

JUST APPLIED LEADERSHIP FOR RESILIENCY IN CSIS TRANSCRIPT

Introduction [00:00:05] Now, this is recording RTI International Center for Forensic Science presents just science.

Donia Slack [00:00:20] Hello and welcome to Just Science, a podcast for justice professionals and anyone interested in learning more about forensic science. Innovative technology, current research and actionable strategies to improve the criminal justice system. I'm your host today, Donia Slack with the NIJ's Forensic Technology Center of Excellence, a program of the National Institute of Justice. This week on Just Science, we are publishing a special release episode on stress and resiliency and crime scene investigators and how agencies can prepare and train their workforce on how to handle traumatic death investigations. Here to help us with this discussion are our guest, Ashley Church and Erin West of Gap Science, a company offering training and resources for leaders in forensic disciplines. Both Ashley and Erin have really interesting backgrounds and experiences. Crime scene investigators and field training officers. And they will be able to provide some great insight into the topic of stress and resiliency, specifically for professionals who must investigate and process traumatic death investigation scenes. Welcome, Ashley and Erin.

Ashley Church [00:01:22] Hey, thanks for having us.

Donia Slack [00:01:23] Before we actually start talking about this really important topic, would you guys mind giving a brief background about how you guys ended up to where you are today? We can start maybe with Ashley.

Ashley Church [00:01:36] Sure. I was always had a passion for a crime scene investigation ever since I was about 13. I was pretty influenced by the shows like CSI and Murder, she wrote. So I always knew something I wanted to get into, you know, using math and science to be able to solve crimes equal to me. I went to the University of Central Florida. I got my bachelors in forensic science with a minor in chemistry, and while I was there, I was required to do an internship. So I did that at the Orange County Sheriff's Office and the crime scene unit. And I noticed about half of this size already had their master's degrees or were pursuing their master's degrees. So I figured in order to be competitive in the field, I probably should also pursue a master's degree as well. I wanted to do something that would set me apart. So a lot of people do criminology and I dove into entomology, which is the study of insects. So quite a bit different from what a lot of other people do. Did not study insect related to the field. It was actually the brown marmorated stinkbug. But it gave me a lot of research experience. I had to supervise to undergraduates and I also hosted some training programs. So and from there I dove right into crime scene investigation. I went back to the Orange County Sheriff's Office and started my career there. I gained a lot of experience in a very short amount of time. Orange County sheriff's offices in Orlando, Florida. So a lot of crime after about three years. I went to the Osceola County Sheriff's Office. They probably have about a third of the workload. And while I was there, I was able to get experience in the prescreening DNA lab. And I also had experience as the supervisor of the crime scene unit. My husband got a job opportunity. We went to South Carolina and South Carolina. I don't know if you're familiar, but I feel like a lot of the crime scene units are sworn they're not civilian. So I have a civilian background. It would have required me to go into a police academy in order to join their crime scene units. So instead, I decided to dive full time into our company. Gap Science, which Aaron and I started just last year. But we've been developing it for a little bit longer than that.

Donia Slack [00:04:00] Excellent. Thank you.

Donia Slack [00:04:02] And, Erin, if you want to go into a little background about yourself.

Erin West [00:04:06] So my name is Erin West and I have been in forensics now for 14 years. I started as a crime scene investigator down here in Florida, did that for a few years, started learning how to be a latent examiner while I was in that crime scene position. And then after a few years, I left and I went to become a trainer for the United States Army. So I was traveling to the different military bases where they were getting ready to deploy and we would train them in different forensic disciplines so that they could process IED related sites overseas. And I did that for several years. And then I was hired on by the FBI's TEDAC facility, which is the terrorist explosive device analytical center. And I was hired there as a supervisor. So I was supervising twelve technicians that were processing all those IED materials that were coming back from overseas. And then shortly after I was there, I got promoted to the deputy program manager position over the laboratory. And so I had the responsibilities of not. Managing the personnel, but also, you know, all the responsibilities that come along with managing a laboratory. So I learned a lot in that position. Did that for a few years. And then I moved back down to Florida. I took a job as a latent print examiner. Then I got promoted over a forensic unit. So the forensic unit was over the crime scene unit and our DNA prescreening laboratory. And then recently I was promoted over our latent print unit. So currently I am the latent print supervisor for the Osceola County Sheriff's Office here in Florida. I do have a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from the University of Central Florida and a master's degree in forensic DNA and serology from the University of Florida. I am a certified crime scene analyst and a certified latent examiner through the IAI and like Ashley said, we are both instructors for Tri tech Forensics actually teaches for the CSI Academy. And we also started Gap Science about a year ago just to focus on some of the things that we really felt were missing in our own experience and our own training in the forensic disciplines.

Donia Slack [00:06:34] So actually, just to give some background, Ashley, Erin and I met on a Facebook board and somehow stumbled on to a common post. And I saw that Gap Forensics was pulling together some really interesting curricula for some webinar topics that they were thinking about putting on and with their background. I went to their Web site that they would actually be really specifically skilled at being able to discuss some of the challenges that crime scene investigators might be facing today. You know, we're now learning from the research that crime scene investigators are actually quite susceptible to things like secondary trauma, also known as compassion fatigue. And that is really a condition that is really similar to post-traumatic stress disorder. It's very similar to PTSD, really. Some of the differences mainly lie in the fact that the trauma did not actually happen to the crime scene investigator themselves, but instead they're exposed to all of these situations in these traumatic death investigations. And it affects them in their own lives. And also they are susceptible to vicarious trauma, which is slightly different than secondary traumatic stress disorder, in that it arises from the accumulation of exposure. So that really happens when crime scene investigators seem to spend years in a career and it kind of affects their World Vision or their view of themselves. And that type of thing. So to start our discussion, what are some of your experiences in being able to either be a crime scene investigator yourself and dealing with traumatic scenes? And then when it comes to leading and managing and supervising entry level or even season crime scene investigators, what have some of your challenges been?

Ashley Church [00:08:21] It's actually really interesting to reflect back on when I was an intern and, you know, just starting out in my training program, you have that adrenaline you're always wanting to learn. So there are definitely worse scenes that come at you in that first initial exposure to crime scene investigation that are a bit shocking, but it's mostly a lot of fun. Now, as you go through the years and you're exposed to more and more crime scenes, it really starts to wear on you. I don't know if some people experienced this, but the cultures that I was exposed to, the crime scene units that I was exposed to, you know, we started developing really close bonds with the coworkers that we have, especially the people that were on our own squads. So we would lean on them if we were going through a rough time or just really stressed out. You also kind of developed a really sick sense of humor. A lot of us cuss a lot. And so that's kind of how I feel like you first start out in the field. And then, as you mentioned, we transition to being a field training officer. And when you transition to being a supervisor, you have to kind of take a step back and really assess, like, how scenes are affecting people. And you'd be really surprised if you do hone in and see the signs and symptoms. Scenes that you don't feel like would be very traumatic to you may be traumatic to someone else just based off of their life experiences.

Donia Slack [00:09:55] Now, that's a really interesting point there.

Donia Slack [00:09:57] I know that there's examples that we had talked about before where, you know, perhaps like a domestic violence scene might affect one person a little bit more than another just based on on past experiences.

Donia Slack [00:10:10] So, you know, knowing that supervisors don't always know about people's personal lives. How have you been able to maybe recognize some of those warning signs in and employees that you might not have the background in their lives, but they might be handling a scene a little bit differently?

Erin West [00:10:27] Well, so to say, I think that's one of the biggest responsibilities we have as a leader is to actually get to know our people. And they may not share all the inner workings of their mind and they may not share their past experiences with us. But if you get to know your people really well and you build rapport with your people, you may not necessarily know that they had some kind of domestic violence experience in their past. And so a domestic violence case is a trigger for them. But you will start to recognize when they're acting differently in the workplace. And then you can at least discuss with them what is going on. So we all have a responsibility as a leader to really get to know our people to a degree and pay attention to our people to a degree where we would notice when something changes. And sometimes that's something really big and significant and sometimes those are really small things. So we do have that responsibility. And I think talking on what Ashley was saying earlier, that everybody handles everything differently and you never know what scene is going to trigger somebody. I think that as leaders, we have to recognize that our people have very different personalities and so everybody's going to handle it very differently. So like Ashley and I, we have very different personalities, feelings wise. So Ashley is a person that's very open with her feelings. And she. It's very easy for her to discuss her feelings and things like that. So for her, you know, if she had a troubled scene, a scene that really bothered her, a great resource for her would be the ability to talk about it with other people and just get it out there in the open. I'm the opposite where I just, like, shove everything down and I don't want to talk about the things. And so for me would be the opposite. You know, if I was pushed into a circumstance where I had to share openly my feelings with the whole group, that would actually really bother me. I wouldn't want to participate in something like that. So it's a

leader's responsibility to figure out the personality types of their people so that they can learn how they can best notice when something is wrong and help them work through it.

Donia Slack [00:12:49] So I know on that topic you have also in some of your training, you guys go into the Myers, Briggs and Learning Styles and the Crono types.

Donia Slack [00:12:59] If you can maybe explain how you might have implemented that as supervisors and how that has helped, because it seems that you guys were big on on on that aspect of soft skills or knowing each other's personalities.

Ashley Church [00:13:13] It's basically like the beginning of getting to know your people. So, you know, some supervisors I've had a very stand off. I really don't even know if they know the names of my spouse or my dogs, like, you know, they really don't know you at all. Some supervisors are very, you know, very involved in your life. But the stuff that you talked about, like DISC and Myers, Briggs, that's like the beginning. If you haven't already figured out who your people are and who you work with. That's a great way of figuring out other people's personality types and not just like what their personality type is, but how to interact best with them and what triggers them and sets them off. You know, what accommodations they may need where other people may not mean that. I know Aaron is like super big on DISC, so she can probably go into a lot more detail on at least that.

Erin West [00:14:11] Yes, I'm very, very big on DISC.

Erin West [00:14:13] I think that DISC is something super simple that leaders can give their employees to determine general behavior, behavioral types in the workplace. And once you understand your employees behavioral types, you can communicate with them more effectively. You can understand how they work more effectively, and you can understand how they handle things on an emotional level, as is typically related to their just personality, behavioral type as well. So we actually think it's really important. We include that stuff in our leadership training because, you know, the hard skills are important, like learning how to do like stats and audits and things like that. But the soft skills are really vital, especially in areas like forensics, where you have these high stress, high pressure jobs, where they're going now and being exposed to really disturbing things and seeing really disturbing things. So, yes, you have to know how to schedule your staff, but you also have to know how to recognize when your staff is in. Or they're trying to communicate something to you and they they don't know how. So we think those soft skills are are vitally important to our leaders.

Erin West [00:15:25] Yeah. And Meyers Briggs is pretty similar. We teach Meyers Briggs in our forensic field training officer course. And then we teach DISC, which is is something a little bit different, but it's still behavioral types in our forensic supervision course. But as far as chronotypes go, it's actually something that I was introduced to while Erin and I were taking a leadership course together. I read a book called When, I think It's by Dr. Bress, and it talks about if you've ever heard of people being early birds or night owls, it's kind of the same thing. So there's four different chronotypes. There's the bear that basically, like their biological clock, will wake up when the sun rises and starts getting really drowsy when the sun sets. There's the wolves, which are basically are night owls and the lions are the early risers. And then the dolphins are the ones that are kind of like insomniacs. They just really don't get a whole lot of sleep. They're very energetic. So those are the four different chronotypes in the way we kind of apply that to. What we do is there are some units that just have, you know, your typical eight to five shifts. But there are some units that have night shifts. There are some units that have on call shifts. So really optimizing your

people's chronotypes might help their work productivity. So if you have one, that's a wolf and their productivity is very high in the evening hours, then don't have them come in at 7:00 in the morning because those first few hours are basically going to be very, very unproductive. And the same thing applies if you're trying to schedule staff meetings, you know, where you want a lot of interaction, maybe you want to talk about S.O.P.s or how you guys want to change report writing styles. Their input might be greater maybe in the early afternoon when work productivity is high for most of the chronotypes versus like scheduling an eight or nine AM meeting where most people are just going to be zoned out.

Donia Slack [00:17:35] So that's really interesting. I mean, I know that with stress and trauma that crime scene investigators and death investigators have burnout is one of the bigger concerns. Right. We have lots of casework that we do in our country and not a lot of staff to do it. And so that is interesting to kind of take that spin on. You know, when are you most productive or even with personalities? Who are you most productive with? If you have to, you know, work with other people in a group and whatnot. So can you kind of explain a little bit about your experiences with stress and burnout when it comes to these types of topics?

Erin West [00:18:13] Obviously in forensics? There is a high workload. Like you said, it's a stressful workload and you're exposed to a lot of just, you know, just kind of gross and disgusting and disturbing scenes. So we have to pay attention to the fact that crime scene investigators get really overwhelmed and eventually burnt out. But there's actually five causes of burnout in the workplace and so on top of all of that. So that is one. Being overwhelmed is one of the five causes of burnout. And so as a leader, you know, we have to recognize when our people are just sinking under a pile of work and do what we can to kind of alleviate some of that stress. But there's for other reasons that people generally burnout in any field, not only just forensics, but one is they've lost their passion for the work. And that kind of goes back to what you were talking about earlier about like compassion fatigue. And like Ashley was saying earlier, when you get in, you're really excited and then you get that grind and it's just grinding on you and grinding on you. And then over the years, you kind of lose that passion and love. So having, you know, maybe a mentor that can keep you really fired up and ignited is super helpful. A lot of times, bringing new employees and fresh staff in reignites the fire under the older, more seasoned people because they're so fresh and so excited about it. So that's something we have to pay attention to. Working in a toxic work environment, obviously, for anybody is a cause of burnout that's typically related to the leaders or the leadership that's going on in the unit. So as leaders, we have to be conscious when our people are starting to shut down and not communicating with us anymore, because if they are not communicating things to us, there's a problem and that problem is probably related to us. So we have to evaluate ourselves to see if we're contributing to the stress of their work environment or actually helping take some of the stress away. Another cause of burnout is when people feel underappreciated. A lot of crime scene investigators get pretty poor pay for what they have to do. And in truth, there's not a lot that leaders can do about that. But leaders can take the time to give their people some rewards and recognition, time off, some coffee breaks or fun things that they can do to just show that they really are appreciated for all their hard work and everything that they're doing. And then the fifth cause of burn out is that people sometimes just get bored. And so if you have people in your units that are really high achievers, they need something and they need a challenge. They need something to keep them going. Otherwise they will burn out on the job and eventually look for somewhere else to go.

Ashley Church [00:21:19] As far as, like personal experience, I've never experienced the boredom burnout, at least in the agencies that we worked for. But I have experience like the overwhelm, especially someone like me, like I really don't enjoy having a lot of stuff pending, but it's something that you have suggested get used to and some people can't. They literally just physically can't get used to a pile of reports that are pending on their desk and that can cost them a lot of stress. But it's a reality. You know, I Orange County, like I said, the workload was about three times higher than Osceola and I. I know that it's still not even a fraction of what some of these agencies do. You know, we were as average, Jane, maybe one hundred and twenty two hundred and fifty crime scenes a year plus. I was doing maybe like around two hundred in-house cases of evidence. So that's a lot of cases for one crime scene investigator. And, you know, the overwhelming not just reports on your desk, but now detectives are hounding you like what you need to get this evidence done. What were the results? The state attorney's office is hounding you because they have a case coming up and they need your report. So the overwhelming stuff and only, I think, relatable to a lot of people in our field.

Donia Slack [00:22:42] So I know we talked a little bit about burnout and I was hoping that we could maybe talk about how do you mitigate us forensic science, supervisors and leaders, you know, being able to take those five factors that lead to burnout and make sure that the turnover rate is not really affected.

Ashley Church [00:22:58] I would say burnout is very real. I don't have any evidence to support this or research. But I feel like from what I've seen, the turnover rate is about five years for an investigator, especially at a really busy department. You know, there are departments, maybe they they're just not busy. They have like one case a week, and that's really busy for them. I would say on average, about five years. So as a supervisor, I went through a really I feel like a really unique experience where four out of the five crime scene spots were open. So we had four brand new people and I was a brand new supervisor. So I got promoted during that time and I was about to go on maternity leave in three months. So we had to get people hired and start the training program very, very fast. And if you can imagine someone that six months pregnant and only has one other crime scene investigator to lean on, you don't really have any other option than to take some of the responsibilities away from them. So we had to sit down with our sergeants on the road and our detectives and really tell them, like we're going to have to pull the reins on what crime, what type of crime scenes we go out to. Like, it has to be more violence. It can't really be like small property crimes. You know, that's that had to stop. And so to take some of that workload away, because if not, like you said, it's just gonna keep stacking up and your people are gonna get overwhelmed. As far as pay goes, like Erin said, there's not a whole lot you can do as far as, like, getting them raises. There are some agencies that will pay for the certification through the eyes. So Erin has the IAI certifications and so do I. So so agencies will pay you for having that particular certification and some won't. So we know several supervisors that I've attended some of our trainings who are still fighting the fight to try to get special pay for their people for the certifications.

Donia Slack [00:25:12] I didn't really hear you actually mention this, but I think Ashley is really fabulous at this.

Erin West [00:25:17] So she injects a lot of fun and flexibility in her work environments. And I think that depending on the leader that you have, some people are very rigid. And I think that it really benefits forensic personnel to have a little bit of flexibility with their schedule and a little bit of opportunity to just have a good time and just relax a little bit.

And I think Ashley's really good about doing like team building activities and things like that that are just blatant stress relievers are her people. I think you think some of those things.

Ashley Church [00:26:04] Yeah. So I'll show you some of those. Those. That's actually a really good point. You have to find ways to get your people to release their stress. And some people won't. If you are in the office, if you're physically in the office, they feel compelled to work. They're always thinking about work and you have to get them away. So there were some team building activities. You know, we called around, use your resources like we had. We were very fortunate enough to have like a really nice lake that we had access to. Very beautiful. So just be outside. And they had a ropes course out there. So it was a team bonding activity where, you know, we're cheering each other on doing these really hard ropes courses and, you know, getting away from the office and kind of releasing some of that stress. You can also do things like make training fun. A lot of the crime scene investigators at the time, they wanted more training. They wanted to hone in more on their skills for nighttime photography. So what we did was one girl had a very big backyard. So we decided to all bring our dinner. We played music and we just had a really great time while we're also training on nighttime photography. And then some other things that you can do that your people will appreciate because you're thinking about them is try to do something that will promote their personal growth or their career growth. I think a lot of supervisors feel like they're going to have their people forever. I don't know. They almost like don't want to promote growth because they don't want you to leave because it's more of an inconvenience. You have to train more people. But I think your people will stay longer. They'll be more loyal to you and they'll really appreciate if you pour into them. So whenever we had our monthly or quarterly meetings, I really tried to have something in there that promotes their personal or career growth. Like one meeting, I tried to focus on how to help them create their curriculum, be one meeting. I tried to help them create a book that they can keep all of their certificates that they receive or any trainings that they go to. So that they can take that with them. You know, if they're ever at a job interview or anything like that. So I think those things are super important. And I don't think that we take the time to do them. You know, we're always so busy and who has time for that? But I can tell you, it goes a long way.

Donia Slack [00:28:46] So what I really love about these different mitigation strategies that you guys are bringing up is that, you know, a lot of times agencies don't have the funding to have more formal strategies.

Donia Slack [00:28:58] Right. They don't have a lot of programs, especially for the non sworn civilians. Right.

Donia Slack [00:29:03] That has definitely been identified as a gap for forensic professionals. Is the topic of PTSD. Stress and trauma has is a known topic with our first responders, police officers.

Donia Slack [00:29:16] And just by that nature of it being around for such a long time, there are a little bit more avenues for more formal processes like mandatory counseling, that type of thing. Whereas for crime scene investigators or civilian employees in the forensic disciplines, those opportunities might not always be available or allowed for that particular group of professionals.

Donia Slack [00:29:39] So what's interesting is that you guys have figured out ways and these have been shown in the research to be evidence based that things like humor and team building and, you know, showing appreciation, those things actually really do make a

positive impact on someone's view of their job, their self-worth and how they are impacting the criminal justice system and how they also have an important part. So that that's really fantastic.

Donia Slack [00:30:05] Have you guys looked into a role of, like, mindfulness? And a lot of what it seems like you guys are doing is just making people aware of the fact that they are in stressful situations and. It's just part of the job. So a lot of this can kind of be pulled back into being able to be aware of one's self, aware of your feelings and kind of dealing with that in a more mindful way as opposed to some of the more destructive ways.

Donia Slack [00:30:29] So if maybe you guys can express some fear experiences of where you might have seen some of your crime scene investigators go down a more destructive path and maybe how you might have mitigated that.

Ashley Church [00:30:39] So, yeah, it's not really a glamorous topic. I feel like it's something that people just want to share deep down. This is not a problem, but it truly is. Like you said, we try to make people more aware of their emotions or in other people's emotions and try to find ways to relieve some stress in healthy ways rather than destructive ways. But as far as destructive ways that I've seen, the anger issues, the anger management kind of gets out of control. There is a lot of partying, not necessarily on the job, but like outside of the jobs, you know, on the weekends. A thing that people frequently do is go clubbing or go to the bars or hang out at each other's houses and they drink, but they don't just drink like one or two beers. They drink a lot. And I was one of those, like, I know I'm not judging for anyone that's in that point in their life. You know, it is how some people cope and it's not definitely not the healthiest way to do things. And then some people, you know, start doing things that are a bit more dangerous. So maybe, though, escalate to not just drinking heavily, but I'm going to drink and drive or participate in some infidelity or you know, and it's not just like crime scene investigators. I feel like law enforcement in general. It's a very stressful job and it's very easy to fall into those traps of those coping mechanisms.

Donia Slack [00:32:13] So, Erin, I know you have an interesting background in in training, not just crime scene investigators, but also training military personnel. So can you maybe explain or describe some of your experiences with how those individuals, the stress and trauma, might present itself possibly differently than domestic crime scene investigators?

Erin West [00:32:35] I actually think that they present in a pretty similar way. So I spent several years working for law enforcement before I went and spent several years working for the military. And law enforcement agencies are a paramilitary organization. So they really are structured the same and they kind of deal with it in a similar fashion. You know, when I came in to forensics and Ashley's probably the same, it's a very much like suck it up buttercup mentality, you know, where you are not really encouraged to talk about things that you're seeing. And it's just kind of like, well, we that's how it was for us. And we always dealt with it. And now you have to deal with that, too. And now that there's been more research done and they're actually tracking like suicide rates for law enforcement officers and military stuff like that is really coming into focus and into light, that that method of dealing with that maybe isn't successful. Maybe we should consider trying a different method. So I think that's the challenge with forensic or with a lot of forensic professionals is that they are civilian. And so we are part of a peer military organization. And not all forensic departments are civilian. There's many that are still sworn, but that's sworn mentality. They still apply it to all of the civilians. And so you really do have to work for a pretty progressive agency that is really trying to put things in place to mentor people and

help people deal with stress and strain of these kinds of scenes. So Ashley and I have both had the opportunity to work for agencies where they were really proactive about that stuff and wanted to do, you know, psych exams on staffs periodically and provide staff with mentors so that they can have confidential conversations and extending EAP access so that people could grow to more than the normal number of sessions if they needed to, or providing counseling after any major scene that was available to everybody that everybody could attend. And we've also worked for agencies that didn't provide any of those things at all. And so, unfortunately, you know, a lot of that stuff comes from the agency that you work for. But as a supervisor, you can be conscious of those things as well and just kind of try to help your people if those things aren't available to you. But to answer your question, I didn't actually see that huge of a difference between military and law enforcement it is actually pretty similar.

Ashley Church [00:35:17] And I think they're you know, they're making some efforts in some places. Like she said, some agencies are implementing maybe like an annual psych exam. But there definitely is some hesitation towards that's a lot of people feel like, you know, if they don't pass it, they're going to lose their jobs. So they don't want to be really truthful during those sessions in fear of losing their jobs. So that's an interesting hurdle that they're still figuring out how to handle. There are some agencies that develop the mentorship programs. But as you mentioned before, I think crime scene units, especially if they're civilian, they just kind of get forgotten. Maybe not intentionally, but they're like, oh, you know, it shouldn't be that traumatic for them. And they kind of forget, like, oh, on that homicide scene, they spent 12 hours in the same room with two dead bodies or they see a really awful baby death. And the biggest efforts that I've seen were related to the Pulse nightclub shooting. And they did a phenomenal job of providing so many resources. They had therapy dogs. You were required to go to at least like one or two sessions. And then it was like more of a group session and they offered more individual sessions if you needed it. So that was like the biggest effort I've seen as far as like, you know, helping people with mental health and crime scene investigators were included in that. But there's definitely a gap like we can do a little bit better. As we mentioned before, there's some scenes that people think, oh, that shouldn't be a big deal to whoever, but it is a big deal to that person. Maybe they saw something in that scene that reminded them of their childhood or some family member. So you don't get to decide what's traumatic for them and what's not to be able to provide those resources whenever they need them, not just really big scenes like Pulse.

Donia Slack [00:37:20] So it seems that with a big scene that because it was available to everybody and things were mandatory, there seemed to be a little bit less of a stigma involved with receiving the help. Am I correct in that assumption?

Ashley Church [00:37:34] I would agree. I actually didn't go inside. But we still responded to a nearby area of the Pulse nightclub before the FBI took over. And in those group sessions, people were very open. And we had first responders in our group sessions. We had the 911 operators in our sessions. And people definitely were a lot more open to share their experiences and the emotions that they went through.

Erin West [00:38:02] Yeah, and I think just tacking about we talked a little bit earlier about our personality differences. And so I'm one of those people that probably wouldn't go to a session unless it was mandated. And I think that's if it was mandated, especially on a major scene like that. Even if you don't feel like you need it for yourself, it could definitely give you some awareness of at least what's going on with other coworkers. So you can at least pay attention to, you know, even if you feel like you're fine. You know, maybe when

you get in a session like that, you realize that you do really want to talk about it or need to talk about it or maybe just hearing other people's feelings about it makes you feel better. But having group sessions like that also allows you to just pay attention to how your coworkers are feeling about things as well. So I think that if you really facilitate team bonding, the team will take care of each other. And that's really important, too.

Erin West [00:39:06] So to have them just be watching out for each other.

Ashley Church [00:39:10] And I want to also say for anyone that's like thinking about starting something like that, you know, make it mandatory counseling sessions, the first couple are going to be super awkward and there's probably going to be very little participation. But once it becomes more normal and less of a stigma, I do think it has a potential to work.

Donia Slack [00:39:33] So one thing that I wanted to discuss just because of, you know, right now we're recording the session during the COVID 19 pandemic and we've all had to adapt and kind of redirect how things are really being done.

Donia Slack [00:39:49] I spoke to a friend of mine who's a crime scene investigator, and it's interesting, in her particular jurisdiction, she saw crime rate go down, but overdoses and suicides go up from other jurisdictions have mentioned those same types of things going up, but also an increase in domestic violence. What has been your experience through this COVID 19 pandemic as crime scene investigators or, you know, individuals who are training crime scene investigators?

Erin West [00:40:16] There's a similar crime trend going on where we live as well, where just general crimes have dropped pretty significantly. But those kinds of person's crimes where you're just trapped in a home with someone have increased. I think that the way people are feeling in general about COVID, our employees are feeling, too. You know, our employees are an essential employees. So having to come to work, still having to go out to crime scenes, working potentially with limited PPE, definitely exposure to the virus and then bringing it home to their families. So they're dealing with all of that stress as well. But a lot of our staff are working from home to some degree to which some of them love and some of them hate. And so we have to know which employees are going to be impacted by that. Like, I have a few employees right now who are very introverted and so they just love it. They think it's the best thing ever they could work from home for the rest of their lives. The employees that are really extroverted, they really feed off that social environment of the workplace. And so they start to feel lonely and missing that companionship. And then on top of it, too, forensics is a stressful job as it is. And now you are taking that job home. And it never leaves your home. So you wake up in the morning and you work on it all day and that just kind of bleeds into your home life, maybe a lot more than it would have in the past. And so we have to I mean, I've had to have discussions with some of my employees about actually ending their workday at a certain like actually stopping, stopping, working and being done with it for the day, because since they're home all that time just bleeds into to each other. And that can actually really increase their stress as well.

Donia Slack [00:42:02] With that I would love to be able to to kind of close with, if you could give a forensic supervisor any word of advice right now of, you know, what would be the best way to help their staff deal with the issues of stress and trauma and burnout in their jobs? What would that one piece of advice be?

Erin West [00:42:24] This will probably sound cheesy since we ran a training company, but we're not necessarily talking about getting training from us. But I think that a lot of supervisors and leaders step into those roles and they have no training at all, no training on. I mean, they typically supervisors are promoted because they were really excellent at the skill sets required to do that job function. Then they move into a leadership role and they don't have any training on all the things that make you a really great leader. And so I think that when you step into that role, it's vitally important that you seek out training to make yourself a better communicator, a better listener, a better empathize, or, you know, somebody that can recognize those kinds of things in their people, because that's not a natural skill set to all of us. Some of us have those things naturally and some of us don't. So I think that the best thing you can do for yourself and for your team is to continue to make active efforts to grow yourself as a leader and improve your own skills because that bleeds out into your team members.

Ashley Church [00:43:37] Mine's more on the touchy feely side because that's just the type of person that I am. So I think now more than ever, supervisors are in these positions where they're not doing the hard skills as much anymore. You know, like they're at home. So they can't do a lot of the stuff that they need to be in the office for. So their primary role, which is what a supervisor should be, is to put their efforts towards their people. So this is where soft skills are super important and they need to realize there people are people. They are not robots. And if you are not willing to start developing or increase your development in the soft skills, then step aside for someone that really needs to fill that role. Because now more than ever, like you said in COVID, you know, people are going through a lot. There's a lot of emotions. And your function as a supervisor should be to help your people provide support to them.

Donia Slack [00:44:40] Excellent. I would like to encourage our listeners to actually seek you guys out. I've been to your Web site. I think that you guys have some really nice materials out there that could be really helpful, especially during these down times where people do have to work from home. So if you guys could just give the the Web site.

Ashley Church [00:45:00] Yeah. If you want to see what we're all about, go to [www.gap science dot com](http://www.gapscience.com). We are also pretty active on our Facebook just search gap science. We have an Instagram and a LinkedIn account to again just search out gaps.

Donia Slack [00:45:16] So with that, I would like to thank both Ashley and Erin for joining us today.

Erin West [00:45:21] Yeah. Thank you so much for having us.

Donia Slack [00:45:23] Please, for our listeners, seek out some of that research, seek out some leadership training and maybe think about really getting to know your staff and each other as coworkers, especially through some of those soft skills. Stay tuned for our next season on digital evidence. And I'm Donia Slack for Just Science.

Voiceover [00:45:48] Opinions or points of views expressed in this podcast represent a consensus of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of its funding.