



By Margie Moulin

An 'Unpleasant Casino:' the Effects of High Priority, Low Frequency Calls

Working in an emergency communications center, you already know that the worst call your center has ever taken is just one ring away. Many of us have policies, guidelines and protocols to help walk us through the process when a high risk, low frequency call comes into the center, whether it's a natural disaster or a human-caused tragic event. We train for these, and we focus on the details of how to follow the process quickly and correctly to ensure help gets to where it is needed in the most expeditious manner.

But are we prepared for what it does to us as we wait for that call? Or even what it is doing to us if we never take that call at all?

As I began this article, I reached out to one of my own department counselors, Elissa Denton, MSW, CSWA, to ask her about the impact of these calls on our profession. Elissa is a counselor specializing in public safety professionals and their families. During our conversation, Elissa described how she likened dispatch centers to an "unpleasant casino." She explained it to me this way. "Dispatch is a bit like an unpleasant casino. There are lots of screens and lights, it's open 24 hours and it can be a time warp. Every time the phone rings, it's like pulling a slot lever, except the potential of winning big is replaced with the potential of a really bad call."

How do you prepare yourself, (or your employees if you are in management) for that time in the "casino" prior to the call?

Consider this: people drawn to this career typically want to be really good at their jobs. You want to be the best and to feel confident and competent. When a high risk/high priority call comes in, that confidence can be shaken, particularly if you lack training or do not feel competent in your skills. This can also lead to questioning what *could* happen, even before the call ever comes in.

"Anticipatory anxiety" is a term for worrying about something before it happens. This state of anxiety can become chronic and add even more stress since a person is always waiting for the "what if." Lack of experience, or lack of training and preparedness, can leave otherwise competent people doubting their abilities and focusing instead on all that could go wrong.

Because high priority calls are infrequent, it is hard to develop a sense of competence and confidence, contributing further to stress and anticipatory anxiety. This can become a never-ending cycle.

This is where training and practice can be helpful. It is important that the training environment not focus on fears or perfection but instead focus on building both competence and confidence. The better we train, the more confident and competent we become, reducing stress, keeping us healthier and adding to job satisfaction. Practicing high priority events without the "real world stress" provides this opportunity in a safe environment, further increasing competence and confidence.

One final thought. Sometimes we focus solely on the negative aftermath of high priority/low frequency calls for individuals (i.e. trauma), but it's important to recognize the sense of confidence that can come after difficult calls as well. Post-traumatic growth is when our abilities or strengths improve following and due to a traumatic event. Recognize the things you did well, acknowledge how the training helped, and use that success as a reminder to pursue further training. If you are in management, watch for these events, and be sure to recognize and acknowledge a job well done.

A big thank you to everyone, whatever your position, working in the "unpleasant casinos" out there. I wish for you many stress-free hours with your loved ones throughout the holiday season. ●

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