

Traumatic On-the-Job Experiences and Help-Seeking Behaviors Among Professionals: Differences Between Men and Women

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INTRODUCTION

Background:

In many fields, professionals are exposed to stressful and sometimes traumatizing experiences first or second-hand. These experiences can have an adverse personal and professional impact. Professionals may be reluctant to seek out help for many reasons such as stigma or failure to see concerning signs in themselves. *How* they talk about their experiences, too, may play a role.

There may be clear distinctions between men and women, as women are more likely to seek psychiatric help, while men may face greater perceived stigma for doing so.

Research Aims:

- (1) To examine the similarities and differences between men and women in their accounts of (a)witnessing a death (b) witnessing a serious injury in a client/inmate that was either self-inflicted or a result of a fight between two other people, and (c) being personally exposed to a potentially harmful or dangerous situation.
- (2) To determine how male and female professionals differ in their help-seeking behaviors and attitudes.

METHOD

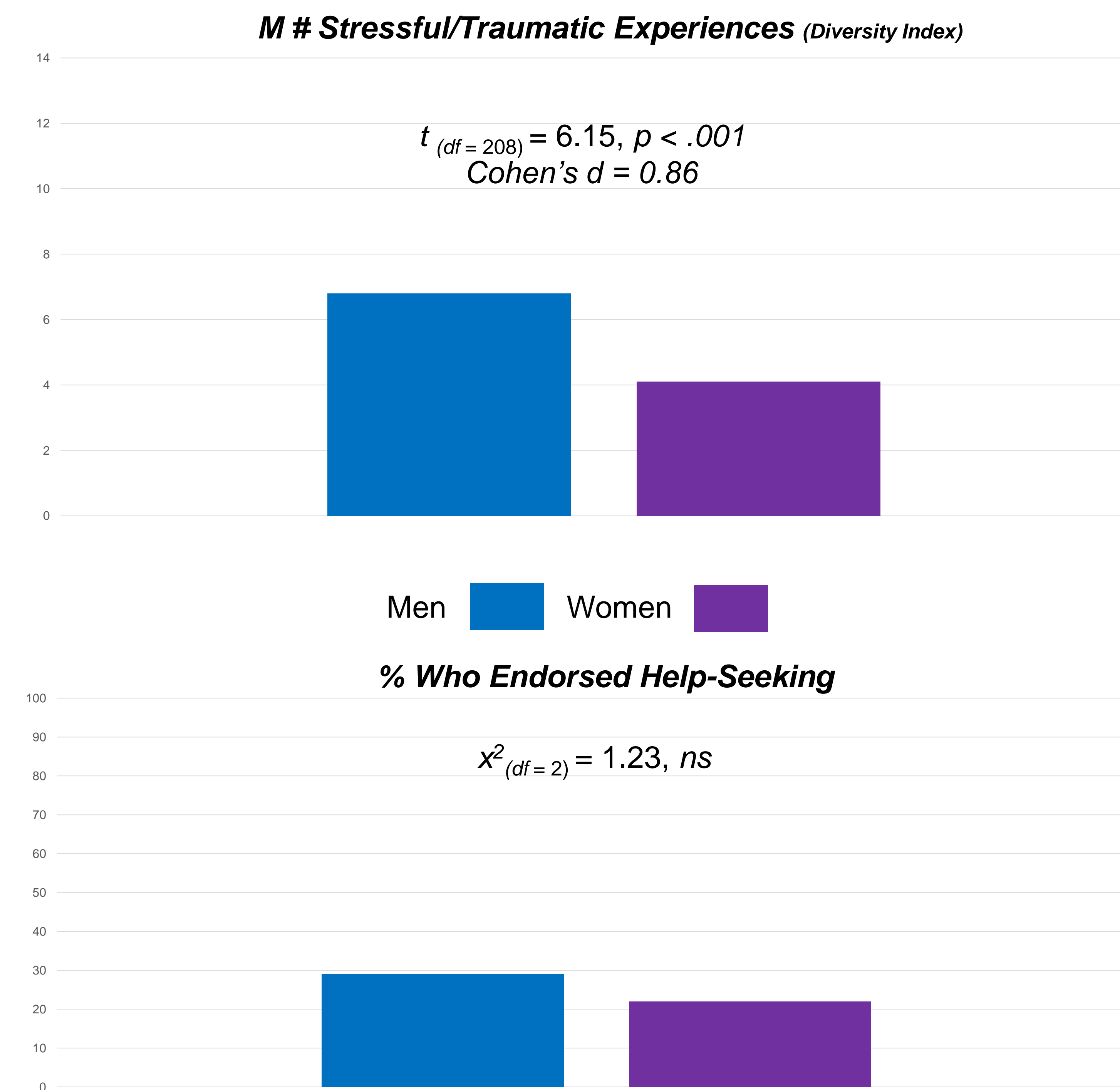
Participants

- N = 227 professionals from substance use treatment, emergency services, and corrections fields
- 58% Male

Measures/ Procedures

- Voluntary survey included:
 - Exposure to stress/trauma on the job
 - Diversity index (Range = 0-14)
 - Binary index of prior help seeking behavior
 - Open-ended questions about most terrifying experience on the job; Responses coded:
 - by profession, gender, and type of incident.
 - for emotional words, graphic/ vivid/ descriptive imagery, and indices of impact on the participant.

RESULTS



Sample Quotations from Participants

	MALE	FEMALE
Witness Death	Honestly, it was assisting another officer when an inmate committed suicide. For weeks after the incident, I expected to see someone hanging in the cell when I completed rounds. The vision will forever be etched in my mind	Witnessing two individuals overdose in our parking lot. It was a terrifying experience seeing the individuals blue lifeless bodies . One of them on the ground. I was the one who made the 911 call for help. I think it was very upsetting because my co-workers came to their aid with no success. I believe they administered 3 Narcan's each.
Witness Serious Injury/ Assault	The most terrifying event in my life was when a patient pulled a gun on me in the back of an ambulance. The patient was not searched adequately and pulled a pistol from his pants said threatened to kill if we did not pull over.	I have seen quite a few suicide attempts by female inmates by jumping from the top tier of a pod day area. One particular young lady jumped and I could hear her body make contact with the floor . When I responded to the scene blood was pooling from her head and I was sure she was going to die . I could not contain myself because I cared about the young lady and it was shocking and I became so emotional . I had to be escorted from the scene.
Health / Safety in Danger	PT tried to stab me with a dirty needle-drugs. Guy killed his mom and had the hunt on him while we were responding.	The most terrifying experience I had on the job was when a client with a mental health issues, health was deteriorating as well as behavior. The client threatened to shoot (with gestures) another co-worker. It sticks out because with the issues he was having. It was only a matter of time before someone was injured.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

- Men experience significantly more and more variety of traumatic incidents at work than women, among the professions examined.
- Men are similar to women in their help-seeking behavior.
- Very few men or women actually seek out help for their traumatic on-the-job experiences.
- Women's accounts tend to use more emotionally-laden words and be more graphic and vivid in their descriptions of the incidents.
- Men's accounts have less emotional content and emphasize more contextual and objective details.

Limitations

- Sample is not generalizable to other professions or geographic regions.
- Conclusions are limited to the people who participated.

Implications and Future Directions

- Few professionals seek help for their traumatic on-the job experiences, despite having had a variety of kinds of these experiences.
- Even with more– and more diverse – on the job experiences that are highly stressful and potentially traumatic, men are not significantly more likely to seek help than women.
 - This could be an artifact of small sample size or reflective of reality.
- Men's lack of help-seeking behavior, relative to the frequency and diversity with which they experience trauma on the job, is consistent with prior literature.
- Efforts to decrease stigma for help-seeking and improve access to and availability of services would be beneficial across all professions and genders.
- Ongoing analysis of the data will yield other potentially beneficial insights and recommendations for professionals.