

Supporting Heroes In mental health Foundational Training (SHIFT)

Unit Commander Guide

Best Practice Recommendations for the Supervisors of Individuals Working with Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Materials



Research has identified that those individuals who are required to view child sexual exploitation and abuse materials at work may experience specific stressors associated with their exposure to said materials. Many of these stressors can be managed by providing a healthy work environment, together with provision of an appropriate and effective support system.

A healthy work environment is one of the best tools that can be provided to professionals coping with exposure to child sexual exploitation and abuse materials. Flexibility, along with an educated and understanding command staff, is vital to support the frontline staff involved in this taxing, and often toxic, line of work.

Support for individuals working in this area should be provided by mental health professionals with a clear understanding of the specific issues faced by staff working in this area. Remember the psychological impact of viewing images can include:

Burnout- Feeling overwhelmed, interpersonal problems at work or home, sudden health problems, substance abuse, feeling unmotivated

Compassion fatigue- the gradual lessening of compassion for co-workers, family members, even victims

Vicarious Trauma- negative changes that happen over time as a result of witnessing other people's suffering and need. Over a prolonged period of time the exposed individual may feel as if he/she is unable to utilize the same coping mechanisms that they once relied on to assist them with the effects of this primary trauma.

The Purpose of this Guide is to:

- Provide best practice recommendations for those managing or supporting individuals exposed to child pornography images through their work
- Provide suggestions for practical guidelines that can be implemented within the workplace
- Provide advice on finding an appropriate mental health professional

Workspace considerations

The physical location in an office should be conducive to feeling comfortable while at work. Consider the following:

- Sometimes just having a window or television in the office may help the individual feel connected with the outside world.
- Use an area that is private, but not totally isolated from others. These investigations are sensitive and accidental exposure should be managed, but the professional also should feel part of the “team”, and be near other colleagues and “normal” work environments.
- If someone has an isolated workspace, have a secondary location that is less isolated where they can do paperwork or other non-toxic work.
- Provide privacy screens for computers to protect against accidental exposure.
- Provide a quiet, meditation or wellness/room for breaks.

Preparation for new employees

- Develop an interview process in which the potential candidate is educated about the true nature of the crime, asked questions about their suitability in entering the unit, and allowed to voice any concerns they may have.
- Allow the candidate to “shadow” an investigator in the unit to observe the work being done.
- Encourage the candidate to speak with other investigators about the job.
- Explore a “transition” process in which the employee does the job for a period of time and then re-evaluates whether the job is a fit.
- Offer training for the employee such as child exploitation investigation classes and SHIFT workshops for exposed individuals.
- Discuss the availability of mental health support for both the individual and, where appropriate, their family.
- Arrange an introduction with the departmental mental health professional

“I have only been doing this for a couple months. What I saw made me sick to my stomach and affected me outside of work.”

- ICAC Task Force Member

Work flexibility

Allowing investigators and others who are exposed to child exploitation material to have some flexibility is an important component in staying healthy. Consider:

- Frequent breaks- no more than four hours at a time viewing images.
- Spreading large cases out over several days of viewing.
- Encouraging switching to other projects, which will allow professionals to get relief from viewing images and come back recharged and refreshed.
- Having an open-door policy that allows the employee to leave the unit without negative ramifications (i.e. decrease in rank, status, or pay).
- Wherever possible viewing images should stop an hour before shift ends.
- Encourage people to take lunch and breaks away from their desk.

Educating colleagues

Colleagues should be aware that:

- Colleagues should be aware of the signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma
- Viewing of child sexual abuse images should be treated as serious, restricted and stressful.
- Trivialization or unnecessary interruption disrupts vital concentration.
- Respect for the job is important to professionals as well as the victims.
- Phrases like “kiddie porn” and “dirty” room or laptops are unacceptable.

Mental Health Providers

A qualified mental health provider should provide:

- Recommendations for care for unit staff,
- Training regarding self-care and stress management,
- Education for supervisors, staff, family members and interested friends,
- Team cohesion exercises,
- One-on-one sessions for exposed individuals.
- Understanding of the true nature and scope of child sexual exploitation and abuse images,
- Experience in dealing with criminal justice professional trauma,
- Specialized training like SHIFT training for mental health professionals,
- The ability to develop trust with criminal justice professionals.

Finding the right mental health provider for your requirements can be difficult. Often the best referral is by word of mouth; however it is also important to have a mental health provider with the appropriate training and experience, and who understands the unique trauma associated with exposure to child sexual exploitation and abuse images.

All good mental health providers will be happy to evidence their professional qualifications and experience, together with their professional body, the organization responsible for monitoring their work.

Mental health professionals come from many clinical backgrounds. Probably the better known groups are psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors, social workers, and psychotherapists. More recently doctors, nurses, and social workers with an interest in mental health have undertaken specialist mental health training and, in some cases, may be able to provide an appropriate mental health service. In these situations, it is particularly important to clarify their qualifications and experience in the mental health field, together with their experience in this subject. Allow your team to meet the candidate and provide input regarding fit.

If your mental health provider does not have experience in this specific area, consider arranging for them to attend a SHIFT training program.

In all cases your mental health professional should be able to provide you with the following information:

- Details of qualification/fitness to provide mental health provision
- Details of fitness to provide mental health provision in this **specialist** area (working with Law Enforcement and sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of children)
- Professional Body Membership
- Insurance Details
- Their Supervision Structure
- An agreed Code of Confidentiality

Finally, both you and your team should feel comfortable with your mental health provider, and feel able to establish a relationship which should combine a mutual respect and trust.

Below are some of the professional organizations that may be able to provide a list of mental health professionals for your area:

The International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies: www.istss.org

American Psychological Association: www.apa.org

Association for Psychological Science: www.psychologicalscience.org/about/

American Psychiatric Association: www.psych.org

American Counseling Association: www.counseling.org

American Psychotherapy Association: www.americanpsychotherapy.com

Psychology Today Therapist Finder: www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists

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SHIFT for Individuals Exposed to Child Sexual Exploitation Material: These courses, team taught by a mental health professional and a law enforcement officer, will offer professionals who are exposed to traumatic material and who may be required to interact with offenders on a regular basis, the opportunity to learn about the causes and symptoms of negative effects that may occur as a result of their duties. Participants will learn how to develop effective coping strategies. In addition, the exposed individual will be given the tools to help facilitate a supportive work environment for themselves, effectively understand and utilize mental health support, and solicit support through and for their families and their peers.

SHIFT for Mental Health Professionals: These workshops, team taught by a mental health professional and a law enforcement officer, will offer mental health professionals insight into the challenges faced by professionals exposed to child sexual exploitation and abuse materials and other operations involving offenders. The course will cover how to help these professionals avoid vicarious traumatization, burnout, and compassion fatigue. In addition, mental health professionals will learn how to gain the trust of criminal justice professionals, which techniques show promise in reducing the negative effects of exposure, and how they can help individuals build resiliency and balance in this very challenging field. This course offers not just education, but also tools that the mental health provider can immediately implement to assist frontline heroes in maintaining positive mental health.

For more information visit <https://shiftwellness.org>