

# Taking on Trauma

BY KALENE MCCORT



photo by Tom Kimmel

Everyday, people across the globe undergo traumatic experiences that rock them to their core. Whether it is enduring pain by the hands of someone they know or experiencing Mother Nature's ravenous storms, these events can leave victims feeling hopeless. UCCS professor of psychology Chip Benight is making strides to help those affected start the healing process and take back their power. Eventually shedding the word 'victim' altogether.

"As a child I was always very relational, for lack of a better

word," said Benight, who has served as the editor of the *Journal of Traumatic Stress*. "I found myself trying to comfort others when I was quite young, maybe 6 or 7 years old."

Decades later, Benight is still trying to find the best possible solutions to help those in need of emotional counsel.

A \$40,000 web-based project funded by the Network Information and Space Security and the National Institute of Mental Health, called Mytraumarecovery.com is helping those obtain help in an anonymous way. Founded in collaboration with Dr. Josef Ruzek at the National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, this one-of-a-kind program uses tools like a community message board, relaxation exercises and progress charts to aid in the healing process.

Oftentimes, it can be challenging making that first appointment with a professional. Mytraumarecovery.com uses a series of steps to help people gain empowerment to seek the help they need.

"I find it incredibly motivating and humbling to work clinically and scientifically with people who are overcoming life's most intense challenges," said Benight. "I also see the challenge of reducing the individual, family, and community ramifications of trauma as critically important and something to which I have devoted my career."

Prior to dedicating his career to helping others, Benight was following in his older brother's footsteps studying business in order to succeed in hotel management. While he obtained a degree in business management through Arizona State University, he continually found himself being drawn to the psychology behind stress and coping mechanisms. He attended Stanford and received his Ph.D., doing his dissertation on a theory he developed titled: "Competent-Incompetent Desperation Shift Theory," which attempted to explain sudden cardiac death from an intense emotional experience.

In 1992, he and his wife moved to Florida so he could start his post-doctoral fellowship, in behavioral medicine, at the University of Miami—only to be greeted two days later by Hurricane Andrew, a storm that left the southern part of the peninsula in utter disarray. Serendipitously, this tragedy in the Sunshine State would help shift Benight's career into the mold it has taken today.

"This changed our lives forever," said Benight. "I started doing disaster related studies and have been doing trauma related science ever since."

Benight teamed up with Dr. Eve Grunfest, a short-fuse weather disaster expert for "The Warning Project"—a \$422,000 venture funded by the National Science Foundation in order to see the effectiveness of weather warnings. "We found that a person's trauma history might be important in how they interpret

and potentially behave based on a warning."

When chaos ensues, sometimes the people left most traumatized are the ones sent in to take action. That is why Benight, along with other colleagues have formed a Peer Support Program for first responders. Inspired by a program based out of Australia called Priority One, Benight's program strives to help frontliners acknowledge and seek the help they need in order to combat the stress that comes with the territory of their occupations.

"Through our 40-hour-program, we train specially identified personnel at all ranks from the fire department on how to identify, respond, and refer a firefighter who is struggling with trauma related or non-trauma related issues," said Benight. "We have provided through our technology transfer work a web-based system that the firefighters can access whenever and wherever they wish to help them manage trauma related challenges."

When not creating solutions to help others overcome emotional hardships, Benight loves to stay active and thrives in the areas of endurance, spending his summers training for events like Lake to Lake Triathlon and Pikes Peak Ascent. His drive to push his body was evident from the time he was six-years-old, when he competed in 1 to 3 meter diving and showed Olympic promise.

"I think this combination of being very emotionally sensitive and highly competitive really linked me into the field of health psychology and now more specifically trauma psychology," said Benight, who received a \$115,000 National Institute of Mental Health grant on coping with motor vehicle accident trauma.

In the fall, Benight will launch a program that strives to help military mental health providers overcome job burnout. "About three years ago I realized that one forgotten area that I, and my center, might be



helpful in is helping the helpers themselves," he said.

This internet-based program called SupportNet aims to help those mental health providers with emotional stamina and relaxation techniques.

"The most exciting aspect of this project is the opportunity to conduct good science on this topic and develop a viable and transferable program," said Benight. "If we can create a program that is ultimately useful to the military in helping to improve the wellness of their providers, I would be thrilled."

Benight finds a great

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sense of fulfillment in the classroom and as someone who switched career paths from business to psychology, he encourages young adults to follow their gut-instinct when it comes to a profession.

"For any student my advice is to follow your passion. Find something that keeps you up at night thinking and do that!" said Benight. "When you do what you love, you have an incredible opportunity to make a difference in the world. We need more of this."

"I recently had a student tell me how much of a positive impact I had on her development as a person and an academic," said Benight. "It doesn't get better than that!"

"In addition to helping students I absolutely love skiing and sitting in the lodge with a cold beer looking at the last few skiers coming down the darkened mountain," said Benight, a man who has helped others overcome challenges and their darkest days.