

'HUGS@HOME'

SUPPORT FOR FRONTLINE EMERGENCY WORKERS

Family members, colleagues and close friends of first responders are being guided on how best to provide support in the aftermath of difficult and stressful events on the frontline, under a new project developed by the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland that offers training in the elements of 'Hearing, Understanding, Guiding and Supporting' (HUGS) at home.

Going home after a difficult shift may sometimes be the hardest task for first responders such as firefighters, paramedics and other frontline emergency response workers, due to stressful events and extreme situations they may face as part of their daily activities.

They may often rely on formal and informal supports to help them cope with these stresses, and while early Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) intervention reduces the symptoms of post-traumatic stress, access to support services remains limited due to lack of resources or the stigma associated with seeking help.

One solution available to first responders, their families and friends is a project developed by Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland (RCSI) SIM Centre for Simulation Education and Research. The HUGS@Home initiative has built on research undertaken in Dublin Fire Brigade, which found that recruit firefighters/paramedics preferred to talk to a family member or

friend after a stressful incident in work.

This finding led to the introduction of a 'Recruit Family Night', which helped raise awareness around how the training and operational role of a firefighter/paramedic has an impact at home. It helped to open the lines of communication between family members and first responders.

Based in the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland (RCSI) SIM Centre for Simulation Education and Research, HUGS@Home is one of 15 projects funded by Movember's Veteran and First Responders Grant and is the only project in Ireland to receive this funding.

The project aims to better equip family members or friends to support their first responders by training them in the elements of 'HUGS': Hearing, Understanding, Guiding and Supporting. This can help to reduce the impact of what their first responders take 'home' – thereby enhancing the mental health and wellbeing of first responders and their loved ones.

RAISING AWARENESS OF STRESS AND TRAUMA

Former first responders and CISM peer supporters with Dublin Fire Brigade, Michelle O'Toole and Brian Doyle, have been joined on the RCSI SIM project team by Prof Walter Eppich, Chair of RCSI SIM, Dr Claire Mulhall, research programme manager, Dr Angeline Traynor, post-doctoral researcher, and Anna Tjin, research assistant.

Since 'HUGS@Home' was launched in August 2022 to complement existing support systems, the research team has been effectively training family and friends of frontline first responders to support their loved ones and themselves, according to Dr Angeline Traynor.

"HUGS@Home engages first responder family and friends in knowledge sharing, learning conversations and the practice of psychological first aid, emphasising the elements of 'HUGS': Hearing, Understanding, Guiding and Supporting.

"Led by Michelle O'Toole and spearheaded by the RCSI Simulation Education research team, the project aims to raise awareness of the impacts of stress and trauma on first responders and their families."

She says that the programme's key feature is that it has been "co-designed with a team of first responders, family members and organisational representatives who have experienced the same stresses and traumas as those who stand to benefit from this training. This work is proudly funded by Movember and supported by Mental Health Ireland and Dublin Civil Defence".

Dr Traynor notes that while first responders try to avoid bringing home the trauma of the job, however, family members report that its impact comes home anyway. "It is present in the silence, sleeplessness, irritability among other less obvious ways. As the family member of a recruit in some organisations you may be invited to a 'Recruit Family Night' initiative to socialise with other first responders and family members. You will learn about critical incident stress management (CISM) supports available to active first responders and the ways in which the job might impact your home life."



PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID TOOLKIT

Providing an update on the programme since its launch last year, Dr Traynor says that the need for CISM does not simply cease when first responders leave their workplace. "Bolstering their existing off-duty support networks brings mental health and wellbeing benefits to first responders and those closest to them.

"Social support is proven to help combat the after-effects of stressful events and first responders often lean on their colleagues, families or close friends for this support. As a prevalent source of emotional support to first responders, family and friends deserve to feel empowered and supported in their role of caring for their loved one."

HUGS@Home is about awareness and skill-building, creating a psychological first aid toolkit that is helpful and empowering for first responder friends and family. "It enables those who may be worried, observing signs of distress in their first responder, to initiate a difficult conversation with their loved one. Family members and friends who participate in the project receive a pre-course handbook, which outlines common stress reactions first responders may display following critical incidents and how sometimes these reactions may have an impact at home.

"Training in practical techniques enhance the communication skills of family members and friends, enabling them to recognise signs and symptoms of stress, encouraging them to engage with their first responders to support them. The training involves simulation enhanced scenario-based interactions, which prompt reflection and discussion among participants, before practicing their newly acquired skills in a safe environment," she notes.

DEALING WITH THE AFTERMATH

Outlining the need for the course, Brian Doyle, former DFB firefighter/paramedic and a member of the RCSI SIM research team explains: "Whether they work in a full-time, part-time or volunteer capacity, all first responders in Ireland experience the same traumas and go through the same challenges in dealing with the aftermath.

"Trauma can manifest in behaviour as irritability, insomnia, mood swings or generally feeling off or withdrawn. I even know myself, from the incidents and action I would have seen over the years, I've certainly brought a lot of that home to my family.

"It's a very natural thing to react when you're exposed to

trauma. What we always say is: having a reaction is the normal thing, the event was the abnormal thing.”

According to Dr Traynor, those who have taken part in the training to date include adult children, parents, siblings, partners and colleagues of first responders who are eager to learn new ways to support their first responders and themselves. “First responders who have participated include firefighters, paramedics, dual role firefighter paramedics and emergency medical technicians.

“Of those who expressed an interest in the project, 50% are dual role first responders wanting to support a friend or colleague or nominate a family member or friend for training, while 38% are family and friends wishing to take part in the training programme.”

POSITIVE COURSE FEEDBACK

Meanwhile, feedback from those who completed the course has been overwhelmingly positive:

“It was impactful, supportive, engaging”

“Emotional, educational, empowering”

“It was helpful to understand what we already do well in supporting our first responders and to further enhance our skills and knowledge in how to best support them and also to look after ourselves”

The results of this flagship programme are now being evaluated with a view to scaling it up. “Ongoing training courses are taking place at the RCSI in Dublin, in addition to several regions around Ireland, based on demand. The project has also received expressions of interest from other frontline services and organisations including An Garda Síochána, Defence Forces, Coast Guard and the Prison Service,” she says.

VOICES OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Project co-leader Michelle O’Toole has said that the voices of family and friends has been one of the main pillars of this project, with their experiences shaping the programme’s development.

“The research team describes the project as ‘training for friends and family, to feel empowered, supported and connected with people who ‘get it’.... It’s a course you wish you had taken in the early days of being a supporter of a first responder and one you want to take as you continue that journey.”

She said that HUGS@Home provides participants with an opportunity to connect with others who have or are about to have similar experiences and may benefit from the insight of others at the frontline. It teaches or revises effective



Project team members (l-r): Anna Tjin, Research Assistant at RCSI SIM; Dr Angeline Traynor, Post-Doctoral Researcher at RCSI SIM; Brian Doyle and project co-leader Michelle O’Toole, former first responders and CISM peer supporters with Dublin Fire Brigade. Missing from the photo are project co-lead Prof Walter Eppich, Chair of RCSI SIM; and Dr Claire Mulhall, Research Programme Manager at RCSI SIM.

“
 I would not change my life,
 but I would love to change
 how first responders have
 that support. I feel alone
 and so do they. **”**

-Family member of a first responder



With guidance from Mental Health Ireland, the co-creation process has brought ‘the people who matter’ together to share their experiences, generate ideas and discuss key factors that affect the community.

communication and psychological first aid skills so they may be passed on to those observing inside and outside the home, across a first responder’s social support network.

“Working with family, friends and organisational representatives of first responders, the HUGS@Home team has learned so much,” according to O’Toole. “Peer support is essential within first responder organisations, and it is equally essential to those trusted loved ones outside of the first responder organisation, who support their loved ones, while striving to maintain wellbeing and quality of life.”

RECRUITMENT DRIVE

The project has received expressions of interest from first responders and family members since late 2021 after the publication of the RCSI promotional material in a national newspaper. Following the launch of www.hugsathome.eu the recruitment drive started officially in August 2022.

Targeted recruitment of firefighters has also taken place within Dublin Fire Brigade and some of the regional fire services, while paramedic-specific targeted recruitment drives have been ongoing courtesy of the Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Council (PHECC).

If you're interested in getting involved and would like more information, email simulationresearch@rcsi.ie or visit www.hugsathome.eu. You can also follow the project updates on Twitter @HUGSatHome_RCSI or scan this QR code.

