



WARNING SIGNS

Patrick Rea examines the mental health challenges facing the security sector

The mental health of security personnel in the UK is under unprecedented strain, a situation brought into sharp relief by a landmark 2020 study by Professor Mark Button, Professor of Criminology at the Institute of Criminal Justice Studies at the University of Portsmouth. This extensive survey, the most comprehensive of its kind, revealed that 40 percent of the 750 security officers involved displayed symptoms indicative of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

The findings also highlighted the routine dangers these individuals face: 43 percent of respondents reported threats of violence at least once a month, with 10 percent getting

threatened on a daily basis; more than 30 percent reported some kind of physical assault in the workplace at least once a year. This vulnerability is worsened by a nationwide surge in violent crime, particularly impacting the retail sector. The British Retail Consortium's 2024 report offers a stark illustration of the escalating threat, with daily violent incidents against retail workers jumping to 1,300 in the 2022/2023 period. This represents a nearly 50 percent increase from the previous year, underscoring a disturbing trend that poses risks not only to physical safety but also to mental well-being.

Many of those drawn to roles in security are veterans of the armed forces who bring their considerable skills and experience to the civilian workforce. However, this

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demographic may be susceptible to PTSD stemming from their service. Recognising this, mental health charity PTSD Resolution collaborates closely with professional associations within the security industry, such as ASIS UK and the Worshipful Company of Security Professionals (WCoSP), aiming to address and mitigate the impact of trauma in the security community.

While there is a growing awareness of mental health issues by employers in the sector, there is generally a lack of resources and professional support available to them. Symptoms may go unrecognised, leaving affected individuals without the treatment they need. This oversight can lead to negative outcomes, including increased absenteeism, deteriorating job performance and even suicide.

The situation presents a clear call to action: to safeguard those who secure our public and private spaces and retail environments, we must first ensure their mental health needs are met. It is against this backdrop of heightened risk and insufficient support that the initiatives spearheaded by PTSD Resolution and its industry partners become critical.

PTSD Resolution was set up in 2009 by co-founder and chairman Tony Gauvain, a therapist and retired Colonel of the Cheshire Regiment, to provide free therapy to address the mental health challenges faced by veterans, reservists and their families in the UK.

Accredited by the Royal College of Psychiatrists, this charity has been instrumental in providing free, effective mental health support to the veterans community. With over 4,000 referrals to date, PTSD Resolution delivers Human Givens therapy that typically concludes within an average of seven sessions, ensuring timely, targeted assistance.

The introduction of Trauma Awareness Training for Employers by PTSD Resolution marks a significant advancement in broadening the scope of support for trauma-affected individuals. This initiative acknowledges the critical gap in employer awareness and engagement concerning mental health issues. By equipping company owners, line managers and HR staff with the knowledge and tools to recognise and address trauma, PTSD Resolution is pioneering a shift towards more compassionate, informed workplace environments.

"The need for such mental health programmes is highlighted by the distressing challenges faced by security staff and veterans within the workplace. The worrying increase of PTSD and other trauma-related conditions underscores the importance of specialised support and intervention," says Graham Bassett, a security recruitment specialist and trustee of PTSD Resolution. "PTSD Resolution's approach, focusing on accessibility, confidentiality and efficiency, ensures that those in need receive help without undue delays. We can do more to support and care for those that keep us safe".

This collaborative effort is crucial in creating a culture of care and resilience, where the well-being of security personnel and veterans is prioritised, destigmatising PTSD and building a more supportive, empathetic society for those who have served, says Bassett.

A high proportion of ex-services people are employed in the security industry, from some 2.4 million veterans overall in the UK. This offers many benefits to employers, says Jonathan Thomas, a partner at Assist Security Group (ASG) Protect. He brings insights as an army reservist and former Royal Marine

and is convinced of the unique strengths that veterans contribute to the sector:

"From their forces' training and experience, veterans bring discipline, trustworthiness, operational capability and a strong work ethic. However, it's their adaptability and problem-solving skills that are most crucial."

Veterans, accustomed to dealing with complex challenges with limited resources are adept at dealing with the often unpredictable nature of security work. Their military training has honed their ability to pre-empt threats and adapt to changing circumstances, skills that are directly transferable to civilian security roles. The British forces encourage creative problem-solving, enabling vets to bring innovative solutions to the table.

THERE'S A CONCERTED EFFORT TO DESTIGMATISE MENTAL HEALTH AND PROMOTE OPEN DIALOGUE

Moreover, the integration of veterans into civilian security teams introduces a valuable blend of perspectives, says Thomas. The combination of personnel backgrounds creates a balanced environment that creates effective problem-solving and team cohesion. Despite some veterans facing challenges such as PTSD, their overall contribution to the workforce is overwhelmingly positive. Their resilience, honed under the pressures of military service, equips them to excel in a range of operational environments.

"Veterans' adaptability is invaluable in ASG's work in forecasting emerging threats, controlling risks, and formulating a managed security solution, tailored to the specific environment of our clients to ensure effective risk management and security. PTSD isn't the plague, it's a state of mind that is increasingly well-managed. Also, there is a debt of gratitude and social responsibility in the industry and wider community to service personnel," says Jonathan Thomas.

MARK'S STORY

Mark is an army veteran who served two tours in Afghanistan. Working as a security officer in Manchester, he was caught up in an attempted robbery at the store he was guarding. Mark's manager Karen kept a close eye on him after the incident knowing trauma could appear later. She soon noticed changes – irritation, edginess. Though Mark denied a problem, it was clear to Karen that he was struggling.

Karen approached him and expressed concern, reminding Mark of their company's commitment to helping staff impacted by trauma on the job. She stressed that such reactions are normal and treatable. Mark finally opened up that he was reliving the incident and not feeling himself.

Mark agreed to meet with a therapist at PTSD Resolution, the security company partners for staff counselling and advice. Sitting down with a local trauma specialist made all the difference. With a first appointment within a fortnight and over two months of therapy, Mark learned new coping techniques and felt symptoms like anxiety and hyper vigilance begin to fade away.

Karen saw the positive changes in Mark after he accessed care through the company's employee

assistance programme. Company policy to promote openness about trauma and with a pathway to effective support has measurably increased staff morale and resilience, and impressed and reassured clients of the business too.

DAILY VIOLENT INCIDENTS AGAINST RETAIL WORKERS JUMPED TO 1,300 IN THE 2022/2023 PERIOD

The experience of trauma, characterised by symptoms such as aggression, anxiety, depression, and vivid flashbacks, can significantly alter a person's behaviour and mental state. These changes not only affect the individuals suffering from trauma but also have wider implications for their work environment, personal relationships and overall quality of life.

The onset of trauma symptoms can be immediate or delayed, often manifesting in ways that disrupt daily functioning and personal well-being. Recognising and addressing these symptoms early is crucial to prevent longer-term psychological damage.

PTSD Resolution's initiative to provide trauma awareness training for employers is a critical step towards bridging this gap. By educating employers and HR professionals about trauma, its symptoms, and effective interventions, the charity fosters a more supportive and understanding workplace culture. This training is essential for recognising trauma and facilitating timely and appropriate support for affected employees.

The collaboration between PTSD Resolution and professional associations marks a significant stride

towards addressing mental health within the security industry. These partnerships amplify the reach and impact of mental health initiatives, creating a network of support.

Letitia Emeana, Chair of ASIS UK's Board of Directors, notes: "The expertise offered by PTSD Resolution provides great value to our members.

Through this partnership, we not only directly support those in need, but also drive a culture shift – both across the security sector and more widely – encouraging staff at all levels to be more open about their mental health without fear of stigma."

Emeana says that while security roles come with inevitable stresses, a high incidence of PTSD and trauma-related issues should never be an accepted norm. ASIS UK's partnership with PTSD Resolution signifies a zero-tolerance approach to the lack of mental health provision, aiming to build psychologically safer, supportive and resilient security teams across the country.

James Sarson is a police officer and member of the Worshipful Company of Security Professionals. He adds: "Every year, WCoSP holds an AGM where mental health in the security sector is a high priority. It is reiterated how involved the company is in supporting charities and organisations that provide mental health assistance across sectors like police, military, retail and private security. In addition to financial donations, the company supports these groups through the work of its over 500 members."

By integrating PTSD Resolution's expertise with the professional and operational frameworks of these associations, there's a concerted effort to destigmatise mental health issues, promote open dialogue, and ensure a supportive environment for all security personnel. Through such partnerships, the industry is taking crucial steps towards not only enhancing the well-being of its members but also improving operational effectiveness and public safety ●

Patrick Rea is a Trustee and Marketing Director of the mental health charity PTSD Resolution.

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PTSD RESOLUTION ACTION POINTS

- Promote a responsible, supportive company culture rather than a 'macho' or dismissive attitude towards mental health.
- Educate line managers and staff about trauma and the importance of monitoring their mental health, such as through PTSD Resolution's half-day trauma training course.
- Regularly check on employees who have experienced traumatic events for changes in behaviour that may indicate a need for support.
- Reassure affected individuals that experiencing trauma is a normal reaction and not a sign of weakness.
- Initiate conversations about recovery preferences with employees not returning to their usual state after a few weeks.
- Encourage open discussion about trauma, but emphasise the necessity of professional treatment over talk.
- Partner with organisations like PTSD Resolution that are experienced in treating severe post-traumatic reactions for effective interventions.
- Recognise the cost-effectiveness of treating trauma early to prevent more significant issues and support employee well-being.