

[ANDERSON] - Development and validation of a mental health screening tool for public safety professionals

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Priority Research Area: Neuroscience, Mental Health and Addiction

Relevant PSP Population(s): All

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What is the issue? The prevalence of mental health issues and PTSD in public Safety Personnel (PSP) is higher than that of the average population. About 44% of PSP experience at least one mental health disorder as a result of their occupations. In this context, there is an important need for a mental health screening tool specifically designed to identify at risk individuals within PSP and encourage them to seek medical follow up for post traumatic stress injury (PTSI) or for providing clearance prior to participation in a program that may trigger or exacerbate existing symptoms. This has the potential to increase access and the effectiveness of mental health services and programming.

What was the aim of the study? The project was designed to develop a brief mental health screening tool specifically for PSP. Screening refers to a procedure in which a standardized instrument or protocol helps to identify individuals who may be at risk for mental health disorders and suicide. Screening is generally brief, narrow in scope, and may be self-administered, administered by support staff with appropriate training and an electronic device (e.g., computer), or administered by clinicians. Screening is neither definitively diagnostic nor a definite indication of a specific condition or disorder; however, screening can be used for early identification of individuals at potentially high risk. The screening tool is intended for use by clinicians in interviewing PSP, or by PSP themselves to self-identify a potential mental health challenges related to a PTSI. The screening tool might also serve as a pre-screen for participation in mental health programming (e.g., training) to identify PSP who might benefit from first seeking treatment.

How was the study conducted? Using data collected from the CIPSRT prevalence study (i.e., 5,813) we developed and validated a short mental health screening tool designed specifically for PSP. The current study used half of the prevalence survey data to develop a brief screening tool for generalized anxiety disorder, major depressive disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, panic disorder, social anxiety, and risky alcohol use. Validity was assessed with the second half of the PSP data, and again in a second dataset of 1,155 correctional officers. Feasibility and acceptability was assessed with novel sample of 20 PSP with PTSI.

What did the study find? Using various statistical approaches, six self-report, scientifically validated measures were reduced to their 2-3 most predictive items. That is, the items that together best predicted total questionnaire scores were identified. The result is a 18-item screening tool with 6 subscales; generalized anxiety, major depressive, post-traumatic stress, panic, social anxiety disorders, and risky alcohol use. The 18-item screening tool was initially validated within the PSP population and in an independent population of correctional officers. A series of linear and logistics models show strong correspondence between the predicted and actual questionnaire scores, indicating that the reduced screening items do an excellent job capturing the variability in the full questionnaire scores.

Recommendations include: Assessment of the concurrent and discriminant validity of the screening tool by comparing individual results with structured interview assessments and other diagnostic measures conducted by clinical psychologists or psychiatrists; Assessment of the test-retest stability of the assessment tool over a two-

week period in a patient population where extreme short-term change in illness severity is not expected (to become significantly better or worse); assess the functional utility (feasibility and acceptability) of the screening tool with administrators' feedback; and establish preliminary cut-off scores to identify individuals with elevated screening scores on any of the six items.

What are the implications of this study? Having access to a brief screening tool that is specific to PSP and can provide indications regarding several mental disorders (i.e., generalized anxiety disorder, major depressive disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, panic disorder, social anxiety, and risky alcohol use) has several potential benefits including, but not limited to: 1) PSP can quickly self-assess and decide whether a more detailed assessment is warranted; 2) PSP who screen positive for one or more mental disorders may ultimately be more likely to access evidence-based care early; and 3) a brief screening tool can support ongoing assessments of mental health and proactive self-care behaviours among PSP.

What are the key messages? PSP are regularly exposed to potentially psychologically traumatic events that may slowly or suddenly compromise their mental health. A brief screening tool specifically for PSP to assess their mental health may be beneficial for early access to care. The current tool, derived from existing well-validated tools, appears to be a promising option for such PSP mental health assessments.

Provide a list of potential target audiences for this research: Researchers, clinicians, policy makers, PSP leadership, membership, and PSP stakeholder organizations