CASAT Podcast Network

Today we get to talk with Trudy about communicating about work.

So as we get started, Trudy, what are some tips for couples to determine how much detail the first responders should share with their spouse or family about work?

Well, I think the first thing you want to take a look at is um what the other family members do for a living because if they're also a first responder or they're in the medical field or something like that, it may be actually easy to share a lot of details about their work.

Even in this scenario, couples may need to discuss the rules about the depth of details because some people would like less details than others.

Um you may also need to discuss the timing of the sharing and the um and also sometimes if you're both in a similar field, the risk of talking talking shop too much because when it comes right down to it, there is always going to be a risk with family members that they could end up being traumatized themselves by hearing about the traumatic content of a story.

Now for first responders for of all sorts the stories for them, they have a different process going on with that story or with that content and they're able to interact with each other and talk with each other and they're not going to necessarily be disturbed by that.

But family members may not feel that same way.

So having that open dialogue about the content and about the timing etcetera etcetera, it's really important because even if you have someone who's like whatever you want to describe as really strong, that still may not be in their best interest to be exposed to the traumatic content.

Um, and and also those really, really clear rules need to be predetermined about the details.

So even for some people who are both in first responder world, they have already decided we're gonna keep the level at a certain level so that we don't go so deeply into it that there's like really descriptive deep descriptions that could be disturbing just because you're on your off time, you're on your your at home.

Um, there's also that risk of exposing spouses and family to the traumatic material that you're not even realizing.

So you could be talking on the phone, you could be in the kitchen talking with your spouse and your Children, you didn't realize came downstairs and you're actually sharing details about something that could be bothersome to the child.

So we do really want to be very, very careful about that.

Um, even half of a conversation, I don't know if you've ever heard a half of a conversation I have and I always fill in what the other person is saying and that isn't always in our best interest either.

So you have to be really careful.

Um, honestly, I've always told people this is when I worked for the military, but also with first responders, the best default for first responders is to come home and talk about how work affected them, not what happened at work.

So those are completely different levels.

The reason I'm going to default to that level is that's actually going to create more intimacy in the relationship is going to create more connection.

If I tell you a story of of what happened versus how I felt about what happened.

Those are completely different levels of communication.

One's gonna draw us a lot closer together, the other one is informative and so it is really good to talk about, like if if you have a particularly stressful day, you could share that experience and what they did to cope with the stress and even that very often isn't terrible for a child to hear because then they get to hear like, you know, my dad really had a stressful day, he was really struggling with some of the things that he was having to do during the day, but what he did for himself was X, Y, Z.

And so they end up having this awareness of how adults cope and that they're able to start learning how to do those same kinds of things from modeling, it also allows the family to be involved without being exposed to the trauma.

So they actually feel part of it.

I think some first responders their default is zero, they don't talk about it at all there, it's like, I don't want to talk about work instead of learning to how, how to have some way of letting their family in on the experience of being them without necessarily going into the details of work as far as the traumatic content.

What do you see as the impact of just not talking about it?

Well, I think, I think in a sense you think about it, not that we for most of us, if you work 40 hours a week, let's say you're still home and interacting with your family more than you are at work and it doesn't always feel that way, but truly do the math you are and that's even if you subtract sleep.

Um and you're getting a full eight hours of the real the real dilemma becomes, I now don't know about an entire chunk of who you are.

And so we feel like we're, it's almost like, you know, there's the you that is here at home which is fine but there's this other you that I don't get to know and I think for a lot of people that does decrease their sense of connection and it just feels like you're going off to this other place that we don't know about at all and then you come back.

I think it also sets families up sometimes, especially kids for a little bit more resentment towards that going away as opposed to being able to share some of the aspects of their work that that can help Children appreciate the value of work and appreciate the value of challenge and growth and all of the other things that often will be equated with work and so we can find ways to share the aspects of it that can be inspiring to our kids and a great model for our kids.

Yeah, I love this shift in thinking about um sharing how it was versus what what happened, which for me is a default.

So it's very interesting to reflect on that.

What are, what are some boundaries that we could set up or that families could set up um, to really improve, you know, help with that that regards to work.

So help with maybe not just what you share and how you share, but you know, when we talk about work or any boundaries that would really be useful for a family in regards to work.

So one thing I would suggest is that like I said earlier, if you really want to make sure that you are extremely careful about details around Children that when you're on the phone and you're having your half of a conversation that you're very, very careful that when you're talking with your spouse, if they are like, let's say they're very familiar with with your work, maybe they're an RN for example, and you're a firefighter and you're able to talk about it there or they're a medic and you're a firefighter, you're able to have this really open conversation.

You may not even realize that there's little ears listening.

So you have to be very, very careful about that.

So no details around Children.

Um, also, I think it's really important to make sure that you have friends within your career field because if you do need to tap into some specific support, someone else who's doing something exactly like you're doing are very similar to what you're doing.

So that you can run something by them if you're not quite sure if your reaction to it or if your response to it is is okay or normal.

We use our friends a lot for normalizing our behavior.

I mean most of us who are parents, you know, we wanted to have other parent, kids, you know, other families with who are also parents.

So we can run things by them to make sure our kids are okay.

Um, if we don't want to run to the pediatrician every single time our kid does something a little off and so we could run it by someone else to say, oh, my kid did that too.

And you just feel so relieved.

So that's why we need somebody else in our field or a couple other people in our field so that we can run stuff by them.

We can know that we're okay.

But in addition to that, it's really helpful to have friends outside of our career field because it does create that sort of balance.

Sometimes we, because we feel so comfortable with the folks who are doing exactly what we do, we sometimes we sometimes narrow our our interaction sort of circles and that can become problematic because we sometimes do need that fresh perspective from someone who does not is not in our world and that they can end up helping us with a different type of normalization.

Um I think, I think one of the things I've noticed about working with first responders is there's an enormous amount of pride in their work and it's very, very deeply tied with the meaning of the work and how important it is and how how good it is for the communities that they work in.

Um and certainly that is going to make for a really happy worker um but they also need to have other things that bring meaning and bring happiness into their life too, because again, sometimes it's so easy to go for the, so maybe the easy way to get that meaning need filled is I'm just going to work an overtime shift for example, but we want to have other things, we want to have activities and hobbies and interests that are outside of our work life in order to have a lot of areas of joy that we can tap into, and that's particularly important if I'm like all of us will go through in our work life sort of times when it isn't going quite as well and so then if I'm getting all of my meaning and joy from work and now I don't have it, I'm not experiencing that, where am I going to get it?

So if you have that sort of that broad way of looking at it and getting it from a lot of different sources, you'll never, you'll never come up empty, you'll always have some place to tap into.

And also I as a result, I always tell first responders families and I know they don't like to hear it, but I'm, I say it anyway, um, is that I really think you really need to watch your overtime and you really need to be getting feedback from your family over time.

To me is is so seductive in that it can be very easy to get it sometimes and the money is very nice, but sometimes it ends up making our families get very out of balance.

Yeah, we have lots of money maybe, but our families are out of balance as a result.

So to have those talks about like how much overtime is really okay in a family, so that we, so that the first responder in particular doesn't get burnt out and doesn't get disconnected from the family for reasons that may actually not be terrifically congruent with the family's real values.

This sounds like such a difficult balance of still talking about things, so you're not completely closed off in a different person, but not talking about too much and and not talking about certain things or at certain times and being able to communicate when that's appropriate, and so I can imagine and this is just kind of a random question for you do a lot of families avoid and just, it would seem like because it is such a difficult balance to have of what to talk about when to talk about everything we've, we've mentioned already do families just kind of go into neutral.

Is it more natural to, this is a life here, this is a life here.

And as the spouse, I'm going to focus on the family and you focus on work and so they do really end up being kind of two separate lives just because it's easier.

Is that a common Yeah, it actually, it it's unfortunately it is and it does sometimes and again, because it is such a unique world and a lot of times the experiences that that first responders have are not necessarily very similar to other people's workplace experiences.

And so, so as a result they will sometimes feel like other people can't understand me, Only other people who do what I do will understand me.

But the universal really is, is the how, so stress is actually is a universal.

All of us experience stress at work.

And yes, their stress may be very, very obviously unique to their work and may be more difficult than the stress someone else is experiencing and yet it is the same, so stresses stresses stress in a way and so how we respond to stress, do we respond in healthy ways or unhealthy ways.

So being able to talk about that, like how it feels to be them, I think it just makes us closer together, it helps us connect and I think it it is, it is, it becomes a difficulty and it is important that we understand the world our spouse goes into just like we as if we're, if we're, than if we are the spouse, we would want to understand their world, but we would also want them to understand ours.

So that's an important thing and, and it's actually sometimes those can be very exciting conversations to just, it's almost like you're an anthropologist and you're trying to understand this, you know, whatever this whole different world that you've never actually been exposed to, so it's a great opportunity to get really curious and ask really good questions and then it also is a great time for them to shine to really get to explain like how exciting their job is or how interesting it is and all the things that they get to do and vice versa.

I'm really aware of, um you know, first responders taken so much of the ugliness, the suffering, the trauma of the world on a daily basis, um and what is the impact of taking in all of that on a daily basis in how we look at the world, I think it's, it's just like any other, I think any other job that you have.

I mean think every single job you have is going to impact the way you see the world based on what you get exposed to.

So if unfortunately for people in the first responder world, whether you're a firefighter or a medic or a police officer or you're a frontline worker of some other sort, sometimes you're overexposed to people, places and things.

I suppose you could say that are really not always ones that anybody would choose to be exposed to.

And as a result, I think it ends up creating some other issues with sometimes some avoidance, including, you know, some of the things I hear often from families is um is some spouses in particular that they'll complain that their family member when they come home is checked out, they just don't want to interact with them at all.

And and that is actually probably most frequently the culprit to blame.

There is what's called compassion fatigue and that is that most of like, especially for I noticed this in particular with medics, so fire medics and with police officers in that they are walking into people's lives on really what amounts to one of the worst days of their life.

And so they're getting hit by emotion that and so think of the worst day or one of the worst days of your life and the emotion you experienced That day.

You know, just for yourself as an individual, they're getting slammed with that kind of emotion, person after person after person after person.

So they may have 68, 10, 12 of these experiences, sometimes even more on any given shift where they're just being, they're in the presence of extremely strong, difficult emotion.

And as a result, their brain is having to deal with that level of emotion and there and and like any other system in the body, it gets worn out.

It's tired of dealing with emotion.

It's too, and, and actually, for a lot of I noticed this a lot, a lot with police officer's spouses will tell me like, like it comes home and I'll just I'll just bring up the smallest little problem and he will lose it because he doesn't want to do it.

And he's just he's just sick of it is because he is he's been problem solving all day long, all day long, all day long, or their little daughter is really dis regulated or like she's throwing it to I, you know, could you take care of that?

And it's like, it's the last thing he wants to take care of and I'm not saying that makes an excuse for him, but it's a reference point, it's like, it's understandable.

It's the same principle to me is like, why if, you know, if you were married to a plumber while, why you have drippy faucets.

It's like, the last thing he wants to do is come home and say we I get to change another, you know, another faucet drip and he's just he's gonna wait days and days.

It's the same principle and it becomes a real dilemma.

How can the first responders make sure that they remain current with themselves and others regarding their work and its pressures?

So I would say, um like I said earlier, you really want to come up with um you have to have that self awareness.

I mean that's really always going to be the 1st 1st piece here.

Um but I think we all need to whether your first responders or not, I think we all need to come up with some kind of criteria in ourselves when we know we need to talk to someone else, when we know that's going to be, we have to.

So for example, my personal criteria is that when I'm upset at a 79 or 10, so on a scale of 0 to 10, if my emotion is 79 or 10, no matter what, As soon as I calm down, I am going to talk to someone about that.

My other criteria of a secondary one is that if I'm thinking about something for more than 24 hours, I'm talking to someone else because if I'm thinking about something because most of us, you know have something happen and I'm just missing it, moving on.

So if I'm still thinking about it a day later, it must have affected me more than I realized.

So I am going to end up needing to talk about that.

So everyone needs to come up with a clear criteria by which they utilize other people to help normalize their experience.

It's a real dilemma for any of us to stuff stuff in other words to to not deal with stuff because it has a tendency to build up over time.

So if it's that I don't like to deal with, let's say it's sadness and I don't like sadness, it's it's weak or whatever I decided it is.

And so I stuff it each time something new sad comes along.

I'm more and more and more vulnerable because that builds up over time.

So it becomes a real dilemma.

Um and also I think it's really good to decide on a family member or friend or whatever that you have sort of as your go to person to speak with about specific content.

So if I have to, you know, I always say like I have my sad friends, they are actually not sad, but they are my person that if I'm sad, that is my go to person to talk about with sadness or maybe you have a person who's really good at talking to you about stress or maybe you have a family member who's really good at when you're discouraged that they tend to get you re motivated really easily.

So we all need those kinds of people in our life and to make sure that you have enough people in our lives so that we would have those go to people that we can talk with about specific needs.

That we have.

Another really useful strategy for first responders is what's called the mind body scan.

Um So really it's a very, very brief thing, you can actually even google it and they'll give you a bunch of ones that they can just walk you through it.

But the simple simply put a mind body scan is a means of checking in with your own thinking and becoming familiar with normal, whatever you would consider your normal thinking so that you are able to notice when you're thinking is not the same.

So an egg's an example is if I'm regularly checking in on my thinking, I'm going to start understanding about the speed of my normal thinking, it's gonna have kind of a normal speed.

I'm also gonna sort of notice the normal regular, I guess you could say um theme of my thinking, so maybe it's it's normally curious or it's normally open or it's normally positive or it's normally, so if it starts to shift and that theme shifts where it's it's all of a sudden it's irritable or it's more anxious or it's more it's more negative, it's like who I am shifted somehow or another and then the last one is just what are you thinking about?

So if I notice what I'm what my normal what is and it's real different than my normal what then I'm gonna want to recognize that.

So and then actually our speed is a really good indicator because that's that's just the first one I check in with with my body scan and then the body part is just head to toe and it's just really simple after you've kind of checked in with your thinking to kind of do a top of your head and then just check in with all the kind of major muscle groups and then just also body sensations.

Do you notice any muscle tension in any parts of your body?

Do you notice any, how's your stomach feel?

I think stomachs are really, really important piece of information with a body scan because sometimes we feel a tightness in it or we've got butterflies in it or we feel sick to our stomach or any of those other things.

Do you feel like way too much energy in your legs.

Do you feel, do you feel sluggish?

Do you have tension in your neck and shoulders which is usually an indication of anger or anxiety.

So we would, so those kinds of things.

So usually we can make the connection then my body is signaling and my head and my mind is signaling.

What can I understand about those and that way, the more you understand it, the more than you're able to respond to it and then do something about it, it sounds like to me and this is my perspective and tell me if if, if this is, if I'm perceiving it correctly if you want, um that what's really common to family members and folks who are in that those first responder um careers is the amount of wear awareness you have to have obviously about like what you're going through, how much you're feeling, what are you suppressing but also at the family needs to have in order to communicate that.

But from my perspective of being someone on the outside is there's also like more of a culture of a tendency to push that stuff down because it's difficult to face.

So it seems like even though it's, it's more important um in this field to be aware of those things and what you're going through and the trauma and the compassion fatigue and all of that.

There's also a kind of a massive pressure to push it down and to not be aware of it.

And so it seems like a really difficult place to navigate of, of how to have that awareness without it overwhelming you.

Yes.

Yeah.

And you're, and you're right about that, that's why I was speaking a little bit earlier about how some first responder families, they are constantly the first responders constantly solving problems at work.

And so they go home and as soon as that, you know, like let's say it's the spouse says, hey, you know, I wanted to talk to you about like, and so maybe his responses like, I don't want to talk about that or gets really agitated or gets really, really angry and just pushes it away because, because he isn't aware that he really, really had a difficult day or that he's really, really exhausted.

Um and sometimes what some others will will do is they'll just say you just take care of it, you just take care of it because because of that exhaustion, so sometimes families will get into these routines that are really not as functional as they need to be.

Um and others I've heard and they'll tell me that they will like the, maybe somebody will come home and they'll start barking orders because they bark orders at work.

And so it's just like sort of like there is no like real transition.

So that's a, that's another useful thing for obviously the first responder, but also for the family members to have that that transition time between work and home, especially if it's not a long enough commute or if we don't have some kind of transitional ritual that can help us transition back home.

And then also obviously, sometimes being able to communicate about the needs of the family on an ongoing basis because it may be really excited.

I had a family that what their solution was, which again, families can be so amazingly creative.

They have a meeting once a week to problem solve.

So that way the for that way the first responder member who is burnout on problem solving, they already know the time of the meeting and that that's sort of their only time that they have to perform.

So it's whatever you wanna call it.

So it's, which to me is great because what that's saying is that we know that this is uh this is exhausting for you and they have to to have you walk in the door and us to throw stuff out at you and to constantly do that as opposed to saying, hey, let's let's schedule thursday night that for an hour we're gonna sit down and we're gonna keep a list of all the things that we just need to discuss as a family and we're just gonna knock them all off in one fell swoop, just kind of get into problem solving mode.

So now we can say, okay cool, now I don't have to do it again for another week or whatever frequency really works.

Um those kinds of things that being really, really creative about what we notice um is really, really important.

Another thing I think that is really important for which I mentioned earlier is that that whole piece about overtime and I think sometimes that ends up being an issue that sort of folds in upon itself in that the family gets used to the money from the overtime they get used to?

They've integrated into their budget.

But now the first responders getting progressively more burnt out, less and less available now they're all becoming resentful at him, but if for him or her, but then if he backs off on the overtime that becomes this other additional problem.

So um it's really important for families to have that discussion about, about over time and how it impacts the family as a whole, how it impacts the first responder.

And also just really recognizing that it's one of those things that's actually highly risky as well because it isn't unusual for overtime to go away and now we're adding like so all of a sudden it completely dries up but we budgeted as if we live off of the off of the overtime and so now we are in this intense crisis mode and we have to reduce our budget by you know, potentially hundreds or thousands a month.

And that's a really, really difficult thing.

So we have to actually look at some of the pieces and parts of how all of this ends up working together within a family and having a really open conversation about it so that we don't end up adding any kind of stress that's unique to, to sometimes to these first responder families.

Trudy, this has been so helpful about communicating about work as a family member and wife.

Um you know, communication is probably the most challenging thing that we face in our family.

So you've given tons of helpful tips today.

Are there any resources that you recommend for our listeners?

I have a couple.

So um if you really want to learn about some really good communication skills and like there's a lot of really good books out there for like even parenting books and things like that, but probably ones that really just speaks specifically to communication skills and two boundaries really, which is overall what we've been talking about.

There's a book called Your Perfect Right by Alberti in Emmons.

That's a really good book about, about just basic communication skills of all sorts.

And then another one is a book that's primarily about boundaries, which is where to draw the line so that you can learn a little bit about, but that's by Anne Catherine, which is a really good book.

And then can you add some maybe some specific action steps for folks?

I know we've been trying to do this on, on some of these podcasts and you list some great steps throughout um, the podcast today obviously, but do you have any action steps for folks who are trying to tackle those things around communication and boundaries?

Sure.

One thing I would suggest to people is um, schedule family meeting to talk about important issues and I would say schedule one and then hopefully continue to schedule them, you're going to get better and better having family meetings is a skill like any other skill, you're not going to be awesome added at first, um, there's some really great outlines for family meetings out there on the internet.

It wouldn't be difficult to find them.

Um, when my Children were young, I used to have each, everybody would take a turn once they learned how to write to be the secretary.

So I have pages and pages, which I still have not thrown away of each of my kids being the secretary for a family meeting and they're just, they're just precious.

I could not give them up, but it just also, it's really cool.

I'm looking at some of the things that even my own Children would put on the agenda.

The other thing that's really nice and the reason I think it is such an important thing to do as a family is that problem solving, you know, we've, we've done an analysis of some of the skills that workers need to thrive in today's modern workplace and they, and they actually have said, communication skills and problem solving are two of the really big ones and so to be able to model that and to work with your family and to learn how to do that as a family is just invaluable because they're learning it from the time they're very tiny and that they realize that the whole group is going to commit to this and work on it.

Certainly we only solve family problems and a family meeting couples will solve couples problems and couples meetings and then if there are, if there is an issue with an individual child, we would want to have a separate meeting with that child because obviously we don't want to have it in front of any of their siblings because I know from experience, the siblings will use that information against the other one anytime they can.

So, so we want to really make sure we're private about that.

And also really we want to have an ongoing conversation about our boundaries around work content and work details.

And um, you may want to decide if you need to strengthen your boundaries because maybe they've been too loose or maybe you need to loosen up your boundaries.

Maybe there's more that we can actually share that.

We hadn't realized that the family could have shared that.

I can, I can give maybe the names of things I've done.

And then also then talk about like how it affected me or what it was like being out there doing, doing the things I've done.

Whereas maybe before you wouldn't have necessarily told them that I was actually on this type of a call or I did this type of thing.

So sometimes we end up having to just sort of gauge that and have really open conversations very often in this regard.

You might start having this conversation with your spouse, but then end up having it maybe as an entire family um, meeting to just so that we can kind of set a standard as a family, which would be nice.

Yeah, that would be awesome.

Well, I know tonight I'm going to try to talk about how I felt about my day rather than what I did about my day.

So thank you so much for talking to us about communicating about work today.

We really appreciate it.

You're very welcome.

It was very fun.

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