Firefighters: The Emotional Processing of Physiological Risks

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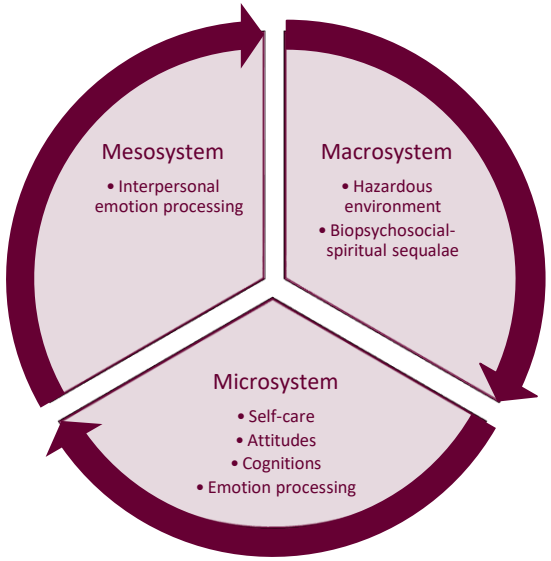
PURPOSE

To acquire an ecosystemic understanding of the relation between mental health and physiological risk among firefighters using a grounded theory approach

LITERATURE REVIEW

- Firefighters have a greater risk of developing certain cancers, relative to the general U.S. population, likely due to occupational exposure to carcinogens (e.g., Bates, 2007; Kang, Davis, Hunt, & Kriebel, 2008).
- Firefighters express apprehension regarding risk of cancer, cardiovascular disease, and infectious disease (Jahnke, Poston, Jitnarin, & Haddock, 2012); however, little is known about how firefighters emotionally process their own, as well as their colleagues', increased risk of acquiring cancer due to occupational hazards.
- These concerns foment symptoms of post-traumatic stress, specifically anxiety, depression, hostility, and interpersonal sensitivity (Wagner, McFee, & Martin, 2010).
- Physical and psychological adaptation to cancer appears to be influenced by an individual's capacity to interpret personal significance of the illness as well as manage accompanying emotions (Hoyt, Nelson, Darabos, Marín-Chollom, & Stanton, 2017).
- There is a significant association between attachment and adaptation to cancer diagnosis, mediated by the different dimensions of emotion regulation (Ávila, Brandão, Teixeira, Coimbra, & Matos, 2015).

ECOSYSTEMIC MODEL



Microsystem
- Self-care
- Attitudes
  - Fatalism
  - Black humor
- Cognitions
  - Anticipation of occupational risk/death
- Emotion processing
  - Deliberate detachment from emotional reflection
  - Goal navigation
    - Meaning-making

Mesosystem
- Interpersonal emotion processing
  - Emotion regulation
  - Attachment
    - Emotion communication
  - Vicarious trauma
  - Debriefing

Macrosystem
- Hazardous environment
  - Carcinogens (threat and/or acquisition of cancer)
  - Threat of decreased lifespan
  - Vocational trauma
- Biopsychosocial-spiritual sequalae

PROJECTED STUDY

- Approach:
  - Qualitative research design for development of conceptual research
  - Grounded theory approach
- Participants:
  - Minimum of 6 firefighters; representative sample from Pacific Northwest
- Method:
  - In-person interviews based on 3 open-ended questions:
    1. How do occupational risks affect firefighters' mental health?
    2. How do firefighters mentally cope with the certitude of being exposed to occupational risks that likely precipitate cancer?
    3. What self-care strategies might be useful in facilitating acceptance and management of emotional responses that might accompany physiological risk?
  - All interviews will be audio recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed for similar themes and patterns

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