

# SOCIAL SUPPORTS IN BUFFERING THE EFFECTS OF NEGATIVE AFFECT AND STRESS TO MAINTAIN RESILIENCE IN FIRST RESPONDER OCCUPATIONS

*Tags: PTSD, Clinical Psychology, Cognitive Processing Therapy, mHealth*

## **Abstract**

Social supports can buffer the effects of stress and negative affect (Heinrichs et al., 2003), pose as a protective factor against mental illnesses, and are associated with happier people. Acutely stress can be adaptive to an individual facing imminent danger, however it becomes an issue if prolonged or emerging from inappropriate situations such as in PTSD. A strong foundation of relationships can help against stressors by giving the individual to fall back on a support system, reminding them they're not alone, and that they have someone to speak to, so they don't end up bottling their emotions. The positive effects of social supports can also be seen biologically. Oxytocin, a neurotransmitter associated with physical touch and bonding, was found to anxiolytic effects in a sample of men who were exposed to a stressor, and further enhanced the buffering effects of the presence of social supports during a stressor (Heinrichs et al., 2003).

Stress can be detrimental for individuals at risk for or currently suffering from PTSD by aggravating symptoms and further causing hyper- or hypo-sympathetic nervous responses. Being proactive towards maintaining good mental health will protect against burnout, negative affect, and can restore feelings of control in occupations dealing with often chaotic, sensitive, and emotionally laborious situations.

Prioritizing mental wellness through monitoring, checking in, and proactive intervention can also leverage the power of social supports by looping in a circle of trust, or individuals closest to the user such as friends, family, or coworkers. Through a circle of trust they can be active participants in the user's journey to recovery, as well as participate themselves in ensuring the health of that social circle is also prioritized. The solution becomes 2-fold: to create an inclusive journey of recovery for the user knowing they're supported by their closest social supports, and by involving the social supports in some of the intervention to show the user they are not outliers, alone, or broken because they're prioritizing their mental wellness. We want to shift the focus on unwellness, disorder, and disability, and rather take a preventative focus that focuses on active mental wellness to build a strong foundation in the face of stressors to prevent or inhibit the effects of occupational stress. By focusing on wellness we may also increase daily positive affect, in which happier people are to have greater creativity, coping ability, productivity, and more focused on the positive in life - which may help with the negative cognitions characteristic of PTSD (Diener & Seligman, 2002). Positive affect is also shown to be increased by gratitude (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), generosity and prosociality (Aknin et al., 2013; Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008), values that can easily be integrated into affirmations. Our solution leverages the power of these values through small low barrier actions carried out by the application, which can suggest words of affirmation to the circle of trust when it detects abnormal scores on stress, negative cognitions, or affect from the user. We believe knowing how to help is only half the problem. It's also important to know when. When individuals have PTSD they may be less likely to reach out for help even in times where they need it most to avoid being burdensome or seen as broken. Bridging the gap was an important value for us, we wanted to make it as easy as possible to foster connections through compassion, understanding, and preventative action.

We take on a preventative approach in developing a solution that prioritizes regular check ins through bridged understanding and compassion between family, friends or coworkers. We aim to bridge the gap that often exists between wanting to help and not knowing when. By taking a preventative

approach first responders may be better prepared to deal with daily stressors as they occur by being cognisant of their significant relationships, which may be forgotten when stress becomes overwhelming.