



I'm Okay—Or Am I?

Mental Stress and Its Effects on Tow Operators

By David Lewis



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William has been a towing and recovery operator for the last 15 years. He is very experienced at his job and well respected by his peers. From minor vehicle breakdowns on the side of the road to major crashes involving multiple fatalities, he has seen a lot. He thought what he was seeing just came with the job, and never let any of it bother him—until recently.

Just a few nights ago, William woke suddenly at 3:00 am in a cold sweat. His mind returned to the previous night's crash incident where there were several injuries, including one of a small child. He had arrived on scene while fire and EMS were still caring for the injured, and he stood by waiting to complete the tow. He watched in horror as the small child screamed from her injuries, and the sight of blood at the scene made it even more horrific to witness.

As he woke with visions from the scene, he could only think of how he would react

Signs of PTSD

Indicators of mental stress can manifest in various ways, affecting emotional, physical, and behavioral well-being. Here are some common signs of mental stress:

Emotional Signs:

- Feeling overwhelmed or anxious
- Irritability or mood swings
- Persistent sadness or feelings of hopelessness
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Increased sensitivity to criticism

Physical Signs:

- Fatigue or low energy
- Headaches or migraines
- Muscle tension or pain, especially in the neck or back
- Upset stomach or digestive issues
- Changes in sleep patterns (insomnia or oversleeping)
- Increased heart rate or chest tightness

Behavioral Signs:

- Withdrawal from friends, family, or activities
- Procrastination or avoidance of responsibilities
- Increased use of alcohol, drugs, or tobacco
- Overeating or loss of appetite
- Restlessness or pacing

Cognitive Signs:

- Racing thoughts or inability to focus
- Negative self-talk or catastrophic thinking
- Forgetfulness or disorganization
- Feeling disconnected or detached from reality

Social Signs:

- Difficulty maintaining relationships
- Increased conflict with others
- Avoiding social interactions

if that child had been his own. He and his wife have two small children, and he would do anything to protect them from injury.

William settled back in to get some sleep knowing he had a busy schedule the coming day. But the nightmares continued until he finally fell asleep from sheer exhaustion. He struggled trying to

understand why after 15 years, he was suddenly beginning to recall incidents that he had witnessed throughout his career as a tower.

Recently, he was awakened with a similar nightmare. This incident involved two teenagers that ran off the road and were killed when their vehicle rammed into a utility pole. Fire and EMS had to practically dismantle the car to get the teens out, but were unable to save them. Their young lives were cut short by this tragic incident. Several times over the past month Bill has awakened with vivid visions from this incident.

GETTING SOME SUPPORT

Overwhelmed by his experiences, William spoke with his wife and together they decided it was time to seek medical guidance on how to put an end to the persistent nightmares. Towing was his passion, and he enjoyed the freedom of being outdoors and a flexible

schedule. William anticipated that the job would eventually wear him down physically, but mental stress was never something he had considered being the reason he would have to stop towing.

Through his primary care physician, William was referred to a mental health counseling program. The program made him aware that the stress of his job was triggering a mental "flight or fight" mode, ultimately resulting in nightmares. With the support of counseling and medication, mental health clinicians helped William overcome his internal battles, and he is now doing much better.

GRIM STATISTICS

Towing and recovery operators

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have one of the most dangerous jobs in the country. As noted in the accompanying chart, an average of 20 towing and recovery operators are struck and killed on the nation's roadways each year. Many more are injured, some so seriously that they are career-ending, because the tow operator is no longer capable of performing labor-intensive tasks.

Being struck, or even nearly being struck, results in physical injury, and can also cause mental injury, leaving the operator fearful of continuing the job. Contributing to the physical and mental injuries is the financial ▶

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stress of damages to a tow truck, as well as time lost from work while repairs are being made.

Medical authorities have long recognized PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) and its effects on mental and physical health. While it is commonly associated with military personnel due to the nature of combat and war, PTSD can affect anyone who has experienced or witnessed a traumatic incident.

This certainly includes tow operators who often respond to crash scenes and witness serious injury or death. Many have also been personally, or nearly, injured by motorists who fail to yield the right-of-way, striking the tow operator and/or their tow vehicles. Each of these exposures can result in symptoms similar to PTSD.

The symptoms of PTSD can manifest in many ways, such as flashbacks, nightmares, emotional numbness, difficulty concentrating, and an extreme state of alertness (hyper vigilance). It's also important to recognize that trauma comes in many forms, and anyone who experiences significant trauma can be affected by PTSD, not just those who have served in the military (note the accompanying sidebar on Signs of PTSD).

When facing signs of mental stress, it is important to not let the stress build up. It's like putting air into a balloon, which can only hold so much until it bursts. There are many effective actions that can reduce stress, and incorporating some of them into a daily routine will effectively promote overall well-being. The key here is to build resilience—the ability to bounce back when confronted with stressful situations. Recommended strategies include physical activity, stress reduction, lifestyle changes, time management, and social interaction.

If signs of mental stress persist or worsen, it's important to seek help,

Support and Treatment for PTSD

Resources include therapy, support groups, and sometimes medication, depending on the severity and individual needs. Options to explore:

1. Mental Health Professionals

- Professionals such as psychologists, counselors, and clinical social workers can provide therapy to help you manage stress and emotions. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a common treatment for stress.
- If necessary, psychiatrists can assess your mental health and may prescribe medication to help with stress and anxiety.
- Websites and apps like BetterHelp, Talkspace, or 7 Cups provide therapy through chat, video, or phone sessions.

2. Hotlines & Crisis Services

- The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States and its territories. The 988 Lifeline is comprised of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining local care and resources with national standards and best practices.

3. Support Groups

- In-Person or Online Support Groups: Connecting with others who are experiencing similar feelings can be helpful. Many non-profits, community centers, or even online forums host groups for people dealing with mental health issues, stress, or specific concerns like anxiety or depression.

- Mental Health Organizations: National or local mental health organizations often have resources and support groups for people experiencing stress. For example, NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) offers support for both individuals and families.

4. Workplace Resources

- Many employers offer EAPs that provide free counseling or support services to employees.
- Some workplaces also have access to professionals who can provide stress management tips or even temporary adjustments to work responsibilities.

5. Community Centers & Local Clinics

- Some local clinics and community centers offer counseling or workshops aimed at reducing stress and promoting mental well-being.
- Religious communities including, pastors, priests, or spiritual advisors often offer support and counseling for emotional distress.

6. Self-Care & Lifestyle Changes

- Mindfulness Practices: Mindfulness, meditation, yoga, or breathing exercises are proven ways to reduce stress and improve mental well-being. Apps like Headspace, Calm, or Insight Timer offer guided exercises.
- Physical Activity: Exercise can help reduce stress by releasing endorphins and improving mood. Regular physical activity like walking, running, or swimming can provide relief.

whether from a trusted individual, a mental health professional, or a support group. The best advice is to start by talking to a trusted person, such as a spouse, co-worker, pastor, or close friend. Talking is the first step in recovery. Early intervention can help prevent more severe consequences of chronic stress.

Seeking professional help is highly recommended for overwhelming or persistent stress. (See sidebar for Support and Treatment of PTSD).

KNOW WHEN TO SAY WHEN


Each day, towing and recovery operators endure physical and



Keeping up a brave front isn't always the best approach to dealing with stress.

mental stress while performing their duties. For many, these stressors are easily managed through self-care and building resilience to the effects of the tasks they perform, and the things that they see. The stress, however, can become overwhelming for some, who will suffer the consequences of ignoring the signs and not taking action to seek professional help.

Towers owe it to themselves, their coworkers, and their families to recognize the signs of stress and act when they become overwhelming. If time is allotted each year for technical training to enhance skills, shouldn't taking time to practice mental resilience also be provided?

While mental stress can feel overwhelming, the path to wellness begins with the first step—choosing to prioritize the mind as much as the body. By adopting small, intentional steps toward wellness, such as practicing gratitude or seeking professional support, everyone can contribute to a culture that values mental health as much as physical health. 

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