

Creating a recovery room to support the mental health of your child sexual exploitation investigators

Executive Summary

Mission

As a company, Griffeye was founded to protect investigators in their exceptionally difficult task and to make their working conditions as supportive as possible.

Griffeye's Analyze platform has several features that support the well-being of its users (these can be found [here](#)). These technical methods offer significant benefits but it's vital to expand the support and protection of investigators through focusing on other areas.

Overview

Vicarious trauma and burnout are huge, often unaddressed, issues for the child sexual exploitation (CSE) investigators and they pose the risk of creating more victims of child sexual abuse – the investigators themselves. This is also a significant human resource issue for organisations and improved tools and better processes will benefit both the investigators and their organisations.

Empirical evidence confirms the importance of taking regular breaks during CSE investigations, and this article will present relevant findings and highlight the need for creating a dedicated breakroom. It will also include suggestions on how to make the breakroom as effective as possible.

The problem

The availability and distribution of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) are continually growing. According to an investigation by the New York Times, 45 million online photos and videos of abuse were reported in 2018 alone. In the same year, the UK National Crime Agency reported that 2.88 million accounts were registered on the most harmful dark web CSAM websites

globally [1]. This growth shows no signs of slowing down and puts extreme pressure on investigators and their under-funded organisations. The New York Times' investigation found that the ability for law enforcement to cope with the number of CSE reports is at 'breaking point'.

The investigators' task of viewing and analysing (CSAM) increases their risk of developing serious and enduring psychological problems. Negative reactions to this type of content are natural but if these are not managed appropriately, investigators may develop compassion fatigue, burnout and secondary trauma. Poor mental health increases the likelihood of making mistakes and leads to high rates of absenteeism and staff turnover. Therefore it's in the interest of the organisation to plan and implement strategies that promote resilience and protect the wellbeing of staff.

The solution

Taking regular, restful breaks in any line of work is vital to the motivation and productivity of staff members. In the case of CSE investigators, this need is particularly high considering the nature of their work. Having a dedicated space where staff can take a mental and physical break gives them a chance to recuperate and reduce mental and emotional fatigue.

This article provides evidence that supports the positive effects of creating a breakroom for staff, including

- Increases in motivation and productivity
- Higher satisfaction with the job and the organisation as a whole
- Space to process distressing material which leads to a reduction in post-traumatic symptoms such as intrusive thoughts, depression and impaired functioning
- Reduces the risk of costly mistakes, absenteeism and staff turnover

Given limited funding, a breakroom can be created on a small budget and, considering the benefits mentioned above, saves money in the long term. Research into the design of therapeutic spaces provides a model of how to create a breakroom that significantly boosts its effectiveness. Further details will be discussed in the main body of this article.

The impact of CSE on investigators

Overview

The sheer volume of CSAM and the nature of this type of content make prolonged exposure a risk factor for developing negative psychological symptoms. According to the College of Policing (2018), this type of work increases the likelihood of compassion fatigue, burnout and vicarious trauma.

Specifically, the negative psychological impact includes intense emotional reactions, such as shock, distress, guilt, sadness and feelings of helplessness [2]. The rate of vicarious trauma in this population is on the rise and symptoms can manifest as intrusive thoughts, avoidance, low mood, cynicism about the world and impairments in behaviour and interpersonal relationships [3]. In other words, investigators risk their health and quality of life to prosecute criminals and save the lives of others.

Limited resources and growing amounts of material result in ever-increasing workloads for investigators. And the impact and urgency of this type of work makes investigators feel pressure and guilt to work through the materials as efficiently as possible [3].

A recent study highlighted the severity of the issue [4]:

‘All of the participants [in this study] believed their role was not sustainable, burnout being not a question of ‘if’ but ‘when’

Burnout and vicarious trauma isn't only devastating for the individual but is linked to high rates of absenteeism and staff turnover [5], which result in higher costs for the organisation. But the organisation's culture, practices and policies have the potential to mitigate some of the negative consequences of CSE investigations and promote staff wellbeing [3].

In a qualitative study investigating the impact of working with distressing material, staff said that taking breaks was most helpful when the task inevitably becomes mentally and physically

overwhelming. This included stepping away from their desk, changing their immediate surroundings and engaging in relaxing activities such as going for a walk, having a chat with a colleague and drinking a hot beverage [3].

Consequences of fatigue

Not getting enough regular, restful breaks can result in investigators making more mistakes, becoming disengaged with the task and being less efficient overall [6]. Having to stop yourself from emotionally reacting to highly emotional material requires effort and results in mental fatigue [6].

This type of mental fatigue caused by a difficult task (such as prolonged exposure and analysis of CSAM) also reduces a person's ability to regulate their emotions [7]. Difficulties in regulating emotions are linked to enduring psychological problems, whereas healthy mental and physical functioning relies on the ability to regulate emotions [8].

Cognitive resources are like muscles; they have a limited capacity so when they're extensively used, they become tired. Once their capacity has been reached, their subsequent performance is negatively affected. In the case of a challenging mental task, it becomes more difficult to regulate emotions and make sense of the disturbing material being viewed. This can lead to low mood and decreased motivation to perform well [7]. Furthermore, when a person is tired and cognitive resources are exhausted, traumatic images are more likely to be 'recorded' by the brain, resulting in intrusive thoughts and nightmares [6].

If this is not managed adequately, it can have lasting effects on the mental and physical health of a person, making the likelihood of mistakes, absenteeism and staff turnover higher.

The rationale for a dedicated breakroom for CSE investigators

The power of taking breaks

To prevent enduring mental health problems to manifest, strategies and activities that calm down the parasympathetic nervous system are among the most effective [9]. After the initiation of the

stress response (of the sympathetic nervous system), the parasympathetic nervous system is activated, which calms down the heart and breathing rate and lowers blood pressure. In other words, the body and mind enter into a state of relaxation.

Each individual should plan their breaks according to their needs and workload, however, the organisation should harbour a culture in which taking breaks is encouraged or even required. Organisations have a duty of care when it comes to the wellbeing of their staff and implementing appropriate policies and measures reduces the rate of absenteeism and costly errors made in the workplace [10].

Such strategies and activities include [9]

- Health promotion e.g. encouraging regular breaks, healthy eating etc.
- Relaxation exercises e.g. yoga/ stretching, meditation, breathing, nature
- Physical exercise e.g. going for a walk, the gym etc.
- Social support including colleagues, friends and family
- A healthy work-life balance

Furthermore, the physical environment or space in which individuals work can have a significant impact on their wellbeing and should form part of the strategy to increase productivity, motivation and health.

The need for a dedicated breakroom

Having a workspace that supports the health and wellbeing of staff is not only a basic requirement of health and safety laws [11], it is also a proactive step in enhancing the productivity and motivation of the workforce [11].

The physical environment of an office has a powerful impact on psychological and behavioural outcomes for staff members [12]. Data recorded in a report by Public Health England showed that employees who were dissatisfied with their physical working environment were more likely to report lower psychological and physical wellbeing and lower levels of engagement [11].

Taking a mental and physical break from the screen can support staff to recuperate and replenish their resources. Moving to another physical space conducive to wellbeing, such as a suitable restroom, would significantly increase the ability of staff to recover.

Creating a dedicated space where staff can leave their immediate environment for a while has several positive consequences including

- Reducing the risk of accidentally seeing the material a colleague is watching
- Provides an opportunity to switch off and reduce mental and emotional fatigue
- Allows staff to reconnect with the 'outside world'
- Increases productivity and motivation
- Decreases the risk of burnout and therefore absenteeism and staff turnover

Features of a successful breakroom

A study investigating the most important components of a breakroom for nurses found several important factors that lead to better wellbeing [13]. Although nurses and forensic investigators have very different roles, there is some overlap in their working conditions. For example, the work requires extended periods of concentration and focus and they deal with high levels of stress and pressure as well as highly emotional or distressing situations/ material.

The recommendations of this research were as follows [13]:

- The breakroom should be close to the workspace to ensure easy access and encourage staff to take breaks
- The space should feel tranquil and noise coming from the office and outside (e.g. traffic) should be limited as much as possible
- It should be an opportunity to reconnect with the world outside of work and to temporarily leave the 'bubble' of their work – mentally and physically
- Elements of nature should be present, including nature-related artwork, indoor plants and windows (preferably with views of nature but this is dependent on the office location)
- Seating furniture should be comfortable with an opportunity to 'put your feet up'
- Other features include having a refrigerator, storage space and internet access

There was also a strong desire for a dedicated outdoor space [13]. Research has found that having windows in the workplace increases the perceived quality of the environment and job satisfaction [14]. The positive effects nature has on psychological and physical well-being are well-documented (e.g. [15]) and it has been found to increase job satisfaction, reduce stress and improve concentration and productivity [13]. Of course, this depends on the availability of outdoor space. But including elements of nature in the workspace, such as artwork and indoor plants, is a good alternative as it has a relaxing effect and can replenish cognitive resources (e.g. [16]).

Some other features of a relaxing and health-promoting breakroom are [17]:

- Adjustable lighting, giving employees the chance to brighten or dim the lights as they wish
- Keeping the space tidy and clean, removing clutter and creating a space
- Avoiding potential triggers such as artwork that depicts violence, death etc.
- If there is control over the colour of the space, choosing soothing and light colours is preferable, such as shades of green or blue

Other ideas to promote staff wellbeing

- ‘Cognitive vaccine’

A study found that playing visuospatial games, such as Tetris, reduces the risk of having unwanted flashbacks – a common symptom of CSE investigators (see [18]). Having such games available for staff has the potential to reduce some of the harmful effects mentioned above.

- Senses

Certain sensory input has a calming effect and has the potential to help employees to relax, such as playing calming music or nature sounds. Diffusing lavender via a diffuser is another option as research has shown that lavender calms down the nervous system [19].

- Supervision

Supervision and providing a space for investigators to off-load and reflect has been shown to improve staff's dedication, productivity and mental health [3]. Furthermore, supervisors should be educated on the importance of CSE staff taking breaks rather than viewing breaks as 'time wasted' or bad for productivity.

The motivation of CSE investigators to do their work is to reduce cybercrime, help victims and prevent further victimisation. Their work is inherently distressing, yet unavoidable and important. Providing a space for them to recover lowers the risk of negative psychological consequences and has an overall positive effect on the individual, the team and the organisation as a whole. Involving staff in the planning and design of a suitable breakroom is best practice and will increase staff morale and engagement.

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