

# The Dam Wall of occupational trauma



## CUMULATIVE TRAUMA

Entering into the emergency or military services embodies an agreement to see and experience situations that are horrific. Dreadful accidents, assaults, gore, war, abuse of the innocent. The world is not what you thought it was. To persevere through that, you developed ways of coping with the adversities you faced each day. It's common to "lock away" the memories and feelings so you can just get on with the job. There's no time to stop and make sense of things. So you shut the events behind a "Dam Wall". Such "coping" mechanisms are reinforced through the training and culture. It adds up to a "just get on with it" attitude.

### Pressure builds.

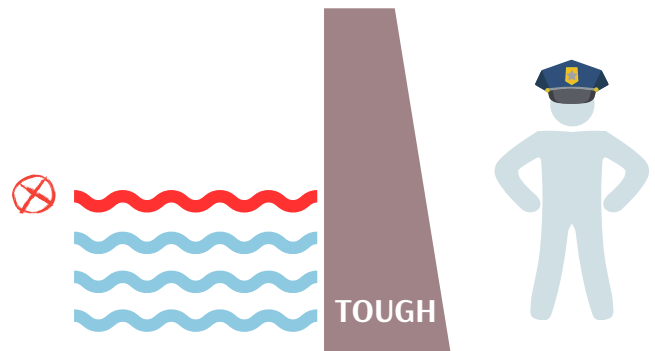
Storing all the pain comes at a cost, and carries an expiry date. No one is impervious to accumulated trauma memories forever. Eventually, the dam wall starts to leak. Without addressing that pressure, the wall starts to crack. If it breaks the flood might destroy your life.

### The Dam Wall Metaphor

Imagine you're a police officer who has been on the job for 5 years. You have built a wall for your trauma memories, so you can keep doing the job.

The layers represent the bad jobs you have been to, and the red wave represents a *really bad job*. A job that really knocked you around.

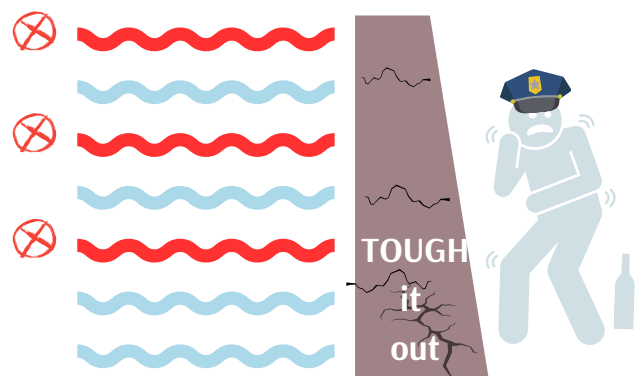
But the dam wall keeps you defended from the events. You are tough.



The longer you stay in the job, the more *really bad jobs* you endure. Cracks start to form in the dam wall and the trauma begins to leak out.

You notice nightmares and edginess. You become more irritable and your family begin to see a change. They start to walk on eggshells.

But you don't want to seem weak to yourself, so you tough it out. You might use alcohol to numb your feelings. Your demons are held at bay for now.

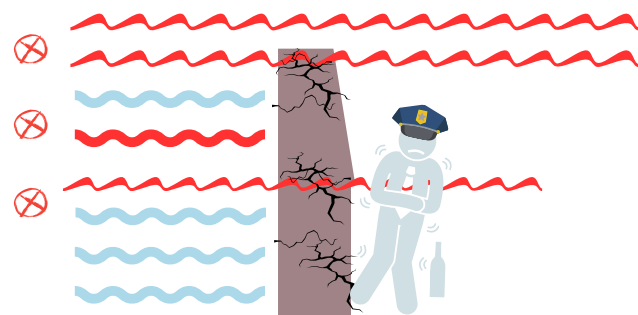


Many years of service.  
Many events have pushed your buttons.

The emotional fatigue is immense and your dam wall can no longer contain the sheer volume of accumulated trauma. The wall is under too much pressure, the cracks are spurting memories and the dam is overflowing.

The fatigue was bad before the wall was leaking, now the fatigue is profound. The emotions are overwhelming.

This is when people often cannot continue. But some try.



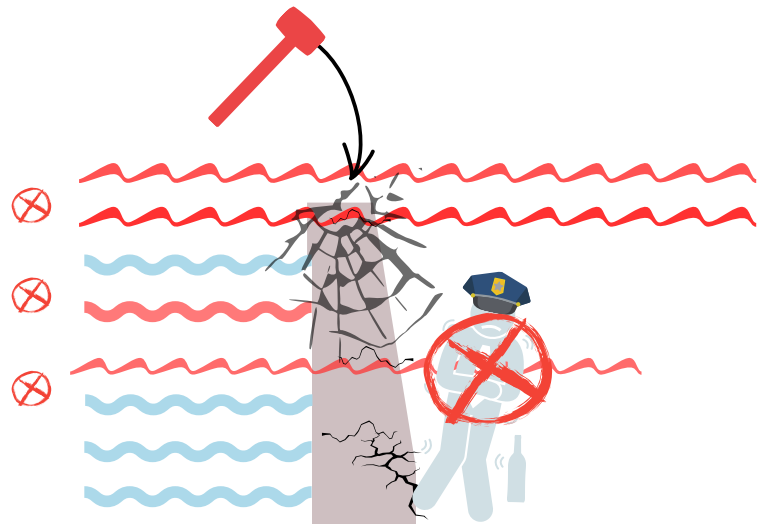
## The Sledge Hammer

Then one day, something drops that makes it impossible to proceed.

Perhaps it is another horrendous job. Perhaps it was a betrayal, a knife in your back. Perhaps you lashed out at someone, your regrettable action.

Something shatters the dam wall and there is no longer a choice:

***“I’m cooked, I can’t do this any more”.***



## A Shattered Identity

When the dam wall crumples, so too does one’s sense of identity.

Someone who was once fearless now feels vulnerable. When one is vulnerable it is a reflex to be on high alert. You no longer feel strong and you no longer feel confident. It’s like you don’t know who you are anymore.

***“If I can no longer cope, then who am I?”***

You feel weak, scared or angry, always. This shift in identity is often more catastrophic than the trauma memories.

## So now what?

With a shattered identity and a constant state of alarm, there is no arguing with the vulnerability that overwhelms you. There is a strong urge to lock yourself away from the world, but vulnerability now accompanies you everywhere.

The answers lay in facing the memories. That’s where the lessons are.

***Without understanding why you are susceptible you will continue to feel vulnerable.***

To learn the lesson means to face what happened. But to do that you need armour, that means you need *Distress Skills*. Applying those skills is a vital tactic in facing your demons. It takes effort, discipline and courage. Without adequate skills you are building a sandcastle in a tsunami.

Our ***Surviving Distress*** Online Course will teach you the skills and some tactics so you're not flattened by the flood. Instead, you can get started on the journey to rebuilding yourself.

