Ordinary Stress or Post-Traumatic Stress?

**Disclaimer:** This case study was prepared by Amanda Zee and Victoria D’Astice under the supervision of Dr. Frances Tuer, DeGroote School of Business, solely for the purpose of discussion. While the injury in the case actually took place, all details of person(s) and organization(s) have been disguised.

**The Injury/Illness:**

Jane Innis is a first-year university student who works part time at her local community center as a lifeguard. One Saturday morning, Jane was guarding the senior swim, as she routinely did. This consisted of watching patrons aged 55 and over swim laps. Halfway through the swim while Jane was speaking with a patron regarding a complaint, she heard an elderly lady in the pool shout “Oh, dear! Is that man okay?” Jane immediately turned her head and saw an elderly man lifelessly floating face down in the corner of the pool. Jane knew she needed to act quickly; she blew her whistle and jumped into the pool. With the help of her fellow lifeguards, the man was removed from the pool and CPR was immediately administered. Jane and her guard team performed CPR for 10 minutes before the paramedics arrived. Once they arrived, the man began showing signs of life.

Although Jane had never dealt with a similar situation before, she had been trained on what to do in these rare situations. Jane went home distraught from the incident. She felt a sense of guilt and wondered if this would have been avoided if she wasn’t distracted while watching the pool. No matter how hard Jane tried, she couldn’t stop thinking about the incident. She wondered if she should speak to someone like her supervisor Tom about how she was feeling, but she was hesitant as she had only known him for a short time.

**Who and What:**

Jane has been working as a lifeguard since she was 16 years old. She always comes to work with a smile on her face, and she is well liked by the patrons and her fellow co-workers. In order to become a certified lifeguard, Jane completed many courses over several years. Additionally, every three months she attends mandatory training sessions at her pool to practice her physical skills and learn about new regulations and rules. The work environment at the pool is busy, loud, and rapidly changing. Working as a lifeguard is physically demanding as lifeguards are required to stand for long periods of time. Additionally, it is necessary for lifeguards to have excellent concentration as they are required to constantly scan the pool to prevent accidents and identify hazards, thus ensuring the safety of the patrons.

**Background on Injury/Illness:**

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental illness; more specifically, PTSD is a anxiety disorder that occurs after experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event (Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, 2018). Symptoms usually occur one to three months after the event or occur many years later (CCOHS, 2018). It is normal for a person to be affected by a traumatic event, but the thoughts and memories of the event could develop into PTSD given the intensity of the traumatic event and the impact on the individual (CCOHS, 2018). PTSD does not occur commonly; however, certain groups where workers are more likely to experience or witness a traumatic event are at a higher risk for developing PTSD such as military personnel, first responders, and medical staff (CCOHS, 2018). For instance, as compared to the general population, first responders are at least twice as prone to suffer from PTSD due to the nature of their job (Stevenson, 2017).

In April 2016, the Ministry of Labour announced the Supporting Ontario’s First Responders Act, which presumes PTSD diagnosed in first responders is work-related and enables first responders faster access to WSIB benefits, resources, and prompt treatment (Stevenson, 2017). Additionally, as a result of the Act, employers are able to develop and implement prevention plans that include intervention, recovery, and return to work (Stevenson, 2017). Prevention plans aid in the development of a proactive approach to reduce and manage PTSD in the workplace (Stevenson, 2017).

**What Next?:**

In realization of Jane’s mental health, Tom had two options. The first option was to ignore the situation; he wasn’t completely sure if Jane was actually suffering from PTSD based off of what he had read online. To his limited knowledge on mental health, Tom thought PTSD only developed in military personnel; therefore, he was unsure about what Jane was going through at the moment. “Maybe she would get over it.”, he thought. His second option was to have a conversation with Jane about her mental health, and then assess the situation from there. However, he wondered if she would be willing to open up to him because their relationship had previously been strictly work-related, and he had only been her supervisor for 6 months. If Jane did open up, Tom could provide support as someone to talk to, but he wasn’t sure how to take on that role. If that was the case, he could talk to human resources about attaining further training to learn how to deal with the mental health issues of his subordinates.

Tom was torn – he could take the easy way out by being ignorant to the situation and forget about Jane, or he could take further action, but it would be a lot more administrative work dealing with HR. He thought to himself – “If I were in Jane’s position what would I want?”