

# New disaster response protocol focusing on 'psychological aid' to be tested in mock exercises

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Police and other first responders need to be more attuned to the emotional needs of witnesses to horrific crimes or mass-casualty incidents, says a leading Canadian disaster response expert.

In the chaotic moments after a mass shooting or other such event, police typically isolate witnesses and instruct them not to talk to anyone until investigators can question them.

But this approach overlooks the fact that the witnesses may be suffering severe emotional trauma and may want desperately to reach out to family to let them know they're OK, says Laurie Pearce, research chair at the Justice Institute of B.C.

"When you are most upset and most want to talk, you can't," Pearce said. "Police won't let you."

Pearce and her research team are developing and testing a new protocol that encourages first responders or victim services workers to administer a bit of "psychological first aid" to witnesses before they are questioned by police.

Psychological first-aid follows three basic principles: reassure people that they're safe; listen to what they have to say; and connect them with social support. Instead of going up to a witness and asking them, "What did you see?," the first question might be, "How are you?"

Providing even just a few minutes of psychological first aid can help "ground" witnesses and give them the clarity of mind that'll ultimately help them in their interview, Pearce said. "Our theory is police will get better information and clearer information."

The theory will be tested at a mock exercise next month simulating a deadly gang shooting at a fitness centre. But Pearce said the technique can be applied in a variety of mass-casualty scenarios, such as train derailments, bus crashes, street riots and stabbings in nightclubs.

Const. Brian Montague, a spokesman for the Vancouver Police Department, which is participating in the exercise, said in an email that maintaining the integrity of an investigation is paramount. "That said, it is important to keep a witness calm and focused, so allowing supervised contact with family or victim services in some cases might make them a better witness, as long as it would not compromise an investigation."

It can be very easy sometimes for first responders to get caught up emotionally in a major incident, said Rene Bernklau, a veteran of the B.C. Ambulance Service and an emergency management specialist. "I wouldn't say there's panic, but there's louder voices, yelling," he said.

Pearce's research, he said, is an important reminder to first responders to think about their tone and inflection, and to be more empathetic to the needs of civilians.

Studies have shown that in the days and weeks following a critical incident, there may be a desire among survivors and witnesses to reconnect with one another. Another part of Pearce's research is trying to identify the best ways to facilitate such meetings.

Ten days after the deadly July 2005 bombings in London that targeted the city's public transportation system, a private reception was held for survivors. Later, police created a private online discussion forum for them.

A report for the British government later noted that "if the desire is there, individuals will circumvent official channels and set up their own opportunities for networking through, increasingly, the Internet."

This sort of group-support therapy is an attempt by witnesses and survivors "to make meaning of what has taken place and the need to regain control of one's life," Pearce said.