36.2) | 20 (25.0) | 1 (1.2) | 8 (10.0) | Rarely | 50 (62.5) |
| 47 | Other things keep making me think about the things that bother me | 33 (41.2) | 23 (28.7) | 14 (17.5) | 2 (2.5) | 8 (10.0) | Not at all | 39 (48.7) |
| 48 | I am aware that I still have a lot of feelings about some things but I don't deal with them | 36 (45.0) | 23 (28.7) | 10 (12.5) | 4 (5.0) | 7 (8.7) | Not at all | 37 (46.2) |
| 49 | I try not to think about some things | 25 (31.2) | 17 (21.2) | 23 (28.7) | 5 (6.2) | 10 (12.5) | Not at all | 45 (56.2) |
| 50 | Any reminder brings back feelings about the things that bother me | 35 (43.7) | 24 (30.0) | 11 (13.7) | 2 (2.5) | 8 (10.0) | Not at all | 37 (46.2) |
| 51 | My feelings about these things are kind of numb | 41 (51.2) | 7 (8.7) | 15 (18.7) | 6 (7.5) | 11 (13.7) | Not at all | 28 (35.0) |

Questions 37, 40, 41, 42, 46, 47, and 50 measured intrusion indicators whereas questions 38, 39, 43, 44, 45, 48, 49, and 51 measured avoidance indicators. Table 4 shows the data for those individual subsets.

Table 4
*Responses Disaggregated by Intrusion and Avoidance Subsets* (*N* = 80)

| Q# | Intrusion Subset | Not at all (%) | Rarely (%) | Some-times (%) | Often (%) | No Answer (%) | Mode | # Answering Affirmatively (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 37 | I find myself thinking about things when I don't mean to | 10 (12.5) | 25 (31.2) | 35 (43.7) | 5 (6.2) | 5 (6.2) | Some-times | 65 (81.2) |
| 40 | There are things that come into my mind that keep me from falling asleep or staying asleep | 29 (36.2) | 21 (26.2) | 19 (23.7) | 4 (5.0) | 7 (8.7) | Not at all | 44 (55.0) |
| 41 | I have waves of strong feelings about these things | 24 (30.0) | 30 (37.5) | 15 (18.7) | 4 (5.0) | 7 (8.7) | Rarely | 49 (61.2) |
| 42 | I have dreams about these things | 41 (51.2) | 26 (32.5) | 6 (7.5) | 0 (0.0) | 7 (8.7) | Not at all | 32 (40.0) |
| 46 | Pictures of these things pop into my mind | 22 (27.5) | 29 (36.2) | 20 (25.0) | 1 (1.2) | 8 (10.0) | Rarely | 50 (62.5) |
| 47 | Other things keep making me think about the things that bother me | 33 (41.2) | 23 (28.7) | 14 (17.5) | 2 (2.5) | 8 (10.0) | Not at all | 39 (48.7) |
| 50 | Any reminder brings back feelings about the things that bother me | 35 (43.7) | 24 (30.0) | 11 (13.7) | 2 (2.5) | 8 (10.0) | Not at all | 37 (46.2) |
| Q# | Avoidance Subset | Not at all (%) | Rarely (%) | Some-times (%) | Often (%) | No Answer (%) | Mode | # Answering Affirmatively (%) |
| 38 | When I think about things I don't mean to, I try not to get upset | 16 (20.0) | 10 (12.5) | 20 (25.0) | 23 (28.7) | 11 (13.7) | Often | 53 (66.2) |
| 39 | There are things on my mind that I keep trying to remove from my memory | 25 (31.2) | 34 (42.5) | 10 (12.5) | 5 (6.2) | 6 (7.5) | Rarely | 49 (61.2) |
| 43 | I stay away from reminders about these things | 38 (47.5) | 12 (15.0) | 16 (20.0) | 3 (3.7) | 11 (13.7) | Not at all | 31 (38.7) |
| 44 | I feel as if these things haven't happened or aren't real | 52 (65.0) | 10 (12.5) | 5 (6.2) | 4 (5.0) | 9 (11.2) | Not at all | 19 (23.7) |
| 45 | I try not to talk about these things | 36 (45.0) | 16 (20.0) | 18 (22.5) | 4 (5.0) | 6 (7.5) | Not at all | 38 (47.5) |
| 48 | I am aware that I still have a lot of feelings about some things but I don't deal with them | 36 (45.0) | 23 (28.7) | 10 (12.5) | 4 (5.0) | 7 (8.7) | Not at all | 37 (46.2) |
| 49 | I try not to think about some things | 25 (31.2) | 17 (21.2) | 23 (28.7) | 5 (6.2) | 10 (12.5) | Not at all | 45 (56.2) |
| 51 | My feelings about these things are kind of numb | 41 (51.2) | 7 (8.7) | 15 (18.7) | 6 (7.5) | 11 (13.7) | Not at all | 28 (35.0) |

*Intrusion subset.* In the intrusion subset of questions, respondents most frequently answered 'not at all' for four questions ("There are things that come into my mind that keep me from falling asleep or staying asleep," "I have dreams about these things," "Other things keep making me think about the things that bother me," and "Any reminder brings back feelings about the things that bother me") and 'rarely' for two questions ("I have waves of strong feelings about these things" and "Pictures of these things pop into my mind"). Respondents answered 'sometimes' most frequently to one question – "I find myself thinking about things when I don't mean to."

*Avoidance subset.* Similarly, in the avoidance subset, respondents most frequently indicated 'not at all' for six questions – "I stay away from reminders about these things, "I feel as if these things haven't happened or aren't real," "I try not to talk about these things," "I am aware that I still have a lot of feelings about some things but I don't deal with them," "I try not to think about some things," and "My feelings about these things are kind of numb." 'Often' was the most frequently selected answer for the question, "When I think about things I don't mean to, I try not to get upset." 'Rarely' was most frequently chosen response for "There are things on my mind that I keep trying to remove from my memory."

Most of the data in the intrusion and avoidance subsets pointed to much larger responses to one of the answers. In four questions, however, data were more closely distributed – "There are things that come into my mind that keep me from falling asleep or staying asleep" ('not at all': 29 responses; 'rarely': 21 responses, 'sometimes': 19 responses); "Pictures of these things pop into my mind" ('not at all': 22 responses; 'rarely': 29 responses, and 'sometimes': 20 responses); "I try not to think about some things" ('not at all': 25 responses; 'rarely': 17 responses," and 'sometimes': 23 responses); and "When I think about things I don't mean to, I try not to get upset" ('not at all': 16 responses; 'rarely': 10 responses, 'sometimes': 20 responses, and 'often' 23 responses).

The responses for the question, "I try not to think about some things," were interesting in that they showed a nearly equal level of response to 'not at all' and 'sometimes.' Having comparable responses to 'not at all' or 'rarely' would not have been unexpected, but comparable responses among 'not at all' and 'sometimes' shows a disproportion among the avoidance reactions reported by some participants. The same observation is made for the question, "When I think about things I don't mean to, I try not to get upset." The response levels were well distributed among all of the answer choices.

*Coping Behaviors*

Table 5 shows that only eight respondents (10%) reported that they sought assistance in coping with their psychological trauma, whereas 63 respondents (78.7%) never sought help. Nine participants (11.2%) provided no answer, which could indicate they felt that they had not experienced an event traumatic enough to necessitate coping behaviors. It also could mean that they simply did not feel compelled to answer the question.

Table 5
*Response Rate for Public Information Officers Seeking Emotional Help* ($N = 80$)

| Q# | Coping Behaviors | Yes (%) | No (%) | No Answer (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 52 | I have sought help or support in dealing emotionally with an incident/situation | 8 (10.0) | 63 (78.7) | 9 (11.2) |

Tables 6 and 7 show the responses of those answering questions related to coping behaviors. Of the eight participants (see Table 6) that reported accepting or seeking help, assistance was more commonly sought from colleagues, employers, friends, and/or family. Professional counseling was less commonly used, as were web sites, books, journals, or other information sources.

Of the 63 participants (see Table 7) who reported declining or not seeking help, 73% indicated that they did not feel affected by the situations they communicate and 46% felt that

their problems could be handled on their own. None of the respondents indicated that help was not sought because they did not know who to contact. More participants in the "Declining or Not Seeking Help" group provided 'no answer' as a response than those in the "Accepting or Seeking Help" group but this finding was not remarkable since the sample sizes were so uneven. Similarly, respondents also were asked about any increase in alcohol or drug use (prescription or illegal) but due to the small samples, the data did not suggest any noteworthy difference between those who sought emotional help and those who did not.

Table 6
*Public Information Officers Accepting or Seeking Help* (*N* = 8)

| Q# | Accepting or Seeking Help | Yes (%) | No (%) | No Answer (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 53 | Have sought help or support from colleagues and/or employer | 7 (87.5) | 1 (12.5) | 0 (0.0) |
| 54 | Have sought help or support from friends and/or family | 7 (87.5) | 1 (12.5) | 0 (0.0) |
| 55 | Have sought help or support from a professional counselor | 5 (62.5) | 2 (25.0) | 1 (12.5) |
| 56 | Have sought help or support through web sites, books, journals, or other information sources | 3 (37.5) | 5 (62.5) | 0 (0.0) |
| 57 | Have found that they drink alcohol more frequently | 2 (25.0) | 6 (75.0) | 0 (0.0) |
| 58 | Have found that they use drugs (prescription or illegal) more frequently | 0 (0.0) | 7 (87.5) | 1 (12.5) |

Table 7
*Public Information Officers Declining or Not Seeking Help* (*N* = 63)

| Q# | Declining or Not Seeking Help | Yes (%) | No (%) | No Answer (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 59 | Have not sought help or support because they do not feel affected by this situation/incident | 46 (73.0) | 9 (14.2) | 8 (12.7) |
| 60 | Have not sought help or support because they do not know who to contact (even though they feel the need to talk to someone) | 0 (0.0) | 57 (90.4) | 6 (9.5) |
| 61 | Feel that problems can be handled on their own – do not need help from anyone | 29 (46.0) | 20 (31.7) | 14 (22.2) |
| 62 | Have found that they drink alcohol more frequently | 3 (4.7) | 57 (90.4) | 3 (4.7) |
| 63 | Have found that they use drugs (prescription or illegal) more frequently | 1 (1.5) | 59 (93.6) | 3 (4.7) |

# CHAPTER 5:

# DISCUSSION

The specific aims of this preliminary research study were to study the effects on public information officers who have duties to communicate tragic news events and crises. Exposure to traumatic events was examined, as well as the intensity of exposure, and how public information officers cope with any psychological effects they experience. In general, research data collected in this study supports that public information officers have ample exposure to intense, job-related traumatic events. Although similar studies have concluded that journalists are at risk for developing psychological disorders due to job-related trauma or stress, this study does not provide sufficient evidence that public information officers are equally affected. This chapter will outline key findings from the data, followed by a discussion on limitations of the study and suggested areas for future research.

*Research question 1.* Research question 1 sought to determine how frequently – and at what magnitude – public information officers were exposed to job-related traumatic events. Data collected from the survey indicates that public information officers have frequent exposure to work-related trauma or crises. Collins (2001) noted how the journalism profession calls for the study and review of cultures, conflicts, and other situations that are unstable and unpredictable. This is not unlike the public information officers' profession, as there is sufficient evidence to suggest that public information officers also are surrounded by situations that are unusual, unstable, and unpredictable. The communication events listed in Table 1 – for example, "injured or dead child," "motor vehicle accident," or "other events where a person has been hurt or killed" – are not typical events that most professions experience. In addition, 12 of the 14 statements in Table 1 dealt with events that are considered violent or represent a situation where physical or psychological harm can be posed to others. Only the events of "life-threatening illness affecting

an employee" and "employee lay-offs" represented situations where imminent physical harm to others was not a factor. Frequent risk of incurring bodily harm could possibly cause distress to the person communicating during that event.

In Pyevich et al's study (2003), it was concluded that frequent exposure to traumatic events contributed to journalists' development of post-traumatic stress disorder. Although this study did not examine the relationship of psychological trauma and development of PTSD, the survey did assess public information officers' exposure to specific trauma and job-related stressors. Of the 14 events presented in Table 1, nearly half (48.1%) of the public information officers had experienced at least 10 of those events at least once. In addition, survey data showed that 65% of the participants have handled more than one of the communication events listed in Table 1 during the same week, which, because of the furthered exposure to trauma or stress, adds intensity to an already difficult situation.

As another factor, all of the situations listed in Table 2 are of a violent or traumatic nature. As noted in Chapter 4, more than a third (77.5%) of all participants reported communicating at the scene of a traumatic event. Communicating "at the scene" presents an additional psychological burden as it may be chaotic and highly stressful to manage a crisis communications situation, as the public information officer is dually trying to handle the news media's information needs while also trying to communicate with members of the public (and possibly family members of a victim) who may be at the scene. Communicating at the scene also adds the likelihood that psychologically disturbing events may be witnessed or experienced. As noted in the previous chapter, 61.2% of the respondents reported witnessing a dead body or a seriously injured individual as part of their communication job duties and 50% reported that they had seen things of a particularly gruesome nature. More than 21% had actually witnessed a person get hurt or killed while they were working as a crisis communicator. These stressful situations, in addition to the others listed in Table 2,

show the intense nature of communicating during a crisis or emergency and support a position that public information officers are frequently exposed to intense, traumatic events on the job.

The Pyevich et al study determined that journalists were at a higher risk for developing psychological disorders because they experience more trauma exposure than the general public due to their unique job responsibilities. This statement possibly holds true for public information officers, but this preliminary study does not examine development of psychological disorders due to its research design (see Recommendations for Future Research in this chapter for further discussion). However, informal comparisons between the Pyevich et al study and this study did suggest that public information officers were not that different from journalists in relation to exposure to traumatic events. This likely is due to the fact the two groups surveyed – National Information Officers Association and National School Public Relations Association – represent two industries that work alongside police officers, firefighters, rescue workers, and other emergency responders, or in education environments where crises or traumatic events, such as student or staff deaths, school violence (fights, shootings, and stabbings), school bus accidents, etc., are common communication events.

*Research question 2.* Research question 2 examined whether public information officers were psychologically affected by traumatic events as well as how they were affected. Similar to Simpson and Boggs' (1999) study on journalists, public information officers' survey responses were examined for intrusion and avoidance indicators, with their responses shown in Tables 3 and 4. As noted in the previous chapter, the public information officers indicated 'not at all' as the most frequently reported answer for 10 of the 15 statements. Also in Simpson and Boggs' study, journalists who responded with an affirmative answer (i.e., 'rarely,' 'sometimes,' or 'often,' as opposed to 'not at all' or 'no answer') were counted together and reported as a

percentage. This practice was continued to the data compilation for the survey used in this study since it was partially modeled after the Simpson and Boggs study.

As noted by the "Number Answering Affirmatively" data in Table 3, intrusion and avoidance factors are experienced by some public information officers, suggesting that this professional group is, at some level, psychologically affected by traumatic events. However, a high percentage of respondents reporting affirmatively to intrusion and/or avoidance statements did not necessarily mean that public information officers had experienced a high severity of psychological trauma. For example, while a collective 81.2% of respondents agreed that "I find myself thinking about things when I don't mean to," the disaggregated data showed that 31.2% reported 'rarely,' 43.7% reported 'sometimes,' and 6.2% reported 'often.' Likewise, 62.5% of respondents reported that "Pictures of these things pop into my mind" even though the data showed 36.2% reported 'rarely,' 25% reported 'sometimes,' and 1.2% reported 'often.' If severe psychological trauma was experienced, it is more likely that the percentages in these two statements would lean heavier toward 'often.' Therefore, using this data alone, it is not possible to conclusively state that public information officers are at a higher risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder than other professions. Data from Tables 1 and 2, however, do suggest that this profession's exposure to traumatic events provides ample opportunity to become traumatized.

Table 4 showed the data disaggregated by intrusion and avoidance subsets. Public information officers, as a group, did not appear overly affected by these indicators. When examining the "Number Answering Affirmatively" between the two subsets, both intrusion and avoidance indicators seem to be comparably experienced among public information officers. Using this intrusion and avoidance data, there was evidence to suggest that public information officers can be psychologically affected by traumatic events, but perhaps not as extensively as

their journalist counterparts. Informal comparisons to the Simpson and Boggs study suggest that the journalist group has a higher reporting of intrusion and avoidance factors; however, it is not definitively known without comparing the two groups in the same study (see Recommendations for Future Research in this chapter for further discussion).

*Research question 3*. Research question 3 sought to determine the coping behaviors used by public information officers when faced with traumatic events or stress. A small number – eight respondents (10%) – reported that they sought assistance in coping with their psychological trauma, whereas 63 respondents (78.7%) never sought help. The small number of public information officers seeking emotional help possibly is due to a fear of being stigmatized as weak or unstable if they ask for help, similar to Palm, Polusny, and Follette's (2004) conclusions that emergency responders and journalists often do not seek assistance for that reason. Nine participants (11.2%) provided no answer to the question, raising the question of whether not answering was an indication of avoidance. Studies by Freinkel, Koopman, and Spiegel (1994) and McFarlane (1992) concluded that avoidance is in itself a coping behavior. More studies, however, would need to be conducted in order to conclusively make that statement.

*Limitations*

As with any research project, there were limitations to this study. Primarily, the limitations were identified among the participants, sample size, selection bias, consent form, procedure, and research design. It also should be noted that this is a preliminary, descriptive study that should serve as a basis for future, more detailed studies.

*Participants.* Public information officers are often found in police, fire, and emergency response departments, as well as hospitals, school systems, utilities companies, and other public-type organizations that serve the community. Therefore, four organizations were identified to participate in the Public Information Officer Survey – the National Information Officers Association, the

National School Public Relations Association, the Society for Healthcare Strategy & Market Development, and the Public Relations Society of America's Health Academy, a subsection for healthcare/medical communicators. Together, the memberships of these organizations would have represented a large majority of the organizations that serve the community during a crisis or emergency situation – emergency responders, school systems, and hospitals.

The Society for Healthcare Strategy & Market Development declined to participate in the study, as did the Public Relations Society of America. Therefore, the two groups participating in the Public Information Officer Survey represent only emergency responders and school systems. The perspective of those communicating crises in the healthcare and medical fields perhaps would have produced different data. In addition, those from the National Information Officers Association and National School Public Relations Association who chose to participate were self-selected, which could yield a selection bias.

*Sample size.* At the time of the study, the combined memberships of the National Information Officers Association and National School Public Relations Association were approximately 2,500. It was estimated that a survey response rate of 10% would yield a sample size of approximately 250 participants; however, only 83 individuals actually completed the survey from start to finish – a sample size of 3.3%. This smaller-than-expected response rate makes it not possible to use the data to make generalizations about public information officers.

Also, the highest number of survey responses (15.6%) was received from Georgia, the researcher's home state. This could be coincidence or it could be that the Georgia survey respondents were familiar with the study because of their relationship to the researcher, who is a former member of the National School Public Relations Association. Although no professional or personal influence was used to coerce anyone to take the survey, it is possible some responded out

of respect or courtesy to the researcher. Therefore, the high rate of Georgia responses might slant the overall results from having more balanced participation among the states.

*Selection bias.* As with any voluntary survey, the data might be skewed because of selection bias. Participants who have experienced a traumatic situation or have an interest in crises or trauma might be more likely to respond to the survey.

*Consent form.* Georgia State University's Institutional Review Board required that the purpose be unambiguously stated; however, it is possible that stating the purpose too plainly had biased participants toward providing a certain type of response. Also, the consent form stated that the survey would take an estimated 15-20 minutes to complete, which could have dissuaded some participants from participating. Upon the survey's completion, it was learned from QuestionPro data that the survey, on average, actually took approximately 11 minutes to complete.

*Procedure.* As mentioned in Chapter 3, the researcher received a free, but limited, "student research sponsorship" from QuestionPro. The subscription allowed basic data analysis but did not allow data to be filtered by gender, age, ethnicity, education level, professional organization, etc. In addition, using an online survey allowed the researcher to reach a larger audience at no personal cost, but it created challenges in engaging participants to complete the survey. An invitation to take the survey was emailed to the estimated 2,500 members of the National Information Officers Association and National School Public Relations Association. However, like any email message, it could easily be overlooked, deleted, or postponed for later reading. If the participant did not read it and promptly respond, it is likely that he or she never would, since the invitation message would soon be buried among other emails flooding the email account. Extending the survey period possibly could have helped, but sending frequent reminder emails could have run the risk of irritating survey-takers and therefore hurt the study or damage the reputation of the researcher or Georgia State University's communications graduate program.

As another limitation, the organization's leaderships directly sent the email invitation to the participants; therefore, the researcher could not control the timeliness of sending the invitation or the verbiage used. Recruitment verbiage approved by Georgia State University's Institutional Review Board was sent to both organizations (see Appendix B). The National Information Officers Association used it exactly as written but the National School Public Relations Association slightly modified it. The overall meaning was not changed, but it is possible that response rate was affected based on the abridged or unabridged version that the participants received. A shorter message might have elicited more response or vice versa.

*Research design.* The Public Information Officer Survey was provided as a close-ended survey with limited opportunity to provide free responses. With the exception of age disclosure and job tenure, where the respondents could answer openly, the participants were directed to choose their responses from among multiple choice answers. The survey originally included open-ended questions that elicited more personal responses; however, Georgia State University's Institutional Review Board would not approve an online survey due to the inability of the researcher to monitor participants for possible distress experienced from recalling the specifics of a traumatic event. As a result, the following open-ended questions were removed from the survey:

> Of the incidents/situations described in questions 12-36, which one(s) stand out most in your memory?
>
> - Please describe the incident/situation in as much detail as possible. Who was involved? What happened?
> - When and where did this incident/situation occur?
> - What was your role during the incident/situation?
> - Was this your first time handling an incident/situation of this nature?
> - Are there sights, sounds, smells, tastes, etc., or other sensations that still come to mind when remembering this incident/situation? Please be as descriptive as possible.
> - How do you remember feeling during this incident/situation? Please be as descriptive as possible.
> - Thinking back on it, how do you feel about it now?

The open-ended questions were important to the researcher, who, as public information officer herself, wanted more "tangible" information to describe what it is like to communicate during a crisis situation. Percentages and other descriptive statistics do not adequately illustrate the experience, such as hearing a mother's scream when she learns that her child has been struck by a car and killed or seeing a mangled body – not yet covered by a coroner's sheet – lying on a bloody sidewalk. The study seems somewhat flat and impersonal without individuals' stories supplementing the data. Open-ended questions or a face-to-face interview would provide more information to describe a public information officer's experiences and would tell a more unique, interesting and relatable story. As in Dworznik's study (2006), responses to open-ended survey questions would have been analyzed for recurring themes. "Stressors," "stress triggers," "recurring thoughts or memories," "reactions to trauma or stress," and "coping strategies" were the primary themes identified, although other themes may have been revealed during the course of analysis.

Although Georgia State University's Institutional Review Board did not allow open-ended questions to be included in the survey, 14 respondents managed to share comments during the "survey feedback" section. Eleven of the comments were about the survey process itself, to thank the researcher for the opportunity to participate, or to request that the completed study be shared. Three participants, however, provided the type of thought-provoking perspective that open-ended questions could have yielded:

> I find my patience is not what it used to be after all of the crises and similar events I've experienced while in my PIO role. The latter was not a part of the survey, but I believe it is significant. Oh, and the stress level as well.
>
> – Public Information Officer, public school system, Minnesota

> I hadn't really thought about it too much, but some of the feelings remind me of combat situations with the stress, recovery and excitement.
>
> – Public Information Officer, government public affairs, Michigan

> I think it would be interesting to see which organizations support an EAP [Employee Assistance Program] process ... that is what helped me in my previous PDs [police departments] to deal with horrific incidents (it was peer counseling). [Organization name withheld] does not have such a support program.
>
> – Public Information Officer, public safety, Georgia

*Recommendations for Future Research*

As this was a preliminary study, the data on public information officers could be expanded to a more comprehensive study in any of the following areas.

*Comparison with journalists.* Since journalists are the public information officers' nearest professional cousin, a future study could focus on the two groups and compare their experiences with job-related trauma. Similar data exists from Simpson and Boggs' (1999) and Pyevich, Newman, and Daleiden's (2003) research but a new study would have to be conducted to include both groups. This study surveyed only the experiences of public information officers.

*Post-traumatic stress disorder.* Although the literature review focused heavily on job-related trauma and its relationship to journalists developing post-traumatic stress disorder, this was a preliminary study and was not structured to establish similar findings with public information officers. Instead, this study was intended to serve as the first step in a similar journey by establishing that public information officers, like journalists and other professional groups, are frequently and intensely exposed to job-related traumatic events and therefore can suffer negative psychological effects. Future research could more closely examine post-traumatic stress disorder indicators experienced by public information officers.

*Coping behaviors.* Other than questioning about increased alcohol and drug use, specific coping behaviors were not probed in this study. Future studies could examine the behaviors used by public information officers, either through a close-ended survey or through more qualitative methods. For journalists, Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) and Himmelstein and Faithorn (2002)

have suggested that coping occurs in the act of writing because it allows information to be assimilated, analyzed, and then reported, which can serve as a cathartic behavior. It is possible that information officers might benefit similarly as they prepare for press briefings, compose media statements, and give interviews to the news media. Future research could examine this area more closely.

*Other biological/psychological influences.* The present study did not examine the relationship that biological factors and emotional temperament have on an individual's psychological well-being. Studies by Marais and Stuart (2005) and Pyevich et al (2003) determined that these factors can prevent or even hasten an individual's development of post-traumatic stress disorder. For example, as in the situation of Sergeant Paul Accardo, the New Orleans Police Department public information officer who took his own life, his suicide may have been attributed to job-related trauma or it could have been due to an underlying biological or psychological condition (Burdeau, 2005). Burdeau's article suggested that Accardo was depressed but it was not known if the depression was an ongoing psychological illness before Hurricane Katrina, or if it developed as a result of communicating during that crisis. Therefore, future studies could examine the relationship between biological and psychological factors and how they affect a public information officer's management of a crisis communication event.

*Other job-related influences.* This study set out to determine whether public information officers suffer psychological effects as a result of job-related trauma. However, the study does not deeply explore the duties of different types of public information officers. There are likely many similarities, but also many differences, that could result in varied experiences among public information officers. For example, the day-to-day experiences of a police department's public information officer possibly are similar to that of a school system's public information officer as both routinely communicate with the news media and the community. However, due to

the nature of the events they communicate, and the environments in which they work, it also is expected there are many differences.

*Case study.* Rather than examining public information officers as a whole, a case study could be conducted on one specific tragedy – for example, the Columbine High School shootings – and how the responding agencies each played their public communication role and the resulting psychological effects. The magnitude of this event required a collaborative communication response from the school system, local police department and Sheriff's Office, area hospitals, and the state emergency management agency. Each had a specific communication role as they managed the crisis communication efforts.

# CHAPTER 6:

# CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this preliminary study was to examine the effects on public information officers who have duties to communicate tragic news events and crises. As no known research exists on public information officers, this study was intended to serve as a launching pad for future studies on the subject.

Specifically, this study aspired to determine whether public information officers, as a group, are psychologically affected by exposure to traumatic or stressful events. Due to limitations of the study, the research fell short of being able to generalize any conclusion that public information officers are psychologically affected by the events that they experience or communicate on the job. Similar studies on journalists have concluded a relationship between traumatic exposure and development of psychological disorders, but this study was not structured to establish similar findings (Simpson & Boggs, 1999; Pyevich et al, 2003). As a result, Chapter 5 provides a summary of possible future research studies on this topic.

However, the data collected in this preliminary study do affirmatively conclude that certain groups of public information officers, specifically those representing public safety departments or public school systems, are indeed frequently exposed to traumatic events. Many of the communication events they experience are disturbing and violent in nature, but there is insufficient evidence to determine if exposure to those events actually results in psychological trauma. Study data suggests that public information officers do experience some level of intrusion and avoidance, which are considered to be indicators of developing post-traumatic stress disorder, but those responding to the survey did not report substantive effects. Similarly, data related to coping behaviors do not indicate that public information officers, as a group, strongly feel that they need emotional help in coping with the job-related trauma they

experience. It is emphasized, however, that these experiences are representative of a small sample of emergency responder and school system public information officers. As noted in the Limitations section in Chapter 5, this study does not represent the perspectives of those communicating crises in the healthcare and medical fields. This limitation, as well as the others identified, should be addressed in any future study.

It is the hope of the researcher that future studies will be conducted on public information officers and trauma, as well as the areas of support programs and professional development training. Attention has been given to journalists and their trauma exposure, as well as any resulting psychological implications, due to the data gleaned from research in those areas. As mentioned in Chapter 2, preparation for reporting on traumatic events is being addressed by educational programs such as the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma.

Although this study did not definitively conclude that public information officers are affected by job-related trauma, it does not mean there is not a need for more research. Communicating about traumatic or stressful events is a responsibility that is increasing for public information officers; from this researcher's perspective, communicating with the news media has become a much larger responsibility and the news media are hungry for stories that depict conflict, violence, or controversy. Using the Columbine High School tragedy and the Virginia Tech shootings in April 2007 as an example, public information officers are increasingly being exposed to large-scale tragedies that receive intense media attention and scrutiny. While school shootings are not new events, the increased media attention – which often includes at-the-scene reporting for days or weeks to feed a society that expects 24-hour news coverage – is a new occurrence from the tragedies of yesteryear. More research is needed to conclude whether public information officers are psychologically affected by the traumatic events they communicate, and whether support programs and other professional development training should be developed to assist them.

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# APPENDIX A

## Public Information Officer Job Description
## Southern Nevada Health District

DEFINITION
To serve as the Southern Nevada Health District's liaison with the media as assigned; assist with the development of public information products, crisis communication planning and training, and the annual report.

SUPERVISION RECEIVED AND EXERCISED
Receives direction from the Public Information Manager.

EXAMPLES OF ESSENTIAL RESPONSIBILITIES AND DUTIES
*This class specification lists the major duties and requirements of the job and is not all-inclusive. Incumbents may be expected to perform job-related duties other than those contained in this document and may be required to have specific job-related knowledge and skills.*

- Serve as a District contact and spokesman with the media and public; accessible after regular working hours, weekends and holidays as scheduled.
- Assist with the development and dissemination of public information and video products, i.e., press releases, ads, annual report, fliers, special information programs, etc., in conjunction with all divisions.
- Serve as back up for PIO Manager in the event of an emergency, to coordinate and release information.
- Plan and coordinate community outreach events; develop information for outreach campaigns.
- Respond to inquiries from the public.
- Monitor and assess relevant news coverage, prepare responses and follow-up when necessary.
- Assist in arranging interactions with the press.
- Foster good public/media relations by notifying the media of newsworthy events, providing pertinent information in a timely manner.
- Appear before special interest groups and community organizations, attend Board of Health and other relevant meetings as requested to present programs or materials dealing with District activities.
- Perform related duties and responsibilities as assigned.

QUALIFICATIONS

Knowledge of:
- The operations, services and activities of the Southern Nevada Health District's divisions.
- Public health systems, current public health issues, public policy and the legislative process.
- The local media.
- Techniques and accepted practices of newsgathering, writing, and interview techniques.
- Techniques of speech writing.
- Techniques of copywriting.
- English usage, spelling, grammar and punctuation.
- Operations of public relations/communications functions, and effective advertising techniques and practices.
- Effective video production.
- Research, organizational and conflict resolution skills.

Ability to:
- Research, compile, tabulate, analyze and interpret data and information.
- Plan and coordinate all components of promotional and informational activities.
- Maintain confidential and sensitive information.
- Work cooperatively with other divisions, outside agencies, boards, elected officials, management and the general public.
- Communicate clearly and concisely both orally and in writing, tailoring the message to the intended audience.
- Operate a personal computer and use a variety of software packages.
- Plan, schedule and organize special events or news conferences
- Interact effectively with the public and media.
- Work under pressure.
- Establish, maintain and foster effective working relationships with those contacted in the course of work.

Training and Experience Guidelines:

Training:
Equivalent to a bachelor's degree with major course work in public relations, marketing, journalism, communications, or a closely related field.

Experience:
Three years of public relations or media experience, preferably in public health, environmental or public agencies.

Preference:
Bilingual, Spanish speaking preferred.

License or Certificate
Possession of, or ability to obtain, a valid Nevada driver's license.

Working Conditions:
May be scheduled to work weekends, holidays or evenings and must be available for on-call work on weekends and holidays as needed.

Conditions:
*All required licenses must be maintained in an active status without suspension or revocation throughout employment. Any employee may be required to stay at or return to work during public health incidents and/or emergencies to perform duties specific to this classification or to perform other duties as requested in an assigned response position. This may require working a non-traditional work schedule or working outside normal assigned duties during the incident and/or emergency.*

Bargaining Unit Ineligible
FLSA Exempt
Schedule 23
Approved by the Board of Health 6-27-02
Revised by the Board of Health 1/26/06

# APPENDIX B

## Invitations to Participate in Research Study

Verbiage approved by Georgia State University's Institutional Review Board

[NIOA or NSPRA] is lending its support to a research project conducted through Georgia State University's Department of Communications. The project is studying professions, such as ours, that have responsibilities to communicate during crises or stressful situations.

Your help is requested. The researcher has created a survey that should take no longer than 15 minutes of your time. I know your time is valuable, and so is this research. To date, there is no established research on how public information officers or spokespersons may be affected by their job duties.

The following link will take you to an external web site hosting the survey. Your participation is voluntary and your responses will be kept confidential by the researcher. Your personal responses will not be shared with me, [NIOA or NSPRA], or your company or organization, so please feel comfortable that your identity is completely protected. No one other than the researcher will view your personal responses. The overall study results will be shared with [NIOA or NSPRA] so that we may review our training programs and support resources.

Thank you for your consideration. The survey web site will be active for two weeks beginning _____ to _____.

Verbiage used by the National Information Officers Association:

NIOA is lending its support to a research project conducted through Georgia State University's Department of Communications. The project is studying professions, such as ours, that have responsibilities to communicate during crises or stressful situations.

Your help is requested. The researcher has created a survey that should take no longer than 15 minutes of your time. I know your time is valuable, and so is this research. To date, there is no established research on how public information officers or spokespersons may be affected by their job duties.

The following link will take you to an external web site hosting the survey. Your participation is voluntary and your responses will be kept confidential by the researcher. Your personal responses will not be shared with me, NIOA, or your company or organization, so please feel comfortable that your identity is completely protected. No one other than the researcher will view your personal responses. The overall study results will be shared with NIOA so that we may review our training programs and support resources.

Thank you for your consideration. The survey web site will be active for two weeks beginning October 2 to October 15.

Verbiage used by the National School Public Relations Association:

On behalf of NSPRA member Susan Hale, NSPRA is lending its support to a research project conducted through Georgia State University's Department of Communications. The project is studying professions that have responsibilities to communicate during crises or stressful situations. Your participation is requested.

This survey link will take you to an external web site hosting the survey. Your personal responses will not be shared with your company or organization, so please feel comfortable that your identity is completely protected. The overall study results will be shared with NSPRA. The survey web site will be active for two weeks beginning October 2 to October 15.

# APPENDIX C

## Public Information Officer Survey

### Explanation and Consent for Research Study

Purpose. This study attempts to measure a public information officer's exposure to traumatic events on the job and any resulting psychological impact. The goal of the research study is to determine whether public information officers have psychological similarities or differences to other groups that have responsibilities of communicating tragic news or events during a crisis.

Procedures. Data will be collected through a survey. On average, it will take about 15-20 minutes to complete and questions regarding exposure to traumatic events, as well as their frequency and intensity, will be asked. General questions regarding your individual professional and personal background also will be asked. The survey will be available online for approximately two weeks.

Both this research study and this survey have been approved by the National Information Officers Association (NIOA) and the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA). The overall survey results will be shared with these organizations so that they may address possible professional development needs that are identified through the study. Please again note that your individual responses will remain confidential.

Risks. In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life.

Benefits. There are practical applications of this study. The research data may lead to better identification of psychological stress experienced by public information officers. It also may lead to the creation of professional development programs that assist in training and support for those affected by communicating traumatic events on the job.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal. Participation in this research project is voluntary. You can discontinue participation at any time.

Confidentiality. All responses collected in the survey will remain confidential. No personally identifiable information will be collected so you may feel comfortable answering the questions as openly and honestly as possible. No question is intended to offend or be used in a biased manner during the study. You may discontinue participation at any time.

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. We will use a study number rather than your name on study records. Only the student researcher and faculty adviser will have access to the information you provide. Research data will be stored in a locked file cabinet and will be destroyed one year after the study's publication. The findings will be summarized and reported in group form. You will not be identified personally.

Contact Persons
Greg Lisby, Ph.D, graduate thesis adviser – 404-413-5639 or glisby@gsu.edu
Susan Hale, graduate student/researcher – 404-667-5881 or shale7@student.gsu.edu

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this research study, you may contact Susan Vogtner in Georgia State University's Office of Research Integrity at 404-413-3513 or svogtner1@gsu.edu.

Copy of Consent Form to Subject. You may print a copy of this consent form for your records.

TO BEGIN
To give your consent for participation in this study and to begin the survey, please click on the NEXT button. If you wish to decline participation, you may exit the survey now.

PART I

Please help us learn more about you and your job by selecting the answer that most closely resembles your experience.

1. How many years, cumulatively, have you had public relations/communications as part of your professional duties?

2. What is your current employment status?
   1. Full-time
   2. Part-time
   3. Retired
   4. No answer

3. Approximately what percentage of your professional work is devoted to public relations or communications?
   1. Less than 25%
   2. About 50%
   3. About 75%
   4. 100%
   5. No answer

4. In which state do you work? If you work in multiple states, please list the state in which your company is headquartered.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Alabama | 14. Indiana | 27. Nebraska | 40. South Carolina |
| 2. Alaska | 15. Iowa | 28. Nevada | 41. South Dakota |
| 3. Arizona | 16. Kansas | 29. New Hampshire | 42.Tennessee |
| 4. Arkansas | 17. Kentucky | 30. New Jersey | 43. Texas |
| 5. California | 18. Louisiana | 31. New Mexico | 44. Utah |
| 6. Colorado | 19. Maine | 32. New York | 45. Vermont |
| 7. Connecticut | 20. Maryland | 33 North Carolina | 46. Virginia |
| 8. Delaware | 21. Massachusetts | 34. North Dakota | 47. Washington |
| 9. Florida | 22. Michigan | 35. Ohio | 48. West Virginia |
| 10. Georgia | 23. Minnesota | 36. Oklahoma | 49. Wisconsin |
| 11. Hawaii | 24. Mississippi | 37. Oregon | 50. Wyoming |
| 12. Idaho | 25. Missouri | 38. Pennsylvania | 51. No answer |
| 13. Illinois | 26. Montana | 39. Rhode Island | 52. Other |

5. Which of the following best describes the community/population you primarily serve?
   1. Urban
   2. Suburban
   3. Rural
   4. No answer

6. The company/organization you work for is in which of the following:
   1. Public sector (i.e., local, state, or federal government)
   2. Private sector (i.e., most corporations and individual businesses)
   3. Not-for-profit sector
   4. No answer
   5. Other

7. What is the approximate size of your company/organization?
   1. Fewer than 100 employees
   2. 101 –1,000 employees
   3. 1,001 – 5,000 employees
   4. 5,001 – 10,000 employees
   5. More than 10,000 employees
   6. No answer

8. Which of the following categories best describes the industry you primarily work in, regardless of your actual work title?

   1. Marketing
   2. Utilities
   3. Construction/Manufacturing
   4. Computer and Electronics
   5. Public Safety
   6. Retail
   7. Transportation and Warehousing
   8. Information Technology
   9. Software Development
   10. Real Estate, Rental and Leasing
   11. Finance and Insurance
   12. College, University, and Adult Education
   13. Primary/Secondary (K-12) Education
   14. Media
   15. Health Care and Social Assistance
   16. Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation
   17. Hospitality
   18. Legal Services
   19. Scientific or Technical Services
   20. Military
   21. Religious
   22. No answer
   23. Other

9. Which of the following best describes your role in your industry?
   1. Upper Management
   2. Middle Management
   3. Entry Level
   4. Consultant (i.e., contracted/ temporary)
   5. Support Staff
   6. No answer

10. During an average week, with which of the following groups do you conduct most of your professional communication/interaction?
    1. Community
    2. Internal employees
    3. Investors/Board of Directors
    4. Senior Management
    5. News Media
    6. No answer
    7. Other

11. In which professional association are you a member? Select all that apply.
    1. National Information Officers Association
    2. National School Public Relations Association
    3. Neither
    4. No answer

<u>Part II</u>

Please select the answer that best describes your experiences on the job. "In my role as a public information officer, I have…"

12. Communicated news of an injured or dead child
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

13. Communicated news of mass casualties
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

14. Communicated news of a motor vehicle accident
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

15. Communicated news of another mass transportation-related accident (i.e. train, subway, airplane, etc.)
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

16. Communicated news of a person hurt or killed on the job
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

17. Communicated news of violence in the workplace
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

18. Communicated news of a life-threatening illness affecting an employee
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

19. Communicated news of a murder
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

20. Communicated news of employee lay-offs
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

21. Communicated news of a physical assault
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

22. Communicated news of a sexual assault or sexual harassment
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

23. Communicated news related to a torture or kidnapping
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

24. Communicated news related to a natural disaster
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

25. Communicated news related to other types of events where a person has been hurt or killed
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

26. Communicated any of the events listed in questions 12-25 “at the scene”
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

27. Communicated more than one of the events listed in questions 12-25 within the same week
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

28. Been physically attacked while performing my communication job duties
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

29. Been verbally threatened while performing my communication job duties
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

30. Been injured while performing my communication job duties
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

31. Witnessed a dead body or seriously injured individual while performing my communication job duties (i.e. individual’s injuries were sustained before you began your communication duties)
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

32. Witnessed someone hurt or killed as you were performing communication job duties (i.e. injuries were sustained while you were working)
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

33. Personally announced news of death to relatives or friends of the victim as a part of my communication job duties
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

34. Witnessed a particularly gruesome scene while performing my communication job duties
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

35. Performed my communication job duties when the victim/perpetrator was someone I knew
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

36. Performed my communication job duties when the victim/perpetrator physically resembled or reminded me of someone I knew
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

PART III

If you have answered 'Yes' to any question in Part II, please indicate how frequently these statements are true for you in relation to questions 12-36. Please choose only one response per statement.

| | Not at all | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | No Answer |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 37. I find myself thinking about things when I don't mean to | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| 38. When I think about things I don't mean to, I try not to get upset | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| 39. There are things on my mind that I keep trying to remove from my memory | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| 40. There are things that come into my mind that keep me from falling asleep or staying asleep | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| 41. I have waves of strong feelings about these things | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| 42. I have dreams about these things | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| 43. I stay away from reminders about these things | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| 44. I feel as if these things haven't happened or aren't real | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| 45. I try not to talk about these things | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| 46. Pictures of these things pop into my mind | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| 47. Other things keep making me think about the things that bother me | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| 48. I am aware that I still have a lot of feelings about some things but I don't deal with them | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

| | Not at all | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | No Answer |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 49. I try not to think about some things | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| 50. Any reminder brings back feelings about the things that bother me | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| 51. My feelings about these things are kind of numb | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

PART IV

Please select the answer that best describes your experience.

"Because of traumatic events I have experienced as a public information officer..."

52. I have sought help or support in dealing emotionally with this incident/situation.
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

If you answered 'Yes' to question 52, please answer questions 53-58.

53. I have sought help or support from my colleagues and/or employer
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No Answer

54. I have sought help or support from my friends and/or family
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

55. I have sought help or support from a professional counselor
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

56. I have sought help or support on my own through web sites, books, journals, or other information sources
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No Answer

57. I find that I drink alcohol more frequently
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

58. I find that I use drugs (prescription or illegal) more frequently
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

If you answered 'No' to question 52, please answer questions 59-63.

59. I have not sought help or support because I do not feel affected by this situation/incident
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer
60. I have not sought help or support because I do not know who to contact (even though I feel that I need to talk to someone)
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

61. I feel that I can handle my problems on my own – I do not need help from anyone
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

62. I find that I drink alcohol more frequently
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

63. I find that I use drugs (prescription or illegal) more frequently
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

Part V

Please help us learn more about you by selecting the answer that most closely resembles your experience.

64. Which is your gender?
    1. Male
    2. Female
    3. No answer

65. What is your age?

66. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
    1. Did not complete high school
    2. High School or equivalent
    3. Some College
    4. 2-Year Degree (Associate's)
    5. 4-Year Degree (Bachelor's)
    6. Master's Degree (M.B.A., M.A., M.Ed)
    7. Doctoral Degree (Ph.D) or Professional Degree (M.D., J.D., etc.)
    8. No answer

67. If you are a college graduate, did you study journalism, public relations, or have any other communications training?
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. No answer

68. How would you classify yourself?
    1. African-American/Black
    2. Asian/Pacific Islander
    3. Caucasian/White
    4. Hispanic/Latino
    5. Multi-racial
    6. No answer
    7. Other

69. What is your approximate income level?
    1. Less than $25,000
    2. $25,001 - $50,000
    3. $50,001 - $75,000
    4. $75,001 - $100,000
    5. More than $100,000
    6. No answer

Thank you for your participation

Thank you for your participation in this study. Your responses will enable the researcher to conclusively determine whether public information officers are psychologically impacted by traumatic events experienced on the job.

This study is presumed to be the first of its kind. To date, no identified studies have been conducted on public information officers who have responsibilities to communicate tragic news or events. In contrast, several studies have been done on journalists – a close professional cousin to public information officers – who often witness traumatic events and then must report on them. Public information officers play a similar role by reporting a message or information to the public or news media during crises.

There are practical applications of this study. The research data may lead to better identification of psychological stress experienced by public information officers. It also may lead to the creation of professional development programs that assist in training and support for those affected by communicating traumatic events on the job.

Further, you also may have benefited by this study. You have been part of groundbreaking research and have provided important information that will further the field of public relations and associates like yourself.

If you would like to receive a copy of the completed study's results (available in approximately six months to a year), please enter your contact information below. Your personal information will not be shared with anyone other than the researcher. You also may provide feedback on the survey process so that the researcher may improve this procedure for future studies.

Again, thank you for your participation in this research study. Your input is highly valued.

Sincerely,

Susan Hale, Student Researcher
Georgia State University

(OPTIONAL)

Name and Title / Mailing Address
Email Address

Comments regarding the survey process