**A picture containing text, clipart

Description automatically generated**

**HOW TO AVOID BECOMING DESENSITIZED AS AN EMT**

November 2022

From [www.lexipol.com](http://www.lexipol.com)

As an EMT, you’re the first to be called in an emergency, which means you are often the first to witness scenes of trauma. Even the most seasoned EMTs can have an adverse reaction to the injuries, physical ailments and emotional distress they witness on the job.

But the longer EMTs serve, the more they run the risk of becoming overly desensitized. While being able to do your job efficiently no matter the surroundings is an important part of professional performance and developing self-confidence skills in the workplace, [complete desensitization](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/where-science-meets-the-steps/201701/trauma-and-first-responders-when-the-helpers-need-help) can be detrimental to your mental health and how you process trauma.

Luckily, there are strategies for effective desensitization and compartmentalization that can allow you to do your job and emotionally process what you experience as an EMT in a healthy way. We’ll explore several options here.

**It’s Normal to Become Unnerved**

How EMTs and other first responders deal with the life-threatening situations they experience on the job plays a large part in their [overall mental health](https://www.ems1.com/health-wellness/articles/how-to-keep-ptsd-out-of-your-ems-agency-sbaqNHdsagI9vkkZ/).

It’s important to realize that feeling squeamish or encountering certain types of injuries that cause emotional and even physical reactions is normal. Your response may be particularly troubling when it comes to [injuries to children](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2211419X14001426). Many professionals, even those with years of medical field experience, still find themselves on [calls that turn their stomachs](https://www.ems1.com/ems-heroes/articles/emt-reflects-on-37-year-career-recalls-hardest-calls-HukB53dagBYIq8YM/).

Accepting that the [emotions you feel](https://www.ems1.com/ems-products/fitness-mental-health-wellness/articles/how-to-build-mental-health-resilience-in-ems-EoaXUlRzkeoxxCJz/) are valid, normal, and real is the first step toward being able to cope with your traumatic experiences in a healthy way. It’s also essential to [speak up early on](https://www.jems.com/operations/psychological-trauma-the-silent-stalker/). Let your leaders know, let your family know, let your team know so you can create a plan and have access to the resources you need to ensure when you come in to work that you are prepared to do your job to the best of your ability.

**Approaches for Healthy Desensitization**

In order to be able to perform your best and put your patients first, you will have to develop a certain level of healthy desensitization while you are in the field. There are many approaches to achieving an appropriately desensitized response to injuries and scenes of accidents.

One approach is basic exposure. Some professionals choose to look at photos of injuries online to prepare themselves for emergencies and remove some of the shock that comes with seeing them for the first time. Others have found that time and experience gradually give them the exposure they need.

In fact, 80% of first responders report having [traumatic experiences](https://www.usfa.fema.gov/blog/ci-011718.html) on the job, and 10% worldwide suffer from PTSD symptoms. Learning the signs and symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns is essential to monitoring your own well-being as well as the well-being of those on your team. You may find that knowing what to look out for, learning how to effectively communicate, and understanding the resources available to you as a first responder may help you tackle your mental health concerns before they reach a state of complete desensitization.

Another approach chosen by some professionals is desensitization therapy. This behavioral therapy works to remove your body’s natural response to fear and replace it with a relaxed physical response instead. This approach has proven successful for learned behaviors and traumas.

Other professionals pursue [eye movement desensitization and reprocessing](https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/emdr-what-is-it), or [EMDR](https://www.cordico.com/2020/08/19/organizing-chaos-emdr-as-an-evidenced-based-behavioral-health-treatment-for-public-safety-professionals/). This form of psychotherapy works to help your mind heal from psychological trauma, like witnessing a severe injury. The approach has been especially successful with severe cases of PTSD. According to the [EMDR Institute](https://www.emdr.com/), 77% of trauma victims no longer displayed signs of PTSD after six EMDR sessions.

Whatever resources you utilize, it is crucial that you balance your work with your life outside of your job.

**Balance Through Communication**

While you may feel it best to leave work at work, a certain degree of communication and sharing is important to help process your feelings. Rely on your support network and those closest to you. You don’t need to explain tough calls in detail, but it’s always OK to [share that you had a rough shift](https://www.ems1.com/health-wellness/articles/planning-for-trauma-how-to-protect-ems-providers-mental-health-qMOfW1DScuO8CIa1/). Keeping your feelings inside will only strain your mental health.

Instead of internalizing everything, focus on positive ways to compartmentalize and process your feelings. Keep a journal. Take time to paint or draw. Spend time in nature. If you’re religious, participate actively and find a way to remember or memorialize the patients you lose. Find time to exercise to release stress.

As you make your mental health a priority, you’ll find the right balance between your natural emotions and complete, unhealthy desensitization. Remember that what you feel allows you to empathize with those you serve, and that is one of the best traits you can carry with you as an EMT.

**For more information about how to foster positive mental health in your EMS organization, check out this on-demand webinar:**[**How to create a mental health-friendly environment at your service**](https://www.ems1.com/ems-products/cpr-resuscitation/articles/on-demand-webinar-how-to-create-a-mental-health-friendly-environment-at-your-service-ZzNAUQqthRdYjhyv/#Register)**.**

Sources:

1. EMTLife user responses: Desensitizing? *EMT Life.*Aug 1, 2013. [https://emtlife.com/threads/desensitizing.35320/.](https://emtlife.com/threads/desensitizing.35320/)
2. Becoming desensitized – what’s your story? *EMT Life.*Oct 29, 2019. <https://emtlife.com/threads/becoming-desensitized-whats-your-story.48095/#post-682020>.
3. Klimley K E, Van Hasselt V B, Stripling A M. Posttraumatic stress disorder in police, firefighters, and emergency dispatchers. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*. Nov 2018. 43: 33–44. doi:10.1016/j.avb.2018.08.005. ISSN 1359-1789.
4. McLeod S. Systematic Desensitization. *Simply Psychology*. 2015. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/Systematic-Desensitisation.html>.
5. What is EMDR? *EMDR Institute, Inc*. 2020. [**https://www.emdr.com/what-is-emdr/**](https://www.emdr.com/what-is-emdr/).