

Helping heroes shoulder the burdens of their work

by David Lea

Oakville Beaver Staff

First responders see a lot on the job — some things worse than others.

Not all police officers, firefighters and paramedics are able to move past the traumatic crises to which they respond.

Sometimes they need assistance so they can continue to do their job. When this happens they may end up speaking with someone like Wm. Allan Gray, an Oakville resident whose job description is clinician/specialist trainer who has conducted specialized training classes for military and law enforcement personnel in the U.S. and Canada.

Gray, 54, works with Oakville-based Dubiel, Gray and Associates Inc. He holds a master practitioner certification (clinician) in behaviour modification from Toronto-based Canadian Training Centres and is a member of the Association Of Traumatic Stress Specialists (ATSS).

Gray has been working with emergency response workers for more than two decades — first in the U.S. and now in Oakville.

Gray emphasizes he is not a doctor, psychologist or social worker. He is someone who can train his clients to think differently about the experiences they've had.

"In many cases, when a member is speaking with me about a particular situation, simply speaking about it with someone they trust and just listening can cause them to put things into perspective and change their focus," said Gray.

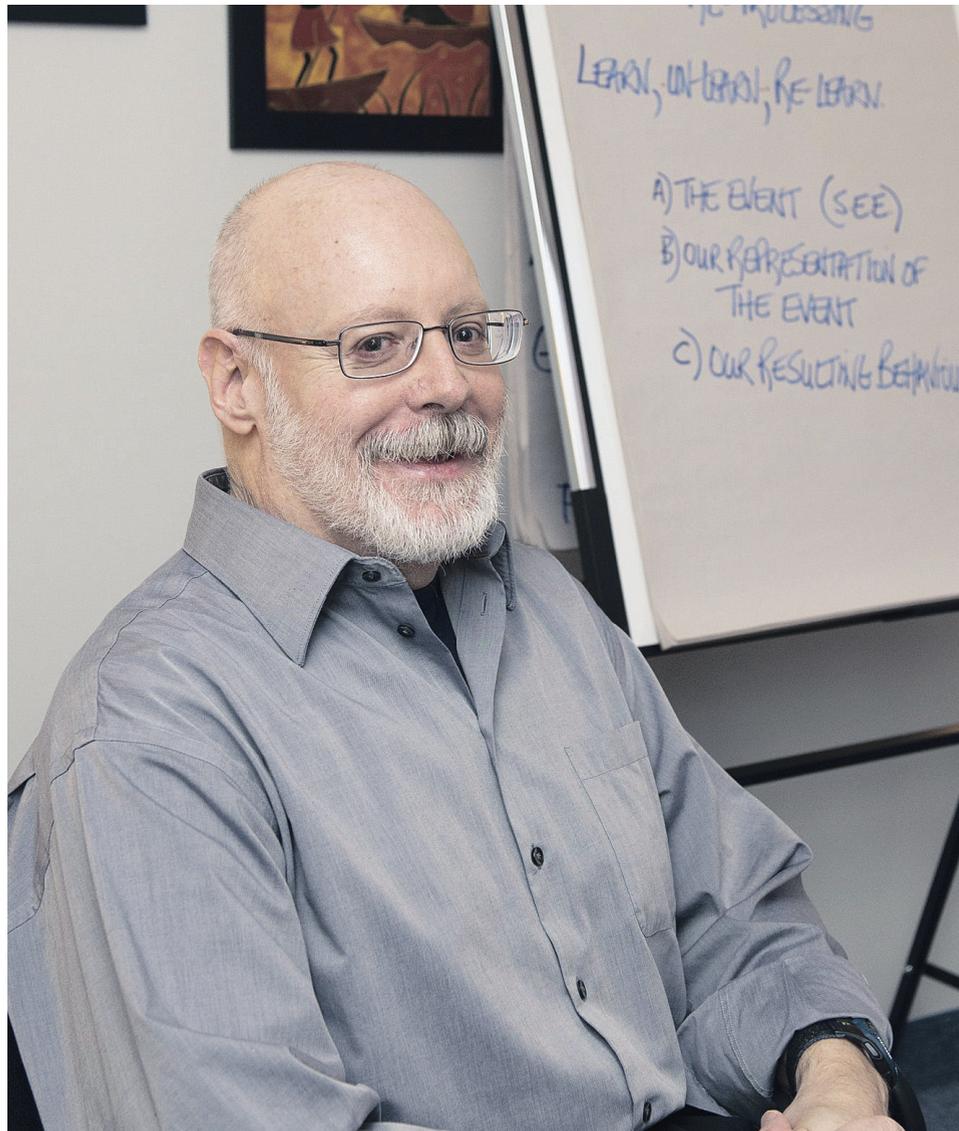
"Sometimes people, through no fault of their own... are not able to see choices, possibilities and options. The big picture, so to speak. They become so focused on something, they are not sure if they want to continue with their career."

Some of the symptoms experienced by emergency workers are not uncommon to those felt by people working in civilian jobs, including sleep disturbances, irritability, anxiety and even short-term memory problems that occur due to shift work.

However, trauma can occur as a result of emergency workers being first at the scene of traffic accidents, fires, murders and more.

"Sometimes, they just see too much over a short period of time and they need a break. It is kind of like filling your coffee cup in the morning. You can fill it and take a drink and fill it and take a drink, but if you don't keep taking that drink, it is going to overflow," said Gray.

"Some come in with flashbacks. Some aren't



When first responders need a sympathetic ear and someone to talk to, they can always call on Wm. Allan Gray, who works with Oakville-based Dubiel, Gray and Associates Inc., specializing in behaviour modification.

| photo by Nikki Wesley - Oakville Beaver (Follow on Twitter @halton_photog or facebook.com/HaltonPhotog)

sleeping because they keep seeing a particular scene that is bothering them, especially dead children... that's the one that gets everybody."

Knowing that any serious decision they make will be thoroughly examined and judged can cause significant stress for police officers while the constant flow of emergency calls can negatively impact paramedics, Gray said.

Gray, who went through his own struggles with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) following his time with the American military, said talking to colleagues and other forms of peer support can be very helpful for first responders dealing with stress.

When this doesn't work, friends or doctors sometimes refer them to Gray.

"By working with these folks one-on-one, we cause them to be able to retrain the way they process what they see and what they hear and what they feel, so the next time they see something that might have previously been bothersome, they process it quicker, more efficiently and they move on," said Gray.

"This is all about having those members return fit for duty very quickly and very quietly. This is ultra private, this service."

Gray acknowledged he is not always the one who resolves the issues a person is having.

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Wm. Allan Gray

If it becomes clear someone he is speaking to has PTSD, he advises them to see their doctor about it before his work with that person begins.

Just getting the chemical balance right in a person's head can go a long way to addressing an issue, he explained.

If a client arrives displaying extreme depression, they will probably be directed to the nearest emergency room, he said.

Gray said his sessions are confidential, which is important because he noted a stigma still exists within the police, fire and paramedic services for individuals dealing with psychological problems.

"It is getting better. It is getting much better, in that the administration of these emergency services are recognizing these are human beings," said Gray, whose work is not covered by OHIP.

"More and more agencies — fire, EMS and police — are responsive to the idea of their members putting forward peer-support units, which is literally peer-to-peer. In Canada, I've seen this grow over a period of almost 22 years. It has taken this long."

Gray also works with the families of first responders to help them deal with the stress that comes from having a family member who is potentially placed in harm's way each day.

He said children of first responders can hear about a firefighter being injured on the news and become convinced it is going to happen to their parent.

"You just have to work through the situation with them and help them recognize that 'we have every reason to believe he is going to leave in the morning and come home for supper.'"

For more information, visit www.dubielgray.com.

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