

BRITISH COLUMBIA RESILIENT MINDS SUMMARY

There are approximately 4000 professional firefighters in BC (and an additional 10,000 volunteer firefighters). These firefighters work in varying environments, from large urban centres to rural and remote communities.

Resilient Minds- Building the Psychological Strength of Fire Fighters' is a four- module mental health and resiliency program developed in partnership by VFRS and the Canadian Mental Health Association - Vancouver Fraser Branch.

Module One: Psychological Trauma: Awareness and Understanding

Module Two: Psychological Trauma: Potential Risks and Strategies

Module Three: Responding with Respect: Psychological Distress & Disorder

Module Four: Managing Workplace Stress & Building Resiliency

Modules are delivered in a face-to-face format with trained facilitators. Through participation in four modules, individuals learn specific knowledge, skills, and resources to support the following goals - **The overarching GOALS of the program are to:**

- Decrease the risk of developing a stress disorder or other mental illnesses due to workplace incidents and/or unhealthy stress
- Mitigate the negative impacts of mental illness and trauma through early recognition and early intervention
- Support the public while on the frontline
- Improve the psychological health of fire staff while cultivating resilience and enhancing quality of life.

Resilient Minds Course Trainers

Three train-the-trainer sessions, hosted by the British Columbia Professional Fire Fighters Association, were held in the summer and fall of 2017. These three-day training sessions, led by a Vancouver Fire and Rescue Services trainer and a CMHA trainer, included firefighters from the Lower Mainland and the Interior of British Columbia. Once trained, these individuals implemented the 'Resilient Minds' Modules in their home communities at their local fire halls.

VFRS: Twelve individuals, who have had prior education in trauma-related content, were trained to be 'Resilient Minds' facilitators in late 2016. Of the twelve who were trained, six became regular trainers in VFRS. With the support of a trainer manual and access to a CMHA support and senior firefighter staff, these trainers worked to deliver the program throughout Vancouver fire halls in 2017 and 2018.

EVALUATION OF 'RESILIENT MINDS' INCLUDED SOLICITING DATA AT FOUR TIME POINTS

Several steps were taken to evaluate the 'Resilient Minds' program to better understand how the course was experienced by firefighters, the impact on their perceived ability to cope more effectively with stress and whether the initiative influenced the culture to be more open to learning and talking about mental health. After the train-the-trainer sessions and prior to the start of the delivery of the 'Resilient Minds' program, all BC professional firefighters were invited to participate in an online or paper-based survey. Then, after Modules One and Two and again after Modules Three and Four, workshop participants were invited to provide feedback via paper-based surveys. Finally, between three and six months after the completion of the four modules, participants were invited to provide final input via an online or paper-based survey.

1. Pre-'Resilient Minds' course (and prior to change in VFRS leadership)
2. Post Modules One and Two
3. Post Modules Three and Four
4. Three to six months post course completion

BASELINE SURVEY KEY FINDINGS

Based on 348 respondents, the top three stressors identified by provincial firefighters were 1) disruption of sleep, 2) being exposed to anxious and overly demanding co-workers or administrators, and 3) not eating a healthy diet. Significant issues related to poor relationships between frontline staff and management were identified in some communities. Further to this:

VFRS: Based on 428 respondents, the **top three stressors** identified by VFRS staff were 1) disruption of sleep, 2) seeing the negative effects of stress on co-workers, and 3) being exposed to anxious and overly demanding co-workers or administrators. Significant issues related to poor relationships between frontline staff and management were identified.

Further to this:

- 24% (34%) of respondents indicated having 'no knowledge' or 'limited knowledge' about psychological trauma and/or mental health challenges.
- Only 47% (30%) reported having some type of training-related psychological trauma.
- 92% (97.5%) of respondents indicated that learning about mental health challenges could be helpful for them in their work.

Baseline survey results clearly highlighted the need for more training to support provincial firefighters as they cope with the stress of the job and are put in a position to support the public.

MODULES ONE AND TWO FEEDBACK

220 respondents provided feedback after completing Modules One and Two. Findings revealed:

VFRS: 111 respondents provided feedback after completing Modules One and Two. Findings revealed:

- 86% (85%) of course participants indicated **high enjoyment** as to the way the material was presented in the workshop, and 86% (82%) found the materials *'very helpful'*.
- 100% (99%) of course participants reported **learning new knowledge** about psychological trauma and/or mental health, with 73% (81%) of these individuals reporting learning 'quite a bit' or 'a lot'.
- 93% (94%) intended to **use the new knowledge and skills** in their work and a further 92% (93%) intended to use new learning in their personal life.
- 99.5% (100%) of course participants derived benefit from the first two 'Resilient Minds' modules, with 91.5% (88%) of these individuals indicating **high benefit**.
- 92% (92%) of course participants were 'quite likely or 'very likely' to **recommend** the course to other firefighters.

Most Useful Parts of the Course

Participants were asked to comment on the parts of the course that they found the most useful. They noted several aspects of the course.

Useful Knowledge

- Learning the **signs and symptoms of stress and trauma in self and others (both mental and physical) to understand normal reactions to stress vs. signs/symptoms that indicate help should be sought.**
- Different functions of stress
- Science behind the content (e.g., how the brain works)
- **Resources** for more information and support, including treatment options.

Useful Skills

- How to help self and others
- New coping skills to deal with stress
- **The 4R framework** that included learning how to address situations that involve mental health (e.g., dos and don'ts when having conversations with others who may be experiencing mental health challenges; how to listen; how to make people feel comfortable)
- Learning **coping mechanisms** to better manage stress

Useful Workshop Processes

- **Personal experiences** that were shared; group discussions
- Using the **image of rocks for stress** that people may have in their lives
- Course flow
- Instructor expertise
- Access to **teaching materials**, workbooks and instructor materials
- Seeing **different teaching styles**
- **Having an opportunity to have discussions** in the workshop to hear the experience of others
- **Videos** in the workshop



MODULES THREE AND FOUR FEEDBACK

194 respondents provided feedback after completing Modules Three and Four. Findings revealed:

58 respondents provided feedback after completing Modules Three and Four. Findings revealed:

- 86% (83%) of course participants indicated **high enjoyment** as to the way in which the material was presented in the workshop and 84% (83%) also found the materials *'very helpful'*.
- 99% (100%) of course participants reported **learning new knowledge about psychological trauma and/or mental health**, with 83% (79%) of these individuals reporting learning 'quite a bit' or 'a lot'.
- 94% (83%) intended to use the new knowledge and skills in their work and 92% (88%) in their personal life.
- 99.5% (100%) of course participants **derived benefit** from the last two 'Resilient Minds' modules, with 87.5% (84%) of these individuals indicating high benefit.
- 91% (88%) of course participants were 'quite likely or 'very likely' to **recommend the course to other firefighters**.

Further to the above findings gathered after the training sessions, firefighters pointed to the **need to have ongoing training** to reinforce the knowledge and skills presented in 'Resilient Minds' as well as have further training to build upon their knowledge and skills in the area of mental health.

Most Useful Parts of the Course

Participants were asked to comment on the parts of the course that they found the most useful. They noted several aspects of the course.

Useful Knowledge

- 'Normal' symptoms versus disorders
- Understanding the effects of stress
- Signs of mental illness
- Resources for support
- **Stress conditions checklist**
- **Resources for more information and support**
- **Meditation and mindfulness techniques**
- **The message that listening is better than talking**
- **Importance of self-care**
- **How the brain works and stores information**

Useful Skills

- 4Rs
- Self-awareness
- Coping with burnout/compassion fatigue and stress and general coping tools to assist with managing stress
- Breathing as a tool
- Communication skills



- Resiliency skills – putting on your own oxygen mask before healing others
- Learning how to identify when other people and myself are under stress
- How to help others who are dealing with mental illness
- Mindfulness
- The 4R framework
- DBT skills
- Strategies to cope with stress
- Strategies to de-escalate intense situations

Useful Workshop Processes

- Group activities, discussions
- Case studies
- Tailored workshop for fire hall and firefighters
- Instructor honesty about their own stress
- Stories /examples that were related to working as a firefighter

FOLLOW-UP SURVEY

119 respondents completed a follow-up survey after completing all four modules. Findings revealed:
67 respondents completed a follow-up survey after completing all four modules. Findings revealed:

- Compared to the average ratings of 17 stressors reported at the baseline survey timepoint (early 2017), ratings at follow-up indicated a **decrease in the perceived level of stress for all 13 or the 17 stressors. (17 of the 17 stressors)**
- 93% (95%) of survey respondents reported **learning ways to better deal with stress** as a result of the 'Resilient Minds' course.
- Course recall varied, with 26% (22%) of respondents reporting strong recall of material, 48% (51%) reporting 'some' recall, and 26% (27%) reporting 'a little' or 'not much' recall. These findings support the many comments made by VFRS staff about the **need for refresher courses, other learning opportunities, and the visibility of a variety of materials related to psychological health** and resilience in the fire halls.
- 71% (70%) reported **using 'Resilient Minds' information and skills** in their work and 67% (69%) reporting using the materials in their personal life.
- (100%) reported **feeling more prepared to respond to a member of the public** who may be struggling with mental health issues, with (59%) reporting feeling 'much' more prepared.
- 96% (100%) reported **feeling more prepared to respond to a colleague** who may be struggling with mental health issues, with 58% (64%) reporting feeling 'much' more prepared.
- 63% (65%) of respondents reported that they **have felt a positive change in the level of support at their fire hall** and 57% (62.5%) reported that they have felt a change of support in management levels (note that this shift would reflect the introduction of a new Fire Chief and new chief officers).

Course Content Recall Suggestions

Respondents were asked to comment about supports that could be put in place to help firefighters better remember the information. 53 (49) individuals provided comments. Overwhelmingly, their comments reflected the need for an ongoing focus in the area of mental health/mental wellness. Specific suggestions included:

- Follow-up and refresher courses
- Posters in the firehalls with course highlights
- Phone app for easy access
- Information in the monthly newsletter or a monthly brief with information related to resilience
- Access to the course PowerPoints
- More time spent practicing some of the exercises
- **Initial longer sessions of 'Resilient Minds' that include more hands-on/interactions**
- **Yearly review sessions of the content**
- **Notices in the bathrooms and on the TV monitors with information and support numbers**
- **Reminders in the bulletins and newsletters**
- **Materials that are visible in the halls**
- **Summary sheets of the four modules**

Ongoing Support for Learning about Mental Health and Resilience

Respondents were asked for suggestions as to ways that the organization can continue to support learning about mental health and resilience. The most noted suggestions were to integrate 'Resilient Minds' into training. (To have refresher courses and other ongoing training to build knowledge and skills.) Other suggestions included:

- More interactions with mental health professionals
- Debriefings handled by outside agencies
- Ensuring that management takes courses related to mental health, including 'Resilient Minds'
- **Ongoing debriefings**
- **Access to a variety of mental health professionals and therapies**
- **More staff trained in CISM**
- **Ongoing offering of resources to staff and their families to support mental health**

PROJECT SUCCESSES

1. **Project Reach:** Despite a very small budget,
2. **Increased recognition of the importance of mental health:** Based on feedback, it was clear that members view a focus on mental health as important.
3. **High Acceptance of the 'Resilient Minds' course:** Course participants gave the course high ratings both with respect to enjoying the format and being likely to recommend it to others.
4. **High learning and benefit from the 'Resilient Minds' course:** Course participants reported learning a great deal about mental health and resilience, both how they can use the knowledge and skills in their own lives and also to support others.

PROJECT CHALLENGES

Evaluation Data Collection: The evaluation was limited in scope and resources. It is unclear as to how many individuals received 'Resilient Minds' to date versus how many individuals provided feedback. The initiative would benefit from a robust evaluation wherein it is possible to track course participation, community contexts, degree to which departments place value on a mental health focus, and overall impact of mental health educational efforts on department culture and firefighter well-being.

1. Train-the-training: Because of the logistics involved in pulling 12 VFRS members from their regular shifts, **it was challenging to book the date for the 3-day training.**
2. Training time: Given the busy and unpredictable schedule of firefighters, **having enough time to work in the fire halls to complete the training was challenging.**
3. Evaluation data collection: VFRS are asked to do many surveys on different topics. **Fatigue related to survey completion** may have contributed to lower post-module and follow-up survey participation rates.

CONCLUSIONS

This report presents preliminary findings for the BC provincial roll out of the 'Resilient Minds' program. Based on data presented in this report, findings indicate a need for such training among firefighters. As with the Vancouver project, the **provincial project has been well-received by firefighters.** Course participants clearly learned new knowledge and skills through their course participation. **Provincial firefighters voiced a need for an ongoing focus on this area** to both continue to decrease stigma related to mental health and to learn to better cope with stress and trauma related to the work. As more course feedback throughout the province comes available, a better understanding will be achieved as to the unique needs that different communities may have related to 'Resilient Minds' and other educational opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **'Resilient Minds' as part of new hire training:** Embed 'Resilient Minds' into new firefighter training.
2. **'Resilient Minds' trainer support:** As new trainers implement the program, incorporate quality-assurance checks to support instructor needs in terms of facilitator development. Ongoing facilitator development will ensure that 'Resilient Minds' remains a course in which participants have a level of engagement with the material.
3. **Ongoing Education:** Examine ways to offer ongoing education related to mental health to firefighters. This education may take several forms such as workshops, brief handouts, phone apps, posters etc.