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The Vermont research study: testing group EMDR and compassion-focused therapy for PTSD and moral injury in first responders and police officers

Submission date
15/10/2025

Recruitment status
No longer recruiting

Registration date
26/11/2025

Overall study status
Completed

Last Edited
25/11/2025

Condition category
Mental and Behavioural Disorders

[ ] Prospectively registered
[ ] Protocol
[ ] Statistical analysis plan
[ ] Results
[ ] Individual participant data
[ ] Record updated in last year

Plain English summary of protocol

Background and study aims
This study is being run by Northumbria University to explore better ways of treating psychological trauma. It focuses on two types of trauma: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which comes from experiencing traumatic events, and moral injury, which happens when someone feels they've acted against their values or beliefs. The study is testing an intensive treatment approach that delivers therapy over several full days, rather than spreading it out over weeks.

Who can participate?
The study is aimed at people who work in front-line roles such as healthcare, emergency services, or social care, and who may have experienced trauma or moral injury as part of their job.

What does the study involve?
Participants will take part in an eight-day treatment program. The first four days are in-person sessions, followed by three online sessions about a month later, and a final in-person session on day eight. The treatment includes group therapy and uses two main approaches: EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) and compassion-focused therapy, which combines EMDR with Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). Participants will also be asked to complete questionnaires before, during, and after the treatment to help researchers understand how well the therapy works.

What are the possible benefits and risks of participating?
The treatment may help reduce symptoms of PTSD and moral injury and improve overall wellbeing. As with any psychological therapy, some people may find parts of the process emotionally challenging. The research team will be available to support participants throughout.

Where is the study run from?
The study is being run by Northumbria University (UK) in partnership with the Vermont Centre for Responder Wellness (USA) and the Trauma Response Network in Ireland.

When is the study starting and how long is it expected to run for?
January 2025 to November 2026

Who is funding the study?
Investigator initiated and funded

Who is the main contact?
Professor Derek Farrell, derek.farrell@northumbria.ac.uk

Contact information

Type(s)
Public, Scientific, Principal investigator

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Additional identifiers

Protocol serial number
Ref:ID8250/DPF/Vermont/Northumbria

Study information

Scientific Title
The Vermont research trial protocol: a mixed-methods study of group EMDR integrated with compassion-focused therapy for PTSD, complex PTSD, and moral injury in first responders and law enforcement officers

Acronym
Vermont Protocol

Study objectives
The primary aim of this study is to develop a solid understanding of effective treatment interventions that can be delivered in an intensive format using a combination of group EMDR

and compassion-focused therapy. This 'proof of concept' study will guide a subsequent application for funding to conduct a larger randomised controlled trial (RCT). The Vermont Centre for Responder Wellness, based in Burlington, Vermont, USA, is conducting this clinical research project, offering trauma-informed care and evidence-based interventions to first responders across the state (Vermont Centre for Responder Wellness). This centre plays a vital role in supporting access to trauma services for emergency responders, who face an increased risk of PTSD and moral injury due to the nature of their work (Smith et al., 2020). This specialised treatment centre within the USA serves a significant population group. Research team members have had a practical, long-standing relationship with the Vermont Centre for Responder Wellness.

Research Focus and Goals:
The research aims to address psychological trauma and moral injury experienced by Law enforcement and First Responders (fire officers, paramedics, healthcare workers, and local authority care workers). The primary goal is to evaluate the impact of an early intervention psychological treatment using a combination of empirically supported psychological treatment – Group EMDR and Compassion-Focused Therapy for the treatment of PTSD/Complex PTSD/ Moral Injury

Research Questions for this study:
Research question 1. Is Intensive Group Treatment for PTSD and Moral Injury a relevant and effective treatment intervention for Frontline/ Emergency/Workers who experience psychological trauma in response to their occupational duties?
Research question 2. Is Intensive Group Treatment for PTSD and moral Injury a safe and efficient treatment intervention for Frontline/ Emergency/Workers who experience psychological trauma in response to occupational duties, about trauma sequelae and co-morbid symptoms

Ethics approval required
Ethics approval required

Ethics approval(s)
Approved 24/01/2025, Northumbria University Health Sciences (15 Coach Lane, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE7 7TR, United Kingdom; 44 (0)191 215 6367; ethicsonline@northumbria.ac.uk), ref: ID8250

Primary study design
Interventional

Study design
Interventional mixed methods non randomized

Study type(s)
Treatment

Health condition(s) or problem(s) studied
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Complex PTSD, and Moral Injury

Interventions
Participants will take part in an eight-day treatment program. The first four days are in-person sessions, followed by three online sessions about a month later, and a final in-person session on day eight. The treatment includes group therapy and uses two main approaches: EMDR (Eye

Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) and compassion-focused therapy, which combines EMDR with Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). Participants will also be asked to complete questionnaires before, during, and after the treatment to help researchers understand how well the therapy works.

Intervention Type
Other

Primary outcome(s)
Measured at Pre, Post, 1-month FU, 3-month FU, and 6-month FU
1. PTSD and CPTSD symptoms are measured using the International Trauma Questionnaire (ITQ)
2. Moral injury is measured using the Moral Injury Event Scale (MIES)
3. Anxiety severity is measured using the Generalised Anxiety Disorder Assessment (GAD-7)
4. Depression severity is measured using the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9)
5. Health-related quality of life is measured using the EQ-5D
6. Global shame experience, including external and internal dimensions, is measured using the External and Internal Shame Scale (EISS)
7. Post-traumatic embitterment is measured using the Post-Traumatic Embitterment Disorder Self-Rating Scale (PTED Scale)

Key secondary outcome(s)
Measured per intervention only:
1. Exposure to adverse childhood experiences is measured using the Adverse Childhood Experience International Questionnaire (ACE-IQ) at baseline
2. Exposure to benevolent childhood experiences is measured using the Benevolent Childhood Experiences Score (BCEs) at baseline

Completion date
03/11/2026

Eligibility

Key inclusion criteria
1. Aged 18 years or older
2. Currently employed as a front-line health, emergency, or social care worker
3. Exposure to psychological distress, trauma, and/or moral injury in the course of occupational duties
4. Evidence of psychological distress and/or moral injury with measurable impact on psychological well-being and functional capacity
5. A minimum score of 24 on the Impact of Event Scale – Revised (IES-R) indicates clinically significant post-traumatic symptomatology

Participant type(s)
Population

Healthy volunteers allowed
No

Age group
Mixed

Lower age limit
18 Years

Upper age limit
65 Years

Sex
All

Total final enrolment
16

Key exclusion criteria
1. Individuals not currently in active service or employment.
2. Individuals currently receiving psychiatric or psychological treatment.
3. Individuals presenting with active suicidal ideation.
Note: It is assumed that participants are either actively working or have been formally assessed and deemed fit for duty by their occupational health provider.

Date of first enrolment
24/01/2025

Date of final enrolment
01/11/2025

Locations

Countries of recruitment
United States of America

Study participating centre
Vermont Centre for Responder Wellness
354 Mountain View Dr
Colchester
United States of America
VT 05446

Sponsor information

Organisation
Northumbria University

ROR
https://ror.org/049e6bc10

Funder(s)

Funder type
Other

Funder Name
Investigator initiated and funded

Results and Publications

Individual participant data (IPD) sharing plan
All data supporting the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author, Professor Derek Farrell MBE (derek.farrell@northumbria.ac.uk). Data will be shared in accordance with applicable data protection regulations and institutional policies.

IPD sharing plan summary
Available on request

Study outputs

Output type	Details	Date created	Date added	Peer reviewed?	Patient-facing?
Participant information sheet	Long version	24/09/2025	25/11/2025	No	Yes
Participant information sheet	Plain English version	24/09/2024	25/11/2025	No	Yes