WHAT HELPS OR HINDERS TOXIC HANDLERS IN THE PERFORMANCE OF THEIR JOBS

by

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The experience of being a toxic handler is filled with many challenges and rewards. Presently, there is not a great deal of literature available on the methods used to deal with the demands of this type of job. A large part of the literature looks at quantitative studies, which outline various strategies for dealing with the challenges of various working life scenarios, always excluding the direct "voice" of the participants. This study is an attempt to address this gap.

Flanagan's (1954) Critical Incident Analysis was used in this study to investigate what helps and hinders toxic handlers in the performance of their jobs. Through in-person interviews, 9 participants from mainstream Canadian culture were asked to explain their stories as toxic handlers. From their stories critical incidents were highlighted, and outcomes gleaned, leading to the development of relevant categories. A total of 34 critical incidents and 87 outcomes were collected. Nine helping categories and four hindering categories emerged from an inductive study of the incidents reported by the nine participants. The results indicate that the helping categories employed by the participants are the following: (a) positive personal attitude, (b) physical activity, (c) personal satisfaction with job done, (d) support from colleagues, (e) outside support, (f) relaxation strategies, (g) belief in company's product/service, (h) affecting positive change in worker, (i) decision to leave organization. Hindering themes which have
an impact on the toxic handler include: (a) lack of company support, (b) long term negative job culture, (c) geography, (d) negative emotions. Participants cross-checking, independent rater, participation rate, and theoretical agreement confirmed the validity of the categories. Counselling implications are discussed, along with practical ways of applying the results of this study to the business environment.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ......................................................................................................................... ii
Table of contents ........................................................................................................ iv
Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................... vii

CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................... 1
What are toxic handlers? ............................................................................................... 1
The problem for toxic handlers .................................................................................. 3
Purpose of the study ...................................................................................................... 4
Rationale ..................................................................................................................... 5

CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ................................................................. 6
Coping theory .............................................................................................................. 7
Coping in the work environment ................................................................................ 8
The role of personality in coping ................................................................................ 13
Secondary traumatic stress/compassion fatigue ....................................................... 15

CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY .................................................................................. 20
Critical incident technique ......................................................................................... 21
Description of participants ....................................................................................... 24
Interview procedures ................................................................................................. 25

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA ............................................................................................ 27
Extraction of the incidents ......................................................................................... 28
CHAPTER IV. RESULTS

PART I: DESCRIPTION OF THE HELPING CATEGORIES

Category 1: Positive personal attitude
Category 2: Physical activity
Category 3: Personal satisfaction with job done
Category 4: Support from colleagues
Category 5: Outside support
Category 6: Relaxation strategies
Category 7: Affecting positive change in workers
Category 8: Belief in company's product and service
Category 9: Decision to leave organization

PART 2: DESCRIPTION OF THE HINDERING CATEGORIES

Category 1: Lack of company support
Category 2: Long term negative job culture
Category 3: Geography
Category 4: Negative emotions

PART 3: CHARACTERISTICS OF TOXIC HANDLERS

PART 4: VALIDATION PROCEDURES

Independent rater
Participant cross-checking
Exhaustiveness
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Men are disturbed not by things, but by the views which they take of things.

Roman Philosopher Epictetus
from the Enchiridion
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

What are toxic handlers?

In many business organizations there are workers who take on the informal role of toxic handlers. According to Frost and Robinson (1999) a toxic handler is "a manager who voluntarily shoulders the sadness, frustration, bitterness and anger that are endemic to organizational life" (p.98). It is toxic handlers who frequently step in and absorb others’ pain so that high quality work continues to get done. Toxic handlers have been around as long as organizations have had distress as part of their working environment. It is pointed out in the Harvard Business Review article, *The Toxic Handler: Organizational Hero-and Casualty*, that these handlers can be found at every level of an organization, however, many work near the top, running "marketing or new product development departments". Many of these managers are highly motivated; handling their colleagues and subordinates concerns on top their own regular workload (1999, p. 98).

One example taken from Frost and Robinson’s article, looks at Alexandra, a woman who works as the vice president of a large financial institution in New York. Alexandra’s formal job position has her working with commercial and small business accounts. Yet, she spends over half her time playing peacemaker between new MBA graduates and the clerical staff who support them. The MBA
graduates would come into their new position acting in a demanding and rude
manner. These new graduates would offend the clerical workers to the point
where they could not concentrate on their work. It was Alexandra who explained
to the administrative staff that these new graduates were actually good people,
but they lacked skills in dealing with people effectively. Once she had spoken to
the administrative staff, she brought the new MBAs into her office to explain that
being a boss is not about dominating staff and ordering them around.

Alexandra took on a second area of unofficial responsibility by talking with
other managers about their fears and insecurities over a potential merger with
another bank. Many of the managers were terrified they were going to lose their
jobs in the amalgamation, so Alexandra would talk to them, calming them down
until they could go back to doing their work.

According to Frost and Robinson, toxic handlers relieve organizational
pain in five ways: they listen empathetically, they suggest solutions, they work
behind the scenes to prevent pain, they carry the confidences of others, and they
reframe difficult messages (1999, p.99). Two major trends have appeared in
recent years, which have intensified the need for toxic handlers in organizations.
The first trend is the idea of constant change being necessary in business to
compete globally. The plus side of this equation is increased value for
shareholders. The negative outcome is an increase in fear and uncertainty
among employees. The second trend is that of downsizing. As employees in a
company are let go, the remaining workers have feelings of guilt and fear. They
have survived this round of cut backs, but the uncertainty is there, wondering if
they will be let go the next time. It is the toxic handler who is left to calm people down and encourage them so they can get back to work.

Unfortunately, the unofficial role of toxic handler is rarely recognized or acknowledged by the executives in organizations. “A culture of toughness infuses many organizations, and a high value is often placed on technical competence. Emotional competence is irrelevant; it doesn’t show up on the bottom line, or so the thinking goes” (1999, p.102). A second aspect of corporate life, that of managers being expected to “tough it out during hard times” makes it difficult for the work of toxic handlers to be acknowledged. As an example a manager in one of Frost and Robinson’s studies recounted, “After a particularly bitter strike that churned up a lot of agony and anger, the company provided counseling for the workers. There was nothing for the managers. We were expected to suck in our emotions, stay quiet, and cope alone” (1999, p.103).

The problem for toxic handlers

The problem for these handlers begins when the stress and pressure associated with their informal status as a trouble-shooter becomes overwhelming. Bouts of depression, severe heart palpitations, chronic sleeplessness, and pneumonia are a few examples of the negative results of working as a toxic handler, according to research undertaken by Frost and Robinson (1999, p.102). The end result of juggling both formal and informal job responsibilities for toxic handlers without proper coping strategies is the loss of this valuable worker from the company due to mental and physical exhaustion.
Dave Marsing is an example of the toll being a toxic handler can take on a person's well being. In 1990, Dave was assigned to turn around a microprocessor plant near Albuquerque, New Mexico. The situation he walked into was terrible because the plant's yield rates were bad and getting worse. The company's senior managers were putting a great deal of pressure on employees, looking for a quick solution to the problem. Employees were in pain, because they felt there was too much pressure coming down on them from senior management. Marsing was trying very hard to be a bridge between the various parts of the company. To anyone observing he was soothing his employees but on the inside he was in terrible turmoil. Two months after Marsing arrived on the job, he suffered a near-fatal heart attack. He was 36 years old (Frost & Robinson, 1999). How to keep these talented trouble-shooters mentally and physically healthy while they deal in toxic situations is a challenge to organizations.

Purpose of the study

The potential for exploration in the newly emerging study of toxic handlers is vast. This study is intended to be specific and limited in nature, focusing on what helps and hinders toxic handlers in the performance of their jobs. The literature reviewed in this proposal describes different theories of coping, and research that applies these theories. It is interesting to note that most of these theories employ quantitative methods. There does not appear to be much literature focusing on the direct "voice" of sample groups who go through the process of dealing with their jobs. They are the true "experts" in that they are the
ones who experience the necessity of dealing with their responsibilities in a
hands-on fashion. This study is an attempt to utilize the participants' "expertise"
(i.e. viewpoint, perceptions, experiences, ideas) to provide the researcher with
an understanding of the processes that help and hinder toxic handlers in the
performance of their jobs. In this study, two sets of categories will be developed
which describe what helps and what hinders toxic handlers in the performance of
their jobs. These categories will be used as a first step in developing positive
strategies to help other toxic handlers avoid the pain and turmoil experienced by
the toxic handlers in this study.

Rationale for the study

The identification and study of toxic handlers is a relatively new and
growing field. Little is known in the current literature about how these individuals
deal with the daily challenges of their jobs. This study is an attempt to get a
better understanding of these participants and what helps them cope with their
demanding positions. How do these handlers cope with the situations that are
surrounding them on a daily basis? It is understood that many of these toxic
handlers are experts in handling the organization's goals, but they have not yet
developed the skills necessary to deal effectively with the personal stressors of
their job. Frost (1999) is quoted in the Harvard Business Review as stating, "....
toxic handlers are amateurs. Unlike workers at a real radioactive site, they do not
have clothing, equipment, or procedures to protect them. They toil in danger
zones completely exposed" (p.101).
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The study and use of coping in dealing with everyday life has played an important role in psychology for well over forty years. A large body of the literature looks at quantitative studies conducted to measure various theories on what coping strategies seem to be most effective in different situations. A number of the more recent research articles look at coping strategies through the common theoretical definition given by Lazarus and Folkman in their 1984 book entitled *Stress, Appraisal and Coping*. "We define coping as constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the individual" (p.141). Coping is therefore seen as process-oriented rather than trait-oriented due to the use of words like "constantly changing" and "specific demands". It has been pointed out by these same two authors that regardless of the current popularity attached to coping literature there is not a great deal of consistency found in the research, theory or understanding of this concept. A general quick appraisal of the literature both theoretical and media based, shows a multitude of viewpoints on the concept of coping and how it helps in the process of adaptation (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984).
The literature explains different theories of coping, and looks at applying these theories in quantitative studies, but there does not appear to be much literature focusing on the direct “voice” of sample groups who go through the process of coping. This study will address this gap by asking toxic handlers directly what helps and hinders them in the performance of their job. The literature reviewed in this chapter can be divided into four groups: (1) a review of coping theory from current literature (2) coping in the work environment (3) the role of personality in coping (4) the role of secondary traumatic stress/compassion fatigue.

Coping theory

Cognitive appraisal processes play a key role in an individual’s determination of how to deal with a stressful situation. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) believe that this appraisal process can be most easily understood as the steps involved in categorizing a situation, with all its dimensions, in relation to significance for well being. It is the interplay of both environment and personal factors that result in the psychological situation of the person under stress. How we interpret a situation will be based on what we have learned about the world and ourselves through experience (p. 23). According to coping theory, the resources available to an individual will also play a crucial role in how a person will respond to a difficult situation. Pearlin & Schooler suggest that resources are best used in situations where people have little control like in the areas of jobs and finances. Any situation rising out of interpersonal issues is better settled by the direct actions of the individual (1978). According to the literature these
resources can be broken down into the following categories: the physical resources of health and energy, the psychological resource of positive beliefs and the competencies of problem solving and social skills. Other categories would include social and material resources (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984 p. 159).

Two dominant strategies of coping, which have been mentioned consistently in research studies, include problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Emotion-focused forms of coping are more likely to be implemented when there has been a realization that nothing can be done to change the difficult or threatening environmental conditions. Problem-focused forms of coping are more likely to be used when conditions are seen as being responsive to change (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Problem-focused coping is aimed at managing or changing the problem causing the difficulty. Related strategies would include: stating the problem, finding other solutions, looking at costs and benefits to different solutions, and gauging solutions in terms of their costs and benefits, picking a solution and acting on it (p. 152). Emotion-focused coping is directed at regulating emotional responses to the problem (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Strategies included in this form of coping include: "avoidance, minimization, distancing, selective attention, positive comparisons, and wrestling positive value from negative events" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 150). These two coping functions can be used in tandem in a beneficial way, but can also hinder each other in the coping process. One example of a hindering decision would be a premature decision reached because the emotional problem outweighed the problem oriented coping strategy. Overall, it has been noted from
quantitative studies that most participants use both strategies when dealing with stressful situations (p.157).

The literature also talks about the role that society plays in influencing coping strategies. "The selective use of valued goals and activities to mold the meaning of circumstances is an easily available coping tool, commonly used and quite efficacious" (Pearlin 1985, p.202). As an example, given by Pearlin, a worker can decide to avoid stress in the workplace by devoting their time to being a good spouse or parent. In this way society will still reward them for their efforts at home and the threat in the workplace will be diminished. Pearlin closes his example of a male worker by pointing out, "One doesn't have to be a dedicated worker; he will still be conforming to the cherished values of the society if he chooses instead to be the devoted father"(1985, p. 202). Lazarus calls this type of coping reappraisal "...threat is diminished by changing the meaning of the situation – a coping effort qua (sic) reappraisal" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p.150). It is worth noting in the work done by Lazarus and Folkman, that there is an effort made to separate coping strategies from the outcome of the action. Coping is therefore seen as the effort that goes into managing the stressor, regardless of how wonderful or terrible the end result.

The literature also talks about a third type of coping strategy, appraisal-oriented coping, in relation to work related coping (Ashford, 1988; Latack, 1986; Nelson and Sutton, 1990.). "Appraisal-oriented coping concerns redefining the stressful situation in more palatable terms" (Begley, 1999, p.2). This third strategy is absorbed under emotion-oriented coping in the work of Lazarus.
In summary, these authors agree that there are many factors which must be taken into account when an individual is deciding what coping strategy will be selected when dealing with a stressful situation.

Coping in the work environment

Coping strategies can be brought into play for various reasons within an organization. Some factors that may induce coping responses include: losing your job due to company closing or downsizing; difficulties in dealing with co-workers, or pressing deadlines and overwork. In one case study looking at how salespeople deal with job stress, a comparison was done among four personal characteristics of individuals: locus of control, task based efficacy, continuance commitment and social support, and their relationship to problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping (Srivastava & Sager, 1999). In the discussion component of the study it was concluded that those salespeople with greater self-efficacy and greater internal orientation tend to employ a problem focused coping style.

Begley’s (1998) article focused on coping strategies when dealing with an organizational consolidation. This quantitative study was valuable in showing that differences may exist between the coping strategies that are chosen by an individual and the ones that are most likely to be truly effective. One clear relationship that came out of this study was that of the use of alcohol and drugs to consistent negative consequences when coping with the company consolidation.
Gowan, Riordan & Gatewood (1999) completed a study focusing on 202 employees dealing with involuntary job loss due to the shut down of Eastern Airlines. Results of the quantitative study pointed out that there is a relationship between coping resources, cognitive appraisal of job loss and the coping strategies developed in response to job loss. Coping strategies were seen to be related to the level of distress felt by the individual and to the level of reemployment attained. Those employees with the greatest amount of education, financial resources, and social support were involved to the largest extent in non-work activities. Symptom focused coping is the name which has been attached to the idea of attending to non-work related activities as a way of coping. These activities are not directed towards finding reemployment nor is it seen as a way to change the individual views the stress of being unemployed (Lena & Feldman, 1995).

Lazarus (1989) noted that coping is seen as vital to dealing with the stressful transitions that take place in people's lives on a daily basis. Social and work roles people occupy can change. An example of changing roles would be when workers retire, fall ill or become disabled or a company fails or organizations change. A central point in this article states "that the sources of stress are always, to some extent, individual, as are the ways people cope with stress" (p.7). What is therefore important to the well being of one worker will not be deemed as necessary for the happiness of another. One worker may prize relationships above all, and find that being liked and accepted is the highest
priority. A second person might be very appraisal oriented and a bad evaluation would leave them feeling very upset.

Lazarus (1989) mentioned three ways of coping in the work environment. The first is to produce favourable environmental change in the workplace. This is getting more difficult as there are larger differences between the needs of individual workers and those working in groups. A second way of coping involves helping those with coping difficulty through stress management workshops. It is Lazarus’s view that individual one-on-one training is most beneficial rather than lumping all workers into a large group, since no two people are alike. The third strategy to reduce stress is transactional in nature. It involves identifying individual and group relationships that are stressful within the organization and changing them based on relational findings. This strategy looks at shifts in worker assignments to “create a better person-environment fit” (p.10).

DeFrank and Ivancevich (1998) discussed the various sources of stress in the work environment today. In their estimation these included “work overload, role conflict, ineffective, hostile and incompetent bosses, lack of personal fit with a job, lack of recognition, lack of a clear job description or chain of command, fear, uncertainty, and doubt about career progress, and prejudice based on age, gender, ethnicity or religion” (p.2). The authors point to new stresses which ushered in the age of the nineties. Increased competition and change have made it necessary for companies to be more creative, innovative and face increased internal pressures. Downsizing of companies is another strategy of the nineties ... “the fear of job loss has become a way of life” (p.3). Survivors of downsizing may
feel tremendous pressure, wondering if they will be able to avoid the next round of cuts, and loss of valued colleagues. There is increasing conflict trying to balance the demands of working life with the needs of the family life. Finally there is the need to take care of elderly parents and small children. With the increase in the number of dual income families, there are fewer family members around to care for dependents.

In summary, the literature shows us that the factors which can affect an individual's method of coping can depend a great deal on how they perceive the stressor, what resources both emotional and physical they have at their disposal and what kind of cognitive appraisal they put on the situation.

**The Role of personality in coping**

The role of personality in coping can be looked at through the work of O'Brien and DeLongis (1996). This study involved looking at problem-, emotion-, and relationship-focused modes of coping, and found that "personality, the stressful situation, and Person x Situation interactions were all significant predictors of coping responses" (p.801).

The conceptualization of coping strategies has been expanded in the area of interpersonal regulation through the introduction of the term relationship-focused coping (Coyne & Smith, 1991; DeLongis & O'Brien, 1990; O'Brien & DeLongis, in press; as cited in O'Brien & Delongis, 1996). This type of coping strategy looks at regulating, managing or maintaining relationships during stressful times. Examples of positive relationship focusing strategies would include "empathy, support provision, and compromise" (p. 782). Negative
relationship-focused coping strategies looks at the components of: "confronting, ignoring, blaming, and withdrawal" (p.782). Caregivers of Alzheimer's patients who used positive relationship coping were found to have higher caregiver satisfaction. Those who used negative relationship-focused coping strategies were found to have higher levels of caregiver depression (1996).

Empathic understanding was one form of relationship-focused coping which was strongly linked with stressful interpersonal situations. "Stress occurring in social relationships tended to pull for empathic responding, particularly when a close family member or friend was involved" (p.801).

Looking to the role of personality in coping it was found that individuals who score high in neuroticism tend to react to personal distress in maladaptive ways such as running away from the stressful situation or venting their emotions angrily. Findings regarding relationship-focused coping point out that this same group has the ability to be empathetic but find it difficult to show empathy when the difficult situation involves someone close to them (1996). The literature also found that those individuals with a high openness to experience were involved in more positive reappraisal than those with a lower level. These people were better able to "cognitively reframe stressful situations to advantage and to respond sensitively to close others during stressful times" (p.806). The findings regarding this study also show that those individuals with a high level of conscientiousness use less escape-avoidance and less self-blaming strategies in coping with stressful situations. People who fell into the conscientious category were high
users of problem-focused coping and low in their use of emotion-focused coping.

Layman and Guyden (1997) look at personality types in relation to burnout. This article speaks of the research that points to extroversion, intuition and thinking types of personalities as being associated with low burnout. Preferences in personality that lean towards introversion, sensation, and feeling are associated with higher levels of burnout. General coping mechanisms to avoid burnout are listed as acceptance, confidence, problem solving, self-directedness, self-disclosure and structuring.

In summary, there seems to be a growing trend in coping literature to look at the role personality plays in the choice of coping strategy. Personality traits are being linked to specific examples of how well they help or hinder the coping process.

Compassion fatigue/secondary traumatic stress

According to the work done by Dr. Marla Arvay in her dissertation Narratives of Secondary Traumatic Stress: Stories of Struggle and Hope, (1998) it is commonly understood that: "scholars in the field of trauma generally agree that a traumatic event is one in which the individual is flooded with intense stimulation that he or she cannot control" (p.76).

Figley (1985) describes trauma as an emotional state of discomfort and stress resulting from memories of an extraordinary, catastrophic experience which shattered the survivor's sense of invulnerability to harm (p. XVIII). Van der
Kolk, McFarlane, and Weisaeth (1996) point out that trauma attacks the individual's sense of self and the predictability of the world (p. 136).


The essential feature of posttraumatic stress disorder is the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor involving direct personal experience of an event that involves threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves threatened death, injury, or a threat to physical integrity of another person....(p 4).

Figley then looks at "compassion fatigue," or secondary traumatic stress (STS) as a natural result of feelings and behaviours which come out of knowing about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other and the stress that comes from helping or wanting to help that person. Figley prefers the term compassion fatigue as it is a friendlier term. He quotes Webster's dictionary defining compassion as "a deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by suffering or misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the pain or remove it" (1995, p. 15). Toxic handlers have been characterized as being experts in "nonjudgmental, compassionate listening" (Harvard Business Review, July/August, 1999 p. 99). As untrained, informal therapists, toxic handlers are in the position of taking on "the emotional pain" of their organization (1999, p. 101).

Charles Figley points out in the italicized portion of the PTSD definition below the definition of secondary traumatic stress outlining that that a person can be traumatized without being physically harmed or threatened with harm.
The person has experienced an event outside the range of usual human experience that would be markedly distressing to almost anyone: a serious threat to his or her life or physical integrity; serious threat to his children, spouse, or other close relatives or friends; sudden destruction of his home or community; or seeing another person seriously injured or killed in an accident or by physical violence (1995, p.XV).

Figley (1995) focuses on trauma workers and gives four main reasons why they may be overcome by compassion fatigue. Firstly, he talks about empathy being a key factor in the "induction" of traumatic material from the originator of the story to the secondary victim (p. 15). By empathizing with the traumatized person the listener can understand the person's experience, but at the same time they may be traumatized during the listening process. Secondly, Figley points out that most trauma workers have themselves experienced some form of trauma of their own. Therefore, the workers may be in danger of overgeneralizing their experience to that of their client, giving methods of coping to the victim which may not be relevant in their case. Thirdly, listening to the story of the traumatized person may trigger unresolved trauma in the case of the listener. Finally, listening to children's trauma can be "provocative" for therapists. Figley discusses how police officers, firefighters, emergency medical technicians, and other forms of emergency personnel state that they are "most vulnerable to compassion fatigue when dealing with the pain of children" (1995, p. 16).

As pointed out in M. Arvay's dissertation (1998) there is very little literature on the topic of secondary traumatic stress (p.86). One of the current theoretical models which looks at possible explanations for the development of secondary stress among trauma counsellors is that of Dutton and Rubinstein (1995). This
model furnishes a list of possible factors underlying the phenomenon of secondary traumatic stress. According to the authors, trauma worker’s coping strategies can fall under two headings, personal and professional. Examples of personal strategies would include: cultivating emotionally supportive friendships, having time set aside for leisure, taking time to attend to personal needs, and taking time out for personal exploration. Professional coping strategies would look at: peer supervision and consultation, working with others rather than in isolation, and diversifying in the worker’s practice. A second set of factors in explaining secondary stress reactions involves the individuality of the counsellor and environmental factors. Individual mediating factors might include: the inner strengths and resources of the person, including wide ranging professional experience, high self esteem, training, or education. A second individual factor would be personal or professional vulnerabilities such as emotional insecurity, inadequate training, inexperience, or loneliness. Environmental factors which mediate trauma worker’s STS include the amount of support received by the counsellor both personally and professionally. For example, strong familial and personal friendships, and a supportive professional network. Other stressors which may enter into susceptibility to STS include: divorce, death of a loved one, legal and financial difficulties, the lack of support in the workplace, and the social, economic, and political situation in which the trauma worker works and lives. Finally, Dutton and Rubinstein mention the impact of cultural and social factors in influencing how emotions are expressed in relation to ethnicity, age, gender, and culture.
Knowing the trauma worker’s social and cultural norms for acknowledging and expressing their emotion is vital to understanding their response to trauma work.

In a study by Schauben and Frazier (1995) counsellors working with victims of violence experienced change in their beliefs and emotional distress. Their major coping strategies were described as “active coping”. They worked actively to do something about the problem by: making a plan of action, doing something about the problem, seeking out emotional support, and seeking out specific social support. Coping strategies used the least were: denial, the use of alcohol and drugs, and disengagement from the counselling process.

In summary, a great deal of the studies related to coping seems to be quantitative in nature. There does not appear to be many studies focusing on the “direct voice” of the participants with the experiences and expertise in coping they have accumulated through their jobs. Researchers need to explore the insights and experiences of toxic handlers in order to obtain information to determine the best way to help them in their jobs. This is the purpose of the present study.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

There were three major factors involved in selecting a design for this study. First, I was interested in exploring what helps and hinders toxic handlers in the performance of their jobs. Second, I was interested in giving the participants the opportunity to express their opinions directly and clearly as to what helped and hindered them in their process. Finally, the reason for this investigation was to gain knowledge, which could be used in the fields of counselling and business to help other toxic handlers better deal with the challenges facing them.

Flanagan's (1954) Critical Incident Technique was decided upon as an appropriate approach as it allows the participants to focus on incidents that both helped and hindered them in the performance of their job. This technique also recognized the "expertise" which rests with the participants themselves. Their insights and opinions of what specific behaviours helped them as toxic handlers are a large part of the rationale for choosing the critical incident technique. It is the view of Gowan, Riordan, and Gatewood (1999), that this technique is valuable in identifying "additional resources affecting appraisal and choice of strategies" which would help researchers understand more of the process of
This chapter will focus on: an overview of the critical incident technique, a description of the participants, interview procedures, collection, and classification of data.

**Critical Incident Technique**

The Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954) was designed to collect direct observations of an individual's behaviour in order to develop various ways to solve practical problems and develop psychological principles. It is useful in generating qualitative data that may be new to a field. For the purposes of this study there is not a great deal of literature available on what helps toxic handlers' continue doing their job successfully day after day. This method was chosen to investigate what facilitates dealing with the challenges of being a toxic handler.

The method behind this technique looked at collecting direct experiences from participants that are deemed critical in their view. By "critical" Flanagan pointed out that the purpose or intent of the activity was very clear to an observer. Secondly, the consequences of the activity are definite enough to leave very little doubt about the effects it will have when completed. (Flanagan, 1954). In such a study, critical incidents are identified and grouped into similar thematic categories. These categories provide an extensive list of what helps and hinders a certain psychological condition under investigation.

John Flanagan first introduced the Critical Incident Technique in studies during the Second World War to develop procedures for the classification and selection of aircrews for the United States Army Air Forces (1954). Specifically, the study was trying to pinpoint why airmen were failing to learn to fly. A study
conducted in 1944 looking at the problem of combat leadership represented "the first large scale, systematic effort to gather specific incidents of effective or ineffective behaviour with respect to a designated activity" (1954, p. 328). With the end of the war, this technique was taken into industry where studies were done to help with: selection of personnel, identification of leadership and motivation attitudes, measurement of task efficiency, and identification of factors in effective counselling (Woolsey, 1986).

The Critical Incident Technique is made up of two components. The first consists of classifying the critical incidents. According to Flanagan, "...once a classification system has been developed for any given type of critical incidents, a fairly satisfactory degree of objectivity can be achieved in placing the incidents in the defined categories" (1954, p. 335).

"The second component refers to inferences regarding practical procedures for improving performances based on the observed incidents" (1954, p.335). It is the aim of this study to use the critical incidents described by toxic handlers as a catalyst in understanding what helps and hinders them in their jobs.

The Critical Incident Technique involves five main steps: (1) a general statement of objectives for the study, (2) development of a plan and specific instructions to the observers involved in the study, (3) collecting the data, (4) analyzing the data, and (5) interpreting and reporting the findings. (Flanagan, 1954).
The first step is that of determining general aims. "No planning and no evaluation of specific behaviours are possible without a general statement of objectives...In its simplest form, the functional description of an activity specifies precisely what it is necessary to do and not to do if participation in the activity is to be judged successful or effective" (1954, p.336). "Unless the general aim used is acceptable to the potential users of the detailed statement of requirements, the whole effort in formulating this statement will have been wasted" (1954, p. 337). It is therefore be the aim of this study to present general objectives to the participants so they are aware of the goals of the study and agree with them.

The second step involves the necessity of having precise instructions given to those who are observing the behaviour. "It is necessary that these instructions be as specific as possible with respect to the standards to be used in evaluation and classification" (1954, p. 338).

The third step is the collection of data. The importance of recording the data while it is still fresh in the mind of the observer is stressed as being of great importance. For the purpose of this study, observations will be made on subject’s stories, which are recounted from memory. "The Critical Incident Technique is frequently used to collect data on observations previously made which are reported from memory. This is usually satisfactory when the incidents reported are fairly recent and the observers were motivated to make detailed observations and evaluations at the time the incident occurred" (1954, p.340).
The fourth step involves the analysis of the data. "The purpose of the data analysis stage is to summarize and describe the data in an efficient manner so that it can be effectively used for many practical purposes" (1954, p.344). As pointed out earlier, the aim of the study is to use critical incident methodology to construct practical solutions to toxic handler's described challenges.

The final step is interpreting and reporting. A key point that is raised at this stage is simply, "In order to avoid faulty inferences and generalizations, the limitations imposed by the group must be brought into clear focus. Similarly, the nature of judgements made in collecting and analyzing the data must be carefully reviewed. While the limitations need to be clearly reported, the value of the results should also be emphasized" (1954, p.345). Using the Critical Incident Technique in an interview format will allow the key incidents, which have facilitated and hindered coping in toxic handlers to be explored. O'Driscoll and Cooper (as cited in Gowan, Riordan & Gatewood, 1999) have stated that:

Additional data about coping resources are important for the development of interventions, counseling, and other assistance programs. Incorporation of techniques like critical incident analysis to identify additional resources affecting appraisal and choice of strategies could aid in gaining a more complete understanding of the process of coping.

In this study, a critical incident is made up of three components: what led up to the event, what was the experience of it, and what was the outcome of the event for the toxic handler. Reliability and validity for this study will be reviewed in a number of ways. First the use of independent raters will be used to validate the study's categories. Anderson and Nilsson (1964) undertook a study in Sweden to
determine the job and training requirements of store managers. Independent raters were introduced by pairing up psychology students to sort critical incidents into categories. It was found from this exercise that the students had a strong tendency to put the incidents in the same category. Through the exercise it was found that the essential level of agreement is between 75% - 85% for the categories. McCormick (1994) and Alfonso (1997) have also undertaken similar work with placement of critical incidents with comparable results.

Secondly, participant’s cross checking of the categories formed will ensure the clarity of the categories. The soundness of the categories will also be ensured through a check of exhaustiveness, following the work of Alfonso (1997). Fourthly, to ensure that the categories are well founded the participation rate of each category will be calculated to find the percentage of participation. A final check to the validity and reliability of the categories will come through the work of checking previous literature for theoretical agreement.

Description of participants

Participants for this study were chosen based on specific inclusion criteria discussed below, and through the assistance of Dr. Peter Frost from the faculty of Commerce and Business Administration at the University of British Columbia. Dr. Frost has conducted previous research on toxic handlers and is in the process of locating managers for future studies. Those participants approached by Dr. Frost were given a letter of introduction regarding this study. If they were interested in being participants then they were instructed through the letter to
contact the researcher directly. In the first interview, the researcher described the purpose of the study, assisted in the review and signing of the informed consent form, and proceeded with the first interview. Potential participants were screened based on selected criteria for the study.

The selection criteria included:

(1) identification as a “toxic handler” through contact made by Dr. Frost
(2) self identification as a toxic handler
(3) employed with the same company at a managerial level, no change in status since contact by Dr. Frost
(4) ability to discuss incidents which have occurred in the last 6/12 months
(5) ability and willingness to provide informed consent
(6) ability and willingness to comply with study procedures (i.e. 2 interviews of up to ninety minutes within a 6 month period)

The exclusion criteria included changing jobs since being contacted by Dr. Frost.

**Interview procedures**

After introductions, the participants were presented with a consent form, which explained: the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, confidentiality and their ability to withdraw at any time. Any concerns or questions the participants might have about the study were answered at that time. The type of situations to be reported were discussed with the participants. According to Flanagan’s work with the Critical Incident Technique, the importance of having
the aim of the study very clear in the participants minds’ is paramount, ensuring that only relevant data will be collected.

The second part of the interview involved collecting critical incidents which related to the aim of the study. Questions were asked in a particular format to allow the participants to talk openly about what was personally meaningful in their experiences. As well, they were consistently asked what was helpful or hindering in their role as a toxic handler. Clarifying questions such as “How did you know it was helpful?” were asked throughout the interview until the participants could not think of any further new incidents. Once all the helpful responses were given, the participants were asked to look at what hindered them in dealing with the toxic handler role. Including the introduction, and signing of the consent form, the interview ended when the participants could not recall any new events or approximately ninety minutes. The participants were left with the understanding that they will be contacted for a second interview to clarify the researcher’s understanding of the helpful and hindering events, which had been explained in the first interview.

The second interview occurred within six months of the first interview. This second interview was completed by telephone or in person depending on the time constraints of the participants. This second interview was an opportunity for the researcher to check her understanding of the critical incidents and the related responses she had defined under various categories with the participants. The participant had the opportunity to verify, add or change their understanding of both the critical incidents and the responses to them at that time.
It is important to note that Flanagan's work (1954) speaks to the importance of the number of critical incidents coming from an interview, rather than the number of people being interviewed. Data was analyzed after every three interviews to look for emerging repetition in patterns to determine if new categories were necessary. When new categories stop appearing the researcher decided that adequate incidents had been collected.

The completeness of the categories were also verified using a second technique. A random grouping of 10% of the responses to the incidents were set-aside before sorting into categories. Once the other responses had been sorted and categorized, the remaining ten- percent were placed into the tentative categories. As no new categories had to be created, the categories are seen as being comprehensive.

**Analysis of the data**

The audiotapes were transcribed, with each critical incident being written down individually. Once this was completed the researcher went back to the transcripts and looked for outcomes which were related to the critical incidents. Next, the responses to these critical incidents were put into similar groups to form categories. Finally, the different categories were examined for validity.

**Extraction of the incidents**

All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and number coded. Critical incidents were typed out in the words of the participants. Each transcript was read over carefully before any critical incidents were taken out and written down.
individually. A review of the critical incidents was conducted utilizing the following criteria: (a) Was the participant's account stated in a clear fashion? (b) Were all components of the critical incident clear? i.e. What led up to the challenging situation or event, what was the experience of it, and what was the outcome?; (c) Was the outcome of the action taken related to the purpose of the study?

The critical incidents were reviewed according to three elements: the source, which looks at who was involved and the context of the event in which the action was taken; the action taken, which explains what unfolded in the situation; and the outcome, which describes the effect that followed the incident. In this case, what were analysed were the outcomes of the critical incidents. These critical incidents are seen as the source for the outcomes from the participants on what helped and hindered them to get through these incidents. It became clear that many of the participants needed to describe the precipitating event first, and the helping and hindering outcomes came out once the stories had unfolded. These outcomes were then put into categories.

Forming the categories

The aim of this study is to provide an extensive resource base of strategies for toxic handlers to help them in coping with their toxic situations. The outcomes based from the critical incidents were individually written down and reviewed after each three transcripts. Categories were formed with the first three transcripts and were added to through each transcript until no new categories were formed. The outcomes from the critical incidents which were the most straight forward were categorized first, and used as an example for the set up of
the other categories. Since this is an inductive process, it was expected that the formation of categories would evolve and change over time. Clarification of these categories came during the second interview when the researcher checked her understanding of both the 34 critical incidents found and the 87 outcomes to follow from the incidents.

**Validation procedures**

According to Maxwell (1996), there are three main understandings to be looked at in qualitative research: description, interpretation and theory. Threats to the validity of the study can occur in any of these three areas. Descriptive validity looks at how accurately a researcher described what they saw and heard. It is noted in Maxwell's work that audio or video tape recordings of interviews and observations and complete transcription of these tapes will go a long way in solving the issue of inaccurate descriptions. Therefore, the researcher in this study ensured that all interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The second interview was used to verify any unclear accounts or category placement with the participant.

Interpretation of the interviews is the second risk to validity. Maxwell pointed out the danger of the researcher imposing his or her own meaning or views on a participant's story. According to Maxwell (1996), one way of avoiding this validity threat is to undertake "member checks" with the study's subjects. This involved soliciting feedback from the participants about the data and conclusions drawn by the researcher on the material they have heard. Considering this study is focusing on the opinion and "voice" of the participants
using the Critical Incident Technique, it was crucial that the researcher work
towards obtaining a clear and accurate account of the participant's critical
incidents and the responses which came out of these incidents. This was done
through asking clarifying questions during the first and second interviews to
better understand the toxic handler's experiences. Finally, in Maxwell's view, a
researcher must look at the role of theoretical validity when collecting data from a
study. A threat to validity will occur if a researcher does not acknowledge
discrepancies in the data or ignores possible alternative explanations for a
situation. In this study, the researcher used the second interview as a time to
check in with the participants on her understanding of a situation or clarification
of an outcome. Secondly, two colleagues independently checked the sorting
procedure to ensure the accuracy of the categories formed. Finally, the
researcher checked with current research to see what has been documented to
date.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

The nine participants recognized as toxic handlers identified a total of 34 critical incidents. In order to answer the question asked in this study: What helps and hinders toxic handlers in the performance of their jobs, it was the total of 87 outcomes from the participants to the critical incidents which were examined and placed into 9 helping categories and 4 hindering categories. In this chapter, each category is first described, followed by at least one example of a critical incident, and examples of outcomes in this category. At the end of the initial interviews participants were asked what they felt it was about themselves that allowed them to continue with the job of toxic handling when others might stop. The second component of this question was to ask them what their family and friends would say are the personal characteristics which keep them going when others might stop the work involved in toxic handling. Although this is not part of the original thesis question, it does add valuable insight into the personal nature of toxic handlers. The results of this question will appear at the end of the helping and hindering categories.
Table 1: Category, Frequency, and Participation Rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Participation Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Personal Attitude</td>
<td>17 (20%)</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Satisfaction with Job Done</td>
<td>10 (12%)</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Activity</td>
<td>7 (8%)</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from Colleagues</td>
<td>7 (8%)</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside Support</td>
<td>6 (7%)</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxation Strategies</td>
<td>5 (6%)</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affecting Positive Change in Workers</td>
<td>6 (7%)</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in Company's Product/Service</td>
<td>4 (4.5%)</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision to Leave Organization</td>
<td>3 (3%)</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Company Support</td>
<td>7 (7%)</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long Term Negative Job Culture</td>
<td>6 (7%)</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>4 (4.5%)</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Emotions</td>
<td>5 (6%)</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of outcomes to critical incidents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>87 (100%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Part I: Description of Helpful Categories

In this section the 9 helpful categories are presented first, in order of highest participation rate. Included with each category is an example of a critical incident, which precipitated the outcomes. Various examples of the 87 outcomes follow immediately after the critical incident examples. With the completion of the helpful categories, the 4 hindering categories are introduced, starting with the category that has the highest participation rate. Participants ID numbers were randomly selected and assigned.

Category 1: Positive personal attitude: number of responses: 17 - 100% participation rate

Throughout the responses to the critical incidents described by all nine participants came the consistent theme of their own personal positive attitudes in getting through a difficult work situation in the position of a toxic handler. The outcome of this attitude is the ability to continue on with the task at hand without getting overwhelmed by the negative aspects of the job. From the responses described, aspects in this category included: not taking things personally, looking at the situation as a learning opportunity, exercising patience, acceptance of an unresolved situation, controlling emotions, and maintaining a sense of humour.

Critical incident example of category 1

Participant B-1 was visiting a customer only to find out that this customer hated their company so badly that they had named a voodoo doll after the company.
The customer proceeded to bring the doll out and smash it on the table. B-1 asked to photocopy the doll and fax it to head office so they would have a better understanding of how upset the customer was with the service they were receiving. When asked what the outcome was for them personally, B-1 stated:

_Outcome 1: Positive personal attitude participant B-1_

I don't know that I ever felt satisfied. I still feel awkward when I go to that account. ... I really don't think that that's completely resolved or that the outcome was completely positive. I think if anything I probably just left it and accepted that my awkwardness probably isn't going to go away about it. Yeah. So I think just a level of acceptance....

_Outcome 2: Positive personal attitude participant F-1_

I guess I look at everything as learning. That's how I try to do it, is that, I'm learning from this. Because from what happened at (company name) and where I worked earlier on before that, I realized that your career is what you make it, you cannot rely on external things for you to be better. You have to do it yourself. And if it didn't work out here, I'd make it a positive thing rather than a negative thing and I'll say,
okay well then I'll just go somewhere and try something now. So how I look at it is I just look at everything I do as learning and I don't take it for granted what I have.

Outcome 3: Positive personal attitude participant H-1.

It's the knowing you have to look after yourself. If you can't balance yourself, ultimately the stress will drive you out....The ability to give yourself little breaks, whether it is a walk down to the park...or going up to (street name) and having a half an hour cup of coffee...Or you know whether it's a run. It's just whatever you can do to diffuse some of the stress around the job. I think is key. And the higher up you go in the organization the worse it gets. So, if you can't balance that you become very one-dimensional or you wind up a total burnout. That's it....

I have a fairly good temper, if it's getting out of hand, I just pack up my coat and go for a walk. Because if I let it go, nobody wins. I've learned that one over time. If you let your temper go, you say things and you do
things that you cannot retract, and people may forgive
but they never forget.

Category 2: Personal satisfaction with job done: number of responses: 10 - 88%

participation rate

This category points to the importance of participants being tuned into
themselves and the need for personal gratification in the job done regardless of
the actions of others around them. Participants seem to have a strong need to
follow their personal beliefs and value systems to tell them they are doing a good
job regardless of what other company members are saying or directives given by
superiors in the company. G-1 states this category theme quite clearly in their
quote, "My loyalty is to getting the job done well, I think that is my driving force."

Critical incident example of category 3

B-1 was working as a lab technologist overseeing one division of a hospital lab. A
casual female employee accused a full time male employee of sexual
harassment. The male employee was suspended on a Monday, and on the
Thursday of the same week the union steward was instructed by the human
resources manager to visit the employee at his home encouraging him to
confess, then the company could get him into counselling and save his job. The
next day, the employee’s wife, who also worked in the lab could not get a hold of
her husband to pick her up at the end of the day. He was found the next day in
some woods, dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. The widow took six weeks
off, then came back to work. The workplace became polarized as to which side they believed. There was a lab manager whose job it was to deal with this incident, but he chose to ignore the fall out from this death. Seeing that little was being done to change staff morale B-1 decided to "watch out" for the widow's mental well being.

Outcome 1: Personal satisfaction with job done participant B-1

So I sort of tried to put her into a bit of a protective situation. So I'd send her off to lunch with someone else and encourage them to go somewhere else instead of eating at the hospital, or she still didn't drive, so I was arranging rides and stuff with friendly faces to take her home and everything. So, I think I did the best I could.... I think that was the main thing I could get satisfaction out of is to actually feel like I was doing something that was right for her, because God knows nobody else in that workplace was!

Outcome 2: Personal satisfaction with job done participant D-1

So I guess I did have a certain amount of pride that one of the support staff would come to me and that after the fact she would say that she had found it helpful to her, because I also knew that she would tell
the other support staff. And you know that made me feel good because I think to a certain extent our department ... most of the managers, most of the executives, most of the senior officers were men. And I guess... a little bit of a crusade to see what was possible in terms of women in the department to not only at the officer level, but also at the support staff level, just for them to know that there was somebody in a senior position who would listen to their concerns, and take action to protect them, or help them stand up for themselves.

**Outcome 3: Personal satisfaction with job done: participant C-1.**

Mmm, it was empowering for me to be able to — you know, because I was so struggling with the trying to be somebody’s friend and trying to be their employer at the same time. And it was very empowering for me... in a way knowing that, you know, when push came to shove, or when I had to do my job,... and that’s what it was for me at the time , you know through this process I could do it.
Category 3: Physical activity: number of responses: 7 - 77% participation rate

Seven out of nine participants spoke of the importance of physical exercise in maintaining their ability to continue with their jobs on a regular basis. Exercise came in the form of running, skiing, lifting weights, softball, golf, and joining a gym. The outcome of exercise is it helped the participants to feel less tired and relieved excess anxiety from various work situations.

Critical incident example of category 3

Participant E-1 spoke about the long hours put in at their job starting at 6:30 in the morning and leaving around 7:30 in the evening. During our initial interview it was pointed out that they were not in the office to meet me because they were out walking. E-1 pointed to the in tray on their desk and commented how stressful it can be trying to clear incoming business from this tray. E-1 commented, "I don't feel thrashed if I do some physical activity. I just walked along the dyke there for 20 minutes, it's no big deal, fairly briskly if I can." E-1 also commented on the importance of exercise in helping to have shorter, but more productive workdays.

Outcome 1: Physical activity: participant E-1

So, physical activity, trying to reduce the hours because you in fact get more done if you can keep your hours to below ten a day, than if you do a whole
pile of 14 hour days. Because once it gets over 10
hours, you’re not that productive even though you are
still there and you’re awake and everything.


Oh, OK, right. I run, I jog – exercise. ...The running -
physical exercise of some kind -running or weight
lifting or something like that is very useful.

Outcome 3: Physical exercise: participant C-1.

Started playing softball last year, and I pretty much
work 6 days a week. So, my Sunday is a day when I
try to see the nephews and niece and I play softball
and it was amazing what that did for me in terms of -
my job wasn’t any less important to me, but in terms
of my life and the balance, it definitely felt like my life
was, my personal life was more important. And
maybe because I am not playing softball right now
that everything is starting to become overwhelming.
Category 4: Support from colleagues: number of responses: 7 - 66

% participation rate

This category points to the importance of toxic handlers knowing that they are not alone but have the support of others around them as they deal with trying situations.

Critical incident example of category 4

Participant I-1 was discussing how in the last two years their company had been involved in two attempted mergers. The company has also attempted to align with their American counterparts. The consulting practice in their company has been merged with another division and I-1’s department in the company was eliminated, with severance packages given out to I-1’s colleagues and relocation to a new division given to I-1. At this point the company is also contemplating moving the entire company to a new location. According to I-1, one of the major ways they have gotten through the constant changes in the company is to look to others in the company for support.

Outcome 1: Support from colleagues: participant I-1

And there’s so much angst and bad morale with the staff and that, which we all lean on each other. I mean there is probably I don’t know how many toxic handlers in this place. I think everybody at some point in time in our department has played the role. I know it.
Outcome 2: Support from colleagues: participant H-1.

...Talk with some key people who are advocates, which are working on the project as well. So, I think you bounce some issues off. Trust in people. But also people who you know have a very objective perspective, will look at it from all sides. It can help you tune it. There are times when you get so buried in what you are doing that it's easy to go off side. So, to do a reality check and say okay, this is where I am at, this is what the issue is. This is the path I have chosen to take; I want to test this path with you. So, the ability to have two or three people that you can do that with, to do a reality check.

Outcome 3: Support from Colleagues: participant D-1

I think for example talking to the colleague, I think by the end of the venting we'd end up with joking. So just kind of the laughter releases the tension. Somebody acknowledging that it's a bad situation or that kind of behaviour is not appropriate. Just somebody simply acknowledging that yeah, what I was being faced with was difficult....So with peers, just the
acknowledgement, the moving to laughter, joking about it.

Category 5: Outside support: number of responses 6: -55% participation rate

This category looks at the positive influence of those individuals and things outside of the company which help the toxic handler regain their perspective or give them a release from the pressures they are feeling in the work environment. The difference between category four and five rests with the acknowledgement that the supporters of category five can fall into various subcategories of: (a) spouses (b) children (c) siblings (d) psychologists and e) medication.

Critical incident example of category 5
D-1 held a position in which they had to act as the middle person between a "task oriented, fast moving, impatient, dynamic, results-oriented" government official and client service delivery staff. D-1 found was caught between some staff who did not want to buy into the directives and others who were very enthusiastic. The frustration continued to increase and D-1 turned to the help of a psychologist to help D-1 regain perspective on the situation. During their interview it was asked what was helpful to get them through the situation, D-1 replied:
Outcome 1: Outside support: participant D-1.

I guess seeing the psychologist. Yes! Actually, to go back, I kind of joked about that, but in a lot of ways that was extremely helpful, because she could say to me, "hey, those two people, there is something really wrong, that's not a healthy situation." And eventually I got to understand what she was saying in terms of "no I can't coach them, no I can't do a performance management with them." So that was helpful.

Outcome 2: Outside support: participant H-1.

So the ability to have two or three people that you can do that with, to do a reality check. And then to back away for a short period of time. For me, personally, that's going home and burying myself in my girls. I've got two girls who have very active sports and school and all that kind of jazz. So I go home and I do paper routes, and I go to baseball and I do math and I do stuff. And I run. So, it's pulling yourself out of it and getting into a real life. And balancing those two things. If I didn't have the other half of my life - I have
workaholic tendencies - I’d be buried in this stuff and I’d never see the light of day. So, I think that balance, to have balance in your personal life is very helpful in trying to balance the frustrations and some of the issues at work.

Category 6: Relaxation strategies: number of responses 5: 55% participation rate

In this category participants highlighted the importance of personal ways to reduce the tension they were feeling due to job related challenges. Subcategories included: (a) breathing exercises/meditation (b) giving up caffeine (c) learning classic relaxation technique (d) socializing. (e) riding a motorcycle

Critical incident example of category 6

G-1 has been dealing with a great deal of change in their company. One of the challenges currently facing them is dealing with a brilliant but stubborn manager who does his job very well, but does not want to cooperate with other managers. G-1 has been direct and open with him about his strengths and weaknesses but the manager feels he is too old to change his spots and would rather continue on with his isolationist style and retire rather than making the effort to change. G-1 considers this a situation which has not been resolved yet, but their personal challenge to find a solution without alienating either this manager or any of the other managers.
Well, that conflict gives me more than a little bit of grief. And stress is part of the 1990’s and 2000’s. I’ve read a lot about stress, and one of the reasons for giving up caffeine was I read books on stress and you give up caffeine as one of the fundamentals…. I do meditate in the morning. I’ve practiced transcendental meditation for almost 30 years. I took it in 1972, that’s when I finished my engineering degree in (Canadian city) and I’ve been- you’re suppose to meditate twice a day, I can never find time in the afternoons. So, I get up and I have a shower and I meditate for 20 minutes in the morning.

Category 7: Affecting positive change in workers: number of responses: 6–55% participation rate

In this category participants acknowledged the importance of feeling like they affected some positive change on the attitudes or behaviour of a colleague. Subcategories included: (a) gratification in seeing a colleague change positively from a negative situation (b) receiving direct positive feedback from a changed colleague (c) gratification from altering a negative situation into a positive outcome (d) receiving gratitude from positive feedback from a colleague. A-1 sums up the personal gratification felt through the comment, “the kicks I get out
of being a toxic handler if you want to call it that are from influencing people sort
of to a better place. But I have to see them move for me to feel like I have
contributed something."

Critical incident example of category 7
C-1, in the position of an executive director has been dealing with staff morale
problems and found it difficult to keep balance and contentment within the staff.
Recently they have hired a new executive assistant who is new to the business
and is learning everyday. C-1 is overseeing their training and stated in the
interview:

Outcome 1: Affecting positive change in workers: participant C-1.

I think when I’m able to share my kind of personal
triumphs with the staff and help them kind of
overcome challenges and barriers that they put in
front of them, whether it’s learning a computer
program, whether it’s dealing with stress that’s what
needs to happen…. To see her make a step forward
or some progress, to me that’s the biggest fulfilling
thing. So for me, it’s how people are affected
personally and how they …the happiness that they
experience when they complete something.
Category 8: Belief in company’s product /service: number of responses: 4 - 44% participation rate

With some of the participants it appeared that the belief in the product or service offered would carry them through a difficult situation even when the company itself was not being supportive. Subcategories of this category included: (a) writing letters to key management expressing pride in workers (b) knowledge that the leader was correct right 85% of the time, therefore being more accepting of mistakes (c) belief in company’s process. These subcategories are exemplified in H-1’s comments of their company. “So I think you have to have a real belief in what you are doing. A confidence that you’ve got a good process, a good product, a good service that is going to provide value.”

Critical incident example of category 8

F-1 was overseeing the closure of the Canadian branch of an American Company. One of the final acts of the closure was a giant inventory of all the parts that remained which were to be shipped to the States. The American counterparts were concerned with possible sabotage and vandalism taking part in the Canadian plant. F-1 and the rest of the management team drew the remaining staff together and asked them to make this the best inventory they possibly could to show the American Company the level of professionalism, which existed, even in the last hours of the Canadian Company.
Outcome 1: Belief in company's product/service:

participant F-1

So they did this inventory and it was accurate.... So I wrote a letter, and this was another thing I just wanted people to know. I wrote a letter to the management in Canada who were left and copied all the management down in the U.S., thanking the employees for this last inventory, and it was kind of corny, with all the dignity and everything else that you guys were doing, that you did a good job. And even in the face of adversity and everything else like that. And that made me feel good because I wanted everybody to know that these employees, even though they were losing their job, and it's a credit to the management group that was up here, that these people had such high values, I guess is the word.

Category 9 - Decision to leave the organization: number of responses: 3–33% participation rate

Participants in this category stated that there was a time when each of them realized that the most helpful solution to their job-related challenges was to accept that it was time to leave the company for their own personal well being.
Critical incident example of category 9

D-1 had been working in the area of Client Services for four years. The strain of being the middle person between a senior government official and the other staff was very draining. At times D-1 was accused of favouring some staff members over others and was subjected to quite aggressive criticism. When asked what was helpful for them to deal with the situation they stated:

Outcome 1: Decision to leave organization: participant D-1.

I think one of the problems we have as managers or executive is we become too imbued with the sense of 'we ought to be able to solve things'. And in some cases you can't. But I think that is a difficult thing to recognize that you're not able to solve everything, to recognize either they're particular individuals or particular situations that in and of themselves, no matter how many techniques you try out, you can't do it.... In hindsight now after quite a bit of time, there are times when I should probably get out of the situation. Where it's a situation that my set of skills is not, or no longer is the best set of skills for that situation and that the situation is not good for me. Need to get out, move on.
Part II: Description of Hindering Categories

Category 1: Lack of company support; number of responses: 7 - 77% participation rate

In this category participants pointed to the frustration which comes out of not receiving support from colleagues, supervisors, and parent companies. They note this has a detrimental effect on themselves as well as the general atmosphere in the company. Aspects of this category would include: (a) lack of leadership in senior positions (b) lack of company direction (c) competition between head company/division branch (d) low levels of trust in company

Critical incident example of category 1

G-1 commented on the difficulty their company is having with staff morale because of sudden changes in the direction of the company and quite regular turn over in senior management. As a manager, it makes their job more difficult to try and explain the company rationale when it appears to be shifting a great deal of the time. In the view of the staff according to G-1 the general quote is:

Outcome 1: Lack of company support: participant G-1.

well, here we go again, flavour of the week, flavour of the month, is often heard in terms of it's a new thing and it's the flavour of the month, and in two months from now we'll be doing something different. That
limits, or that inhibits people from putting their effort behind an initiative because they are saying, 'well in two months it's going to be different anyway, so why should I give my heart and soul to this when I'll just wait for two months and we'll do something else'?.... So the constant change hinders our ability to - not always –but hinders our ability to get employees enthusiastic about significant changes.... There isn't continuity in management. And when those Presidents come out here, they get challenged by the staff, saying, and "well, like who are you we've seen three Presidents in the last year and a half, and like how long are you going to last? We don't give you six months. OK those words are actually spoken at staff meetings when these Presidents are chosen.... The constant changing and change in senior management, it's unsettling to the staff, because senior management puts a certain - stamps a certain style on the organization, a certain –modifies the culture somewhat.
Outcome 2: Lack of company support: participant H-1

Lack of executive leadership.... the role of senior executive is to look at the business issues, to look at the facts on the table, and when I can’t come to a conclusion or someone can’t come to grips with what’s there because of the barriers put in their place, remove the barriers. Most senior executives are really loathe to do that. Just because they’re senior executives doesn’t mean that I have found that they have good leadership skills, good decision making skills, or have the ability to make tough decisions.

Outcome 3: Lack of company support: participant E-1

So there’s a fair amount of politics you could say between our corporate master and here. On a day to day basis as far as what we develop, how we sell it, the sales channels, and how it’s marketed - all this sort of thing. And we’re constantly badgered by them for either doing our own thing and not being a part of the team or actually trying to compete with them. So what - and I see this as part of what I should be doing
anyway...I try to buffer the whole of this company from all of the people here, that's like (number) people here, buffer them from interference or politics from (European Country).

Category 2: Long term negative job culture: number of responses: 6-55% participation

This category implies that some of the participants have been involved with a company that seems to have a long term negative work environment. Participants commented in various ways on a similar theme of feeling worn down over time by a negative company culture.

Critical incident example of category 2
B-1 spoke of handling a suicide in the lab where B-1 was the manager. The negativity and controversy surrounding that event caused B-1 to comment:

Outcome 1: Long term negative job culture: participant B-1.

That was my mind set - I thought well I can stay and I can last another two years of coming to work and having to send people home because they are crying and me lose more weight and sleep, or I can decide to go back to (Canadian province) .... So I decided to
put some effort into that and leave, because it had been going on too long. I think any toxic handler I think maybe can deal with one situation at a time, for up to a few months at a time, but I think for two years it's too long. And I don't know if my staying there would've made any difference.

Outcome 2: Long term negative job culture – participant I-1

And that was the attitude that (Canadian City) - where the big powers were. ‘What are all you guys complaining about? We fired her. Move on with it. She's gone. Your problem is gone.’ But you know it was funny because I talked to P. about it last summer, and he used the analogy like you put a frog into water and turn up the temperature, right? And it was so true. So I have real conflicting emotions about the whole thing. So that was in May and we have this group intervention, and the psychologist actually wrote a letter on our behalf, we all saw it and approved it and stuff like that. It got sent to the chair and our director of HR back in (Canadian City), and to this day we
have never heard from them about this. And I mean it was pretty damning in that the firm had opened itself up to being perhaps liable to a harassment case.

This is a huge firm and you can't sort of change the culture overnight. And just this whole incident about there was a group of - I don't know how many of us, 15 or so employees that - when they had that group EAP session, every single person at that table was in tears. Oh yeah, and like some of the things that people endured, like the abuse, like I said I was amazed. And then I felt guilty that I'd had this relationship with this partner and I thought - to my assistant 'did we miss the boat here or something?' And she's like oh it was... it's just very bizarre that so many people can have such different perspectives.

But anyway, but then the way the firm has handled it. I just find that really disappointing. It's like they don't care. So I guess a part of me goes, well if I go to them and say, 'you know I need to retrench and regroup and figure out whether or not this is going to work for me and if so what am I going to do.' There's no confidence they are going to understand.
Category 3: Geography: number of responses: 4 – 44% participation rate

Participants spoke of the difficulties around dealing with different time zones and the role distance plays in the lack of understanding of company problems. B-1 commented on this hindrance when dealing with the company that used a voodoo doll to represent B-1’s company.

**Outcome 1: Geography: participant B-1.**

Geography was still a big block. There’s no way that someone in (Canadian City) understands what that meeting is like even though you fax the voodoo doll to them. They really didn’t understand how difficult it was.

**Outcome 2: Geography E-1**

We’re owned by a (European country) company. And we’re a long way from there. We’re 9 hours time difference, 10 hours right now, but 9 hours generally. Which means that that’s more than the working day, which means that when we start work, our owners have just finished. So, direct, verbal communication occurs either while I am having breakfast at home or
after they've gone home after work. Because we're not actually at work at the same time. So, that's one thing that prevents useful communication between (European country) and here. The other thing is the culture is quite different between the two countries. And the (European nationality) that we deal with have a, "if it's not invented here, it's no good" type attitude...

Category 4: Negative emotions: number or responses: 5 - 44%

participation rate

Participants spoke of the draining effects their own emotions played in hindering them in their job performances.

Critical incident example category 4

B-1 spoke of the hindrances they faced when dealing with their own emotions in relation to staff after the suicide of one employee, and dealing with the female casual employee who had made the accusations of sexual harassment.

Outcome 1: Negative emotions: participant B-1

My own tendencies to behave unprofessionally. My biggest urge was just to let her have it, really. Or to let
other people have it. So that was my biggest block was to control myself and the lack of support from a good manager in the lab, the lack of an HR person who even knew what the heck they were doing or even wanted to address it... And other people’s insensitivity was really hard to deal with.

Outcome 2: Negative emotions I-1

But in the last couple of weeks it’s like I have hit this breaking point where I feel that all of the stuff that has kind of got me where I am today, it hasn’t been dealt with - sort of for me, on a stress level... I just find right now it’s very draining on me emotionally. You’ve always got to be up for interviewing people, and it’s really intense listening to them. And they pay me good money, like you can’t screw up. And you’ve got that coming at you. At the same time we’re trying to rebuild a practice under a different umbrella and the competition out there knows everything that’s going on and they’re saying ‘oh company name is out of the -------- practice’, so we’ve got to be out networking even more. But at the same time you’ve got the
utilization and billing rates that you have to try to do.

Then, I've got three kids that are seven, nine and eleven. So, I have a whole different life when I get home. So, you know it is too much right now. I'm really at the point where I don't know – I'm not enjoying it. It's not – I don't know if it's what I want to do but I don't even have time to think about it rationally, other than an hour here and an hour there. It's not enough....Yeah, I think it's just so many things that have happened that haven't got dealt with that are all just building up. It's almost like the ground you walk on has been sort of eaten away and you're standing on this one little piece.

Part III: Personal Characteristics Which Help Toxic Handlers Continue their Work

At the completion of each interview participants were asked the same question: "What is it about you personally that helps you to continue on with this job when others cannot? What would your friends and family say are your personal characteristics that you can do this job when others cannot?" The results of this question are discussed below in the order the interviews were completed.
EXAMPLE 1

Participant A-1

I think I like listening. Listening, for example and coaching.... are things that I have done a lot of and enjoy doing and have begun to see that I’m better at that then some of my peers.... for whatever reason I’m pretty patient in helping people sort through whatever it is.... I help people by being aware of the whole situation as opposed to some folks it’s hard to see it any other way than the way you’re experiencing it.

EXAMPLE 2

Participant B-1

I do look out for the underdog a lot, so I think just part of my own values is not to overlook people like that.... Even in my current job I’ve hired some people that were kind of in rough times and really needed the job and that kind of thing, and brought them along. I’m not overly approving – seeking approval from bosses and supervisors. I try to go more by an internal feeling about how my own values are going rather than trying to please them.... I can keep things confidential. That’s one of the things when people talk to me they
don't, they aren't afraid that I am going to go and blab it to the next person.... I have a sense of fairness; I can look at both sides and try to be fair about things.

EXAMPLE 3

Participant C-1

...I'm passionate about my work and that I'm committed to learning...so I think in terms of doing research and always trying to strive to find a better way to deal with something.... I think the fact that I'm sensitive and compassionate.... try to put things in perspective, talk about our problems, challenges, triumphs, and celebrate those, and how we deal with those.... I probably carry as a manager the self-confidence – that I believe in myself as a manager that's pretty strong.

EXAMPLE 4

Participant D-1

...I tend to be a big picture, concept long-term thinker, I've always got that kind of perspective. I'm quite analytical and pick up on what's happening with people in an organization, but I don't get emotionally ties to them, so I'm seeing the big picture in terms of where we want to go.... I stay fairly calm. Put on a
professional mask...I mean I’ve been in enough situations through my life that I can at least put on the appearance of staying calm in a situation and I move myself into an observer or an outsider role and don’t get too much caught up in that individual’s own emotions. I think most of them would know that they could come and talk to me and the confidence, keeping it confidential wasn’t so important for them as knowing that I would take action with an issue.... I would say for ...it sounds a little pretentious but probably people see me as caring not just about my own specific job or seeing it just as work, but caring about what happens to the people in the organization, or being concerned about people’s development...

EXAMPLE 5

Participant E-1

...I think I can judge which people I can joke around with and which people I can’t. Because I have to joke around because that’s part of what I am. ....I think I am seen as having a diplomatic way about me and I think I’m seen as a person that can listen. And at the end of it all, I may not have ...in fact mostly have not said anything, have not given any real, hard advice on
anything —really, particularly. But I also haven’t judged people from what they’ve said, I’ve tried to have an open mind, I believe …I feel that I’m hard to shock. And therefore, and I think people understand that so they can tell me all kinds of things and I don’t freak out or anything. And I think they feel that what they talk to me about is kept confidential so therefore they feel relatively safe in coming to me…. I think people would say here that I am patient and a good listener. I don’t make a snap decision on anything unless it needs to be a snap decision. And I like to gather all the information I can…My only skill, really, I think is getting a group together that is reasonably happy to work together —we get things done.

EXAMPLE 6

Participant F-1

I didn’t personalize it. I didn’t take it personally. Like, you’re being paid to do this. I’m always multi-tasking when I’m doing anything anyway. I’m thinking here, I’m thinking there….. I’m thinking of the big picture. …I don’t tend to look at the micro; I tend to look at the big picture…. I’m not afraid to speak my mind …The biggest thing is not to have people threatened by what
you are saying.... I believe that you have to look at change as a learning process and not try to fight it.... one of the things that I have to say is you have to listen more, listen to other people's... - Another thing that probably affected everything we, me, is my father had a heart attack at 57 from working – like working to work, and work and work and work and work and he ended up on long term disability. That's always been in my mind, that 'it ain't worth it if you're not having fun with it – a little bit'.

EXAMPLE 7

Participant G-1

I'm calm under fire.... And I'm diligent and tenacious about working my way through issues. So, I may not be happy about what's going on, but I'll get to the other end. I'll try various routes to get there.... OK, I'll bounce off a couple of failures but I'm not giving up. I will get there eventually, or I will somehow find a solution to this problem. And I'll be tenacious about doing that. If one thing doesn't work I'll try something else.... They've questioned my sanity about staying with the company so long. Insanity probably helps.
Sense of humour, a very dry sense of humour, but a sense of humour.

EXAMPLE 8

Participant H-1

I love a challenge. I love to learn. I have the ability to juggle multiple balls, so when you work across a group of companies and deal in a broad base of information technology and telecom, you have multiple balls in the air all the time. So, the ability to deal with a wide variety of things at the same time. I like people. If you didn’t like people, you cannot work in this job. I think the ability to work with concepts as opposed to concrete things; I deal in strategy, in vision, in goals, in concepts. I very rarely deliver a product, something physical that you can touch and feel. Stubbornness, perseverance, the ability to back track and kind of regroup, and continue to move forward. I hate to lose, it really bugs me. So, for me, it’s persistence. The desire to build on something. Team. You can’t be a solo artist here. Or you wouldn’t be able to function in the job. It very much has … we cannot deliver this product by ourselves. It’s very much being able to work with a group of people to
deliver. Strong communication skills. The ability to work at all levels of the company, whether you are talking to a CEO or you’re talking to somebody who is support, or technical... I think strong leadership skills and the ability to make decisions.... Don’t take yourself too seriously. You can’t... a good sense of humour.

EXAMPLE 9

Participant I-1

I’m an overachiever that’s for sure.... I’ve been through some pretty stressful situations in my time and gotten through it. And I kind of take that now – I go, “oh God B., you’ve been through worse than this....
Part IV: Validation Procedures

Independent rater

Using the same process as Andersson and Nilsson (1964), two independent raters participated in separate one-on-one training session (20 min. long) with the researcher. Both have Master's degrees in counselling psychology and are currently pursuing their PhD's in counselling psychology at the University of British Columbia. Definitions of the nine helping and four hindering categories were printed up on individual index cards. The researcher reviewed a description of the categories with the independent raters who were encouraged to ask for clarification when necessary. Two random examples of responses were given to improve the rater's understanding of the categories, and an explanation was given of the relationship of the 34 critical incidents to the 87 outcomes which followed from them. The independent raters were then asked to place 27 randomly selected outcomes for the helping categories and 8 outcomes for the hindering categories. The responses were chosen at random, so there would be no bias in the raters expecting a set number of outcomes for each category. (All categories were covered at least once.) These outcomes were printed on individual cue cards to be placed under the appropriate category. The independent raters had no communication with the researcher while the
validation took place. The independent raters took 25 and 30 minutes each, sorting the 35 cards into the appropriate categories. A 91% consensus was reached with the first independent rater, (32/35), while an 86% agreement was reached with the second rater (30/35). The researcher conducted an interview with both independent raters to determine if there were reasons to warrant changes in the categories. An examination of the three outcomes placed incorrectly by the first rater revealed that they had focused in on a key word without focusing on the entire response. This inconsistency can be attributed to haste and therefore does not warrant changes in the category scheme. The second independent rater mentioned it would have been helpful to have a longer outcome response, as it would have allowed for greater contextual understanding in the five responses missed. However, this second rater stated they understood the categories clearly and had focused on some key word or phrase in the outcome instead of the entire response, which lead to misinterpretation of the outcomes. The high percentage agreement obtained by the independent raters means interested parties can use the categories to place outcomes in a consistent or reliable way.

**Participants cross-checking**

As mentioned in the first chapter there have not been many studies done where the voices of the participants are heard directly through interviews. Alfonso (1997) points to the importance of "treating participants as experts in their history and individual perspective of the world." Therefore, participants were asked to
check the categories for verification. This cross checking took place during the second interview. The participants and researcher reviewed the critical incidents, the outcomes and the categories that each participant’s outcomes had been placed under. Unclear outcomes were discussed and reviewed for clarity. Since the purpose of the study was to focus on the direct observations of the participants, the researcher followed the participant’s views in terms of clarification of categories. It was in during the second interview that the 10 tentative helping categories were transformed into 9 categories. As shown in the following table, three categories were maintained: (Support from Colleagues; Outside Support; Relaxation Strategies). Five categories were renamed (i.e., Personal Satisfaction became Personal Satisfaction with Job Done; Personal Attributes became Positive Personal Attitude; Recreation became Physical Activity to keep a clearer separation between this category and Relaxation Strategies. Belief in Company became belief in Company’s Product/Service; and Affecting Positive change became Affecting Positive Change in Worker.) The tenth tentative category, Nothing is Helpful was absorbed under the ninth and final category, Decision to Leave the Organization. Three out of the four hindering categories were agreed on by the participants and stayed as they were originally named: Lack of Company Support; Geography; and Negative Emotions. The final category, Negative Job Culture was changed to Long Term Negative Job Culture.
Exhaustiveness

Referring to Andersson and Nilsson (1964) an important way to determine the soundness of a category is to find out whether or not the category scheme is adequately complete or comprehensive. Following Alfonso (1997), approximately ten percent of the outcomes from the critical incidents were left unexamined until all the categories were formed (i.e. 9 responses from participant H-1). At that time these outcomes were looked at and classified. It was expected that if the outcomes could be placed within the existing categories the category system would be considered comprehensive. There had been the understanding that new categories might have to be formed, but this was not the case as the nine outcomes fit within the already formed categories.
Table 1: A comparison between the categories corresponding to the first and second interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Interview</th>
<th>Second Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Attributes</td>
<td>Positive Personal Attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation</td>
<td>Physical Activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Satisfaction</td>
<td>Personal Satisfaction with Job Done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from Colleagues</td>
<td>Support from Colleagues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside Support</td>
<td>Outside Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxation Strategies</td>
<td>Relaxation Strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in Company</td>
<td>Belief in Company's Product/Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affecting Change in Workers</td>
<td>Affecting Positive Change in Workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing is Helpful</td>
<td>Decision to Leave Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving Organization</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of Company Support</td>
<td>Lack of Company Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Job Culture</td>
<td>Long Term Negative Job Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>Geography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Emotions</td>
<td>Negative Emotions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participation rate

Another way of determining if a category is well founded is to add up the number of participants who took part in each category and calculate a percentage of participation. According to Flanagan (1954), the higher the participation rates, the more valid the category. As pointed out by McCormick (1994), if only one person or a few reported an event, it might be dismissed. A person might have exaggerated an event, response or situation. McCormick points to agreement among independent observers as an important test of soundness. The participation rates for the helping categories range from a low of 33% (Decision to Leave Company) to a high of 100% (Positive Personal Attitude). Other helping categories with a participation rate of 50% or higher include: Personal Satisfaction with Job Done; Physical Exercise; Support from Colleagues; Outside Support; Relaxation Strategies; Affecting Positive Change in Worker. Under hindering categories the highest participation rate was under Lack of Company Support (77%), with the lowest participation rate falling equally at 44% with Geography and Negative Emotions.

Theoretical agreement

Another method used to check the soundness of the categories is agreement found with previous research. According to McCormick (1994), if a category disagreed with previous research, there would be legitimate reason to question its validity. However, it would not be automatically dismissed, rather it
would be more questionable because it goes against prior findings in other studies. Conversely, if a category agreed with prior research, there would be more confidence that it is sound. If a category were found to be unique, or new, neither confirmed or discounted by previous research, it would stand out as a possibility to be reviewed by further research for legitimacy. To assess agreement, the 13 categories formed were compared with previous research. In this analysis 12 of the 13 categories agreed with previous research. The exception being "Affecting Positive Change in Workers." Since participants and the expert raters agreed upon this category, the researcher decided to retain it, with the hope that it will be confirmed or discounted by future research. These findings increase the confidence that the categories are sound. Reference to relevant research for the twelve supported categories are as follows:

Positive Personal Attitude. Lazarus (1991) mentioned positive thinking can be found to be a relatively stable coping strategy across encounters. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) point to the importance of positive thinking items such as looking for the silver lining, and looking on the brighter side of things in their discussion of emotion based coping. Begley, (1998) spoke of using positive reinterpretation in the form of a two point scale to measure cognitive change-the stressor-coping dimensions in employees going through an organizational consolidation. The two item scale included: 'I look for something good in what has happened' and 'I try to see it in a different light, to make it seem more positive.' Therefore, this category was confirmed by previous research.
Personal Satisfaction with Job Done. Sclafane (1999) reported on an American national survey of the manufacturing and industrial environments, which pointed to the discrepancy between managers and employees ranking of what makes for employee job satisfaction. The factors reviewed included: good wages; the opportunity for promotion and growth; feeling in on things; sympathetic help on personal problems; full appreciation of work well done; interesting work; job security; working conditions; and tactful discipline. Participants in this study commented on the need to feel included in the process of the company, as well as their personal appreciation of a job well done, and the importance of an interesting and challenging job. Shoemaker (1999) comments on worker's job satisfaction coming out of a manager's ability to allow people to innovate and risk failure. The salespeople in this study sought challenges in the job when they knew risk taking was rewarded.

Physical Activity. The use of physical exercise to get one's mind off of a problem is noted in Lazarus and Folkman (1984) under behavioural strategies of coping. Buhler (1999) points to the importance of exercise in reducing pressure, with a regimented exercise plan being one option and a simple walk another. This statement is in accordance with remarks made by participants on the use of exercise to help off set busy workdays.

Support from Colleagues. Talking over a problem with colleagues fell under active problem solving coping strategies in Long's (1990) paper comparing male and female managers. Participants commented on the value inherent in
being able to discuss a problem with a colleague to gather perspective on the
issue.

**Outside Support.** Lazarus and Folkman (1984) discuss the sustenance
and support gained from social relationships. These authors point to the buffer
zone that support offers by making threatening experiences seem not as
important or serious, while also providing resources for coping when stress does
happen. In a paper by Gowan et al. (1999) a study was undertaken to look at a
model of coping following involuntary job loss due to a company closing. The
results of that study pointed to social support being positively related to
involvement in non-work activities, a form of symptom focused coping.
Srivastava (1999) looked at how salesperson's personal characteristics affect
their coping style. The author noted that research shows that the use of social
support can directly reduce perceived work stress.

**Relaxation Strategies.** Zuber (1999) mentions deep breathing, and
visualizing oneself in a relaxing setting as ways to deal with stressful work
situations. Participants spoke of giving up caffeine, practicing breathing exercises
and using meditation. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) concur with these methods
of relaxation, citing how these suggestions are commonly taught in programs to
deal with lowering tension to control stress.

**Belief in Company's Product/Service.** In his article on Information
Technology employees, Foote (2000) points out that workers need to feel a
sense of belonging to a company, most are often satisfied by "psychological
ownership of an object, a job or a team pursuit." Some participants in this study who expressed pride in the team's effort over a project echoed this sentiment.

**Long Term Negative Job Environment.** Whicker (1996) wrote about the devastating impact toxic leaders can have on organizations over time. She noted that the negative impact of Ross Johnson, CEO of RJR Nabisco on the organization, leading to a plummeting of moral and increase in despair among employees. She also commented on the results of long-standing battles between members in an organization, which leaves employees feeling battle worn and weary, emotionally exhausted, with cynicism and hopelessness prevailing. Frost (1999) points out that managing an organizations' pain is vital to the success of the organization. However, the negative fallout is especially hard on the toxic handler if there is a continuous stream of emotional problems heading their way and they are in a constant toxic-handling role for a long period of time.

**Decision to Leave Organization.** Srivastava (1999) commented that more and more Americans are finding their jobs increasing in stress and this is in turn leading to a desire to leave their jobs. Bromage (2000) calls the new millennium the "strain drain", and remarks on the dissatisfaction of British Workers to long hours, heavy workloads and a perceived lack of support. British companies are experiencing increasing difficulties in recruiting and retaining good employees.

**Lack of Company Support.** According to a 1996 survey by the National Foundation for Women Business Owners, the main four reasons for women leaving companies are lack of recognition, unhappy work environment, mundane
workload and bumping into the glass ceiling Dawson (1999). Research done on why Information Technology workers leave companies, points to poor relationships with their managers or supervisors Foote (2000).

**Geography.** In his book, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Goleman (1998) remarks on the demands technology and a competitive landscape are making on workers. He points to the comments of a manager in a large company who observed that in working for a global company you have to be available twenty hours a day – calling Europe early in the morning and Asia late at night.

**Negative Emotions.** Employee’s own feelings can get in the way of them completing their jobs in a satisfactory way. Goleman (1998) points to the example of a stockbroker who reacted very strongly to work situations, became angry and wouldn’t back down. This approach cost her promotions, and an increase in salary. Participants in this study also commented on how anger as one example had cost them jobs in the past.

In summary, the tests used in this study support the validity of the category system developed in this current study. A high percentage agreement obtained by independent raters supports the soundness and trustworthiness of the categories. The soundness of the category system was also supported through the test of introducing withheld incidents to the established categories. The participation rate was determined by checking with all the participants of this study for agreement in reporting the same type of event. In all categories a number of participants reported the same responses, with 10 categories showing a participation rate of 50% or higher. Theoretical agreement was shown for 12 of
the 13 categories in examining literature related to the study topic. This agreement with previous literature supports the soundness and trustworthiness of the category system.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

Through interviews with nine participants, 34 critical incidents were produced, with 87 related outcomes given, explaining what helped and hindered toxic handlers in the performance of their job. The 87 outcomes were placed into the 13 categories which were found to be reliable and valid: (a) positive personal attitude, (b) personal satisfaction with job done, (c) physical activity, (d) support from colleagues, (e) outside support, (f) relaxation strategies, (g) affecting positive change in worker, (h) belief in company’s product and service, (i) decision to leave organization, (j) lack of company support, (k) long term negative job culture, (l) geography, (m) negative emotions.

Limitations

There are a number of factors which limit this investigation. First, it was the outcomes to the critical incidents which were put into categories, not the critical incidents themselves. To ensure a clear understanding between the researcher and the participants, both the critical incidents and the outcomes were verified with the participants in their second interview. The critical incidents,
outcomes to them, and the categories subsequently formed were the participants' way of expressing their direct voice.

Second, it was the self-reported behaviours of the participants which were described, the researcher did not actually observe these behaviours directly, and therefore must rely on the testimony of the participants. Thirdly, since the critical incidents were not directly observed by the researcher, but reported by the participants, the critical events are limited to those the participant could bring to memory at the time of the interview. This may have excluded some events from being reported. Flanagan (1954) addressed this limitation in his study of automobile employees at General Motors. He verified that recording of critical incidents from interviews could be relied on to provide adequate data.

Critical incidents which were unclear, as well as unclear responses to these incidents which had been set aside after the first interview were brought up for verification in the second interview. During the second interview the researcher and the participant reviewed the critical incidents and responses that related to the participant in question, and verified the categories into which the responses had been placed.

Finally, the data gathered during this study is based on 9 participants from different areas of business, whose criteria for being labelled a toxic handler rests on the expert view of Dr. Frost. However, the validation procedures for this study did show a high level of agreement from independent raters and a generally high participation rate for this particular study and set of results alone.
Implications for theory and research

The results of this study are the first steps towards gathering empirical evidence on what helps and hinders toxic handlers in the performance of their jobs. Previously, interest in the helping and hindering component of toxic handling has amounted to educated opinions from researchers.

In regards to the Critical Incident Methodology, and in line with Alfonso’s (1997) assertions, it was very beneficial to implement a second, follow up interview. This second interview allowed for confirmation and clarification of critical incidents as well as the responses to these incidents. It would appear that Alfonso's innovation to Flanagan’s original work is of great benefit in giving participant’s a direct voice in using their feedback for confirmation purposes.

Under expert validation, this study introduced the idea of having a truly random sample for the expert raters to place in the various categories. According to the expert raters and this researcher, it was a true test of validity to have an irregular number of examples from each category to be placed. The raters stated that they felt it was a true test of the category’s merit to not have a set limit of responses to match each category. Further research needs to be done employing the present innovation to the design to confirm its usefulness.

In terms of future research in the field of toxic handling, the nature of toxic handling implies that the participants have worked or are working in an environment of low trust and a level of negativity, and this does have an impact on the research process. In at least three instances, the participants expressed
deep concern that the extreme confidentiality of the interviews be maintained. It was made clear by the participants during the initial interviews that their termination or disciplinary action might be a possible outcome should the content of the interviews come to the attention of their company. With the consequences of any misstep in protocol being exceptionally clear in my mind, I found myself becoming increasingly vigilant and anxious about interactions with the participants. In hindsight, it was as though the emotions and atmosphere surrounding the participants were passed through to me in the sharing of the participants’ stories. In such an atmosphere, there is the possibility that the style of the interview may have prevented the participants from articulating or recollecting some critical events. During the second interview, I acknowledged the negative atmosphere and reassured the participants of the safeguards ensuring confidentiality. From this study experience, it is clear that any research done in this field will involve a high level of trust and rapport building between the researcher and participant.

As pointed out in the introduction of this study, toxic handlers have been seen as amateurs without the skills to protect themselves from the toxicity which surrounds them. Through this study, participants have produced nine different categories of helpful means for them to deal with the stressors and tension which comes their way as toxic handlers. These nine categories are: positive personal attitudes, physical activity, personal satisfaction with job done, support from colleagues, outside support, belief in company’s product and service, affecting positive change in worker, relaxation strategies and decision to leave
organization. This is a good foundation for future research on toxic handling to build and improve upon these findings.

In terms of research into the hindering aspects of toxic handlers' work, the participants came up with the four categories of: lack of company support, long term negative job culture, geography and negative emotions.

**Implications for Practice**

The results of this study advance the understanding of what helps and hinders toxic handlers in the performance of their jobs. This study has used the direct voices of participants which has allowed for a richer understanding of the difficulties facing toxic handlers in their work environments. The results of such a method of research is to have a direct understanding of challenges faced by the participants rather than relying on second party interpretation of vents through scales or questionnaires.

One outcome of this study is to use these categories as a helpful blueprint towards using facilitative strategies when dealing with the challenges of being a toxic handler. This study reveals how the participants deal with the tension of their unofficial jobs.

It would be of benefit to all upper management, those delivering company employee assistance programs and potential toxic handlers to be made aware of: the existence of toxic handlers in most companies; what toll their jobs take on them; and the use of the nine helping and four hindering categories found in this
study to use as an awareness raising tool and intervention method to cope with the pressures of this unofficial job.

Counsellors and business coaches could use this study in a concrete way, by using the information found in these categories to implement a check in and mental health monitoring system with potential toxic handlers through:

(a) educating them in the importance of maintaining perspective and a healthy/positive outlook on their jobs and lives in general as a key to maintaining balance;
(b) encouraging them to be actively involved in an exercise program or some form of exercise on a regular basis;
(c) encouraging toxic handlers to seek out and use both the support within the company (colleagues) and support outside the company (family, friends, and professional help i.e. psychologists and therapists);
(d) have handlers run through an exercise where they clarify their values and the personal satisfactions they receive from their job;
(e) check with them to see if they practice any form of relaxation training. If they don't have any strategies in place, have information on programs available in the local area;
(f) verify the handler's attitude towards the company's product and service. Check the handler's awareness of the connection between the company's product/service and their attitude;
(g) identify how the toxic handler views the impact they have on those around them (i.e. do they see themselves in a mentoring role or as someone who affects positive change in others or do they feel a lack of influence)
(h) in a position of trust, counsellors or business coaches can undertake a frank discussion with the toxic handler on the effect the
company is having on them. The reality may be that it is time for a vacation, change of division or time to leave the company.

CEO's and other upper management, could use the findings in the hindering categories to undertake an honest appraisal of where their company lies in terms of: (a) recognition and support of the unofficial role of toxic handling; (b) where their company fits in terms of negative handling of their everyday business environment and situations which arise. Are they guilty of harbouring a long-term negative job culture? (c) watching out for the negative emotions of the toxic handlers in their employ; have they gone from optimistic to sullen, resentful and angry? (d) pushing their toxic handlers too hard in dealing with the stresses associated with running business in different time zones and in partnership with a variety of cultures.

Conclusion

This study has addressed the issue “What helps and hinders toxic handlers in the performance of their job”. It has answered this question through the development of 13 categories, which emerged through an inductive process. The first nine categories describe what helps the toxic handler in the daily performance of their jobs. The last four categories answer the question of what hinders or impedes toxic handlers in the successful completion of their work. Several methods were employed to validate the categories.

The findings of this study contribute to the field of counselling psychology by describing nine various coping mechanisms from the perspective of nine men
and women working in middle to upper management which help them in the performance of their jobs. Many of these categories have been substantiated in both psychology and business literature through previous studies described in this paper.

This study is also valuable to the business community, as it offers some concrete categories of coping which can be used to reduce the distress levels of those workers identified as toxic handlers. It also helps to put a face on the factors which are seen as being harmful to a healthy work environment. Both researchers and practitioners can use the information from this study to look at healthy, proactive strategies for maintaining and retaining their highly motivated, empathetic toxic handlers.
REFERENCES


Dear Sir or Madam,

My name is Laura Lee MacLean, and I am a Masters student in the Department of Counselling Psychology at the University of British Columbia. One of my degree requirements is to complete a thesis, and I have therefore chosen the topic "What Helps or Hinders Toxic Handlers in the Performance of their Jobs." A toxic handler is "a manager who voluntarily shoulders the sadness, frustration, bitterness, and anger that are endemic to organizational life." (Harvard Business Review, July/August, 1999)

Dr. Peter Frost from the department of Commerce and Business Administration is forwarding this letter on my behalf to ask for your voluntary participation in this study.

This study consists of two in-person, individual interviews. The first interview will be approximately 90 minutes in length and will be composed of: an introduction to the purpose and formalities of the study, a consent form review, and a recollection of various incidents which have helped or hindered you in your role as a toxic handler. The second interview will be either in person or over the phone. It will consist of validating and collaborating the first set of data given during the first interview. Your total time commitment would be a maximum of three hours over a two-month period.

Any information resulting from this research will be kept completely confidential. Participants will not be identified by the use of names or initials. Interviews will be tape recorded, transcribed, and coded to protect confidentiality. Data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. After the completion of the interviews the tapes will be erased and the transcripts will be destroyed after 5 years.
APPENDIX C- INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What helps or hinders you in your role as a toxic handler?

2. Please tell me about a situation you have been through in the role of a toxic handler.

3. What led up to the situation?

4. What was your experience of it?

5. What was the outcome of the experience?

6. What did you learn about yourself from it?