

Every rescue is an experience

By Stephen J Penny MBE, Wellbeing Officer (Volunteer), Scottish Mountain Rescue

Humans, not heroes

A few years ago, Scottish Mountain Rescue asked Facebook followers to send in the word that came to mind when they thought about rescuers. After putting all the words together, the one that seemed to be most prevalent was 'Heroes'. I don't believe that mountain rescue volunteers see themselves as heroes. We have human feelings, emotions, and physical and mental health. All of us can be impacted by what we do. Volunteering is good for us but we're not invincible.

Almost 30 years ago, as a mountain rescue search dog handler, my dog located the body of a missing walker buried under an avalanche. After the event, I went through many different physical and emotional reactions. These were confusing and alarming, but fortunately I was able to continue my volunteering and am still doing so today. So, am I hard-hearted? - I don't think so. There are things at play that have allowed me to deal with the tasks we are asked to do and to keep things in balance. Have there been tough times? - yes of course! Do the positives outweigh the negatives? - definitely!

So, what have I learned over the years?

Volunteering (in general) is good for us



and our mental health. It is extremely rewarding and provides opportunities to work within teams, learn new skills, help others in distress, and build life-long friendships. We know that teams who look out for each other, have a shared sense of purpose, share mutual respect and trust,

have confidence in the knowledge and skills of other team members, and value difference are stronger overall. All these factors help to build our protective armour and that allows us to thrive in the role. If we can look after ourselves and our colleagues then we can keep helping others, one way or another, more effectively and for longer.

Protective armour

Gaining knowledge of what helps to create our protective armour, and an understanding of the things that might threaten that, has been the foundation on which I have built and maintained the drive to keep volunteering to help others. We know that the challenge of being a response volunteer is a bigger threat to our wellbeing than the exposure we might have to potentially traumatic events. It can be extremely difficult to leave either your family (or work) at a moment's notice when the call comes in. It can be difficult to go, but the guilt



The avalanche

Tumbling over and over...out of control...unable to see...a constant roaring in my head.

And then stuck... suffocating...a weight seemingly enveloping me... trapping me.

A surge of panic...trying to push arms up and out...I'm buried!

The duvet relented and my head was free ... I could breathe ... but my heart was racing. What is happening to me? I was both confused and alarmed.

It was little more than 12 hours since my search and rescue dog had located the body of a missing walker buried in an avalanche.

Over the next few days, I experienced many different reactions - both physical and emotional - and I struggled to understand and explain these. I suffered periods of guilt and re-running the incident over and over in my mind. I'd not long qualified as a volunteer dog handler with mountain rescue. Did I do enough; could I have done more? My dog performed well. We train for years for this, so that's a success. But a life was lost, so have I failed? I volunteered to save lives. Images and thoughts kept coming to mind out of the blue and I felt exhausted. Was I going mad?

This event was nearly 30 years ago, and we didn't talk then about what, I now know, were my normal reactions to an event that wasn't normal. Today things are moving forward in a positive way, and we understand more about both the positive, and sometimes negative, impacts of volunteering in mountain rescue. A side of volunteering not always seen or understood by the general public. Every rescue is an experience.



of not going can play equally heavy on the mind. There are pressures associated with balancing the time required for callouts, training, and running mountain rescue teams alongside all other aspects of life. And because of the complexity of our lives, any single or combination of incidents can affect individuals more or less than their colleagues and we need to recognise this and account for it.

Lifelines Scotland (www.lifelines.scot)

How can we learn to understand our protective armour and our normal responses to potentially traumatic events? In Scotland, we are very fortunate to have a national NHS project called Lifelines Scotland. This was initiated by the Scottish Government in 2016 when they asked staff at the Rivers Centre* in NHS Lothian to develop a resource that would help to support the volunteer responder community. By 2016, the Rivers Centre had 20 years of experience of working with emergency service staff. Alongside the clinical knowledge and skills to help those with a psychological injury on a journey of recovery, the staff had built up a huge knowledge base on what was helping to keep emergency personnel functioning well and thriving in their roles – most people, most of the time, cope well. The Lifelines Scotland project is based on over two decades of clinical experience, research and best practice and summarised in the Lifelines 10 Essentials.

Prevention and early intervention

The project is driven by the certainty that taking a proactive and inclusive approach to overall wellbeing will be most effective in keeping emergency service staff and volunteers doing what they do best – helping others. The focus is on prevention and early intervention and a model of informal peer support that reflects the evidence that early and ongoing support such as reassurance, information, and kindness, ideally from people who know us – family, friends, colleagues and managers – will help to challenge stigma, normalise reactions, and promote the expectation of recovery. This is supported by dedicated resources on a website that is a portal for emergency service staff and volunteers, providing a joint community resource which complements various learning packages and bridges to further sources of support. Of course, the material on the website, which includes a short self-directed training module, is open to anyone and not restricted to emergency

THE LIFELINES 10 ESSENTIALS

- #1 We all have mental health and responders are not invincible.
- #2 Emergency responders are at risk of psychological injury. It's an occupational hazard.
- #3 Health and safety assessments should include psychological risk.
- #4 Getting psychologically injured doesn't mean you're weak or a failure.
- #5 Psychological injury is not inevitable. Most responders, most of the time, will cope well.
- #6 Psychological injuries can heal.
- #7 Stigma stops people getting help.
- #8 Workplace stress is as big a threat to wellbeing as trauma exposure.
- #9 Good management and leadership protect responders.
- #10 Support from colleagues, family and friends keeps responders well.



Our 10 Essentials are based on research and experience, as detailed on our website.

The way to help is CLEAR

- Choose when to ask
- Listen attentively
- Explain and reassure
- Assist with appropriate support & help
- Remember to look after yourself

service staff and volunteers.

Through the website material and targeted learning opportunities, Lifelines aims to provide as many emergency service staff and volunteers as possible with the knowledge, understanding, and skills to look after themselves and their colleagues, allowing them to function well in their roles and for this experience to be both positive and rewarding.

There are also resources on the site for family, friends and others, for example, employers with staff who volunteer as responders.

Supporting our members and teams

Heading out in extremely challenging conditions and placing ourselves into dangerous situations is part and parcel of the mountain rescue volunteer's role. As a consequence, volunteers are at risk of physical and psychological injury, it's an occupational hazard. But psychological injury, just like physical injury, isn't inevitable – most of us, most of the time, will cope well.

Mountain rescue team members and their families in Scotland have access to other forms of direct support if and when they need it. Scottish Mountain Rescue provides opportunities for teams to share what they are doing to support member wellbeing, and also organises relevant learning opportunities for all team

members. We must never underestimate the sacrifices and support that family and friends provide to allow volunteers to help others. We produced a 'Welcome to the Team' booklet to help explain some of the key points and teams can make this relevant to their own local circumstances.

Every rescue is an experience. If we learn about the things that make up or threaten our protective armour, understand normal reactions to potentially traumatic events, accept that as volunteers we are not invincible, and are supported to seek early help and challenge stigma, then we will be better placed to look after ourselves and our colleagues. We will thrive in our roles and continue to go out into situations to help others in distress.

▶ To find out more about Scottish Mountain Rescue, visit: www.scottishmountainrescue.org

**The Rivers Centre takes its name from the psychiatrist (and anthropologist) William Halse Rivers (W.H.R.) Rivers (1864-1922) who was stationed at the at Craiglockhart War Hospital, Edinburgh, in 1917 and who famously treated British officers, including Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, suffering from shell shock by the 'talking cure' which was revolutionary then and continues to influence trauma therapy today. The Rivers Centre provides a specialist clinical service for NHS Lothian patients with PTSD and Complex PTSD and a national clinical service to Scottish Fire and Rescue Service staff, jurors across Scotland and the Scottish Courts and Tribunal Service. As well as Lifelines, Rivers hosts the National Wellbeing Hub and advises the Scottish Government on major incident response.*