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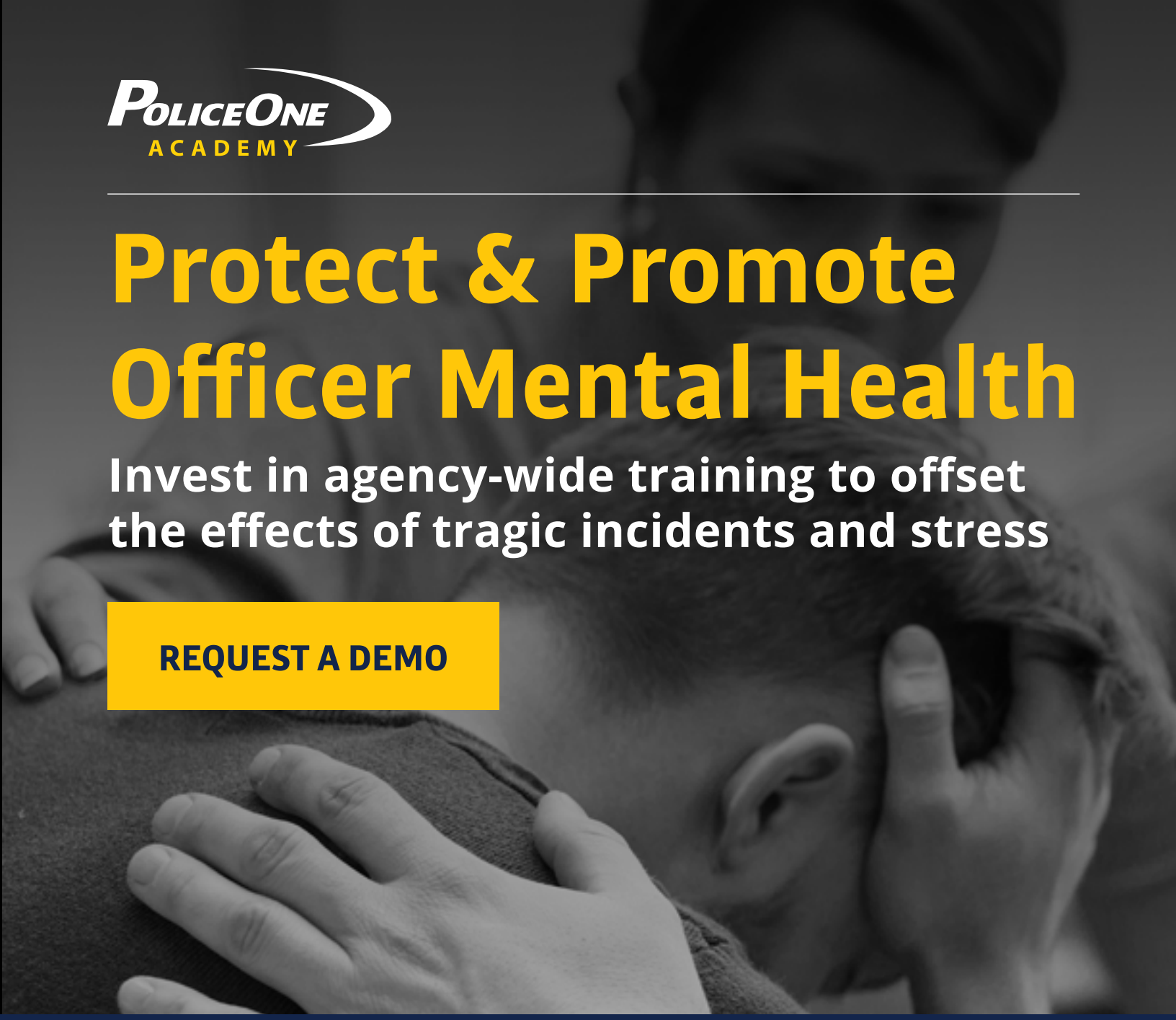
OFFICER WELLNESS: PRIORITIZING MENTAL & EMOTIONAL HEALTH

INSIDE



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EDITOR'S NOTE

Public safety is a difficult profession that can lead to mental health struggles. The repercussions of leaving those struggles untreated are significant. More police officers died by suicide than in the line of duty in 2018, as was the case the previous year and the year prior to that.

Fortunately, awareness is growing about the risks law enforcement officers face from repeated exposure to emotional trauma and high-stress incidents.

It is imperative that police leaders create an environment in which officers are open to seeking peer support and other mental health-related services. This requires the implementation of training, policies and programs that promote officer self-care and mental health awareness.

This eBook provides a template for agencies to develop wellness programs that will ensure officers are as prepared for the mental risks of the job as they are physical ones.

Bill McAuliffe makes a case for why agencies need to buck the old and dangerous "10-feet-tall and bulletproof" mindset and embrace and model healthy and effective mental health practices. Damon Simmons reviews what leaders, managers and supervisors within a law enforcement agency can do to mitigate work-related stressors experienced by officers. Jim Dudley outlines the six steps to forming a successful peer support program. Finally, Dan Fish details why officers need to develop self-care tools in order to preserve their emotional and mental health.

By giving officers the tools to recognize symptoms of stress, agencies can provide an early warning sign for effective intervention. And that will save lives.

What programs has your agency implemented to prioritize officer wellness? Email editor@policeone.com.

Nancy Perry
Editor-in-Chief, PoliceOne.com

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Why we need a new approach to law enforcement officer mental health

As a profession, we have been negligent in teaching proper coping skills to our brothers and sisters in public safety

By Bill McAuliffe

Take a minute to think back to when you attended your basic academy. Reflect on the long list of topics covered in those grueling months meant to get you primed and ready to tackle the world of public safety. Do you recall topics such as ethics, chain of command, use of force, handcuffing, courtroom testimony, physical fitness, and laws of arrest and search and seizure? Me too. I think we can agree that all of those are critical to being successful as an officer. Of course, that's before your field training officer (FTO) tells you, "Forget what you learned in the academy, kid, I will show you how the real world works," right?

Can you think of any topics you would add to that list now that you are a veteran? I can.

Collecting Baggage

When I started my career in public safety in 1989, it was as a member of the U.S. Coast Guard. My role encompassed all things Coast Guard, but with an emphasis on law enforcement as a part of port security. I later joined the civilian law enforcement world, which was similar, yet had a marked difference from my maritime law enforcement training.

As my career progressed, I had the honor of working alongside some great professionals and being influenced by strong and impressive leaders. I also had the misfortune of working for some not-so-great leaders and with some questionable members of this profession. In my 22 years divided between two sheriff's offices, I served in many roles. Some of my most memorable and noteworthy were eight years as a SWAT operator, five years as a dual-purpose K9 handler and nearly two years as a jail commander.

Over the years I amassed my collection of memories, as we all have. Some memories bring a smile to my face, while others invoke a black cloud that haunts me. All of us, regardless of how many weeks, months or years we have served, accumulate a collection of experiences we carry with us. It is as if we are issued a

huge duffle bag on day one that we strap to our backs and carry ever since, continuing to pile on the weight: critical incident debriefs, mandatory psychological counseling after an officer-involved shooting, and personal issues such as divorce. As the years go on, we become conditioned to carrying the additional weight of that emotional duffle bag, like a runner training for a marathon.

Breaking Point

The problem: We have forgotten everyone has a breaking point. Continuing to add "baggage" pushes us closer and closer to that breaking point when we really should be shedding weight along the way.

I was lucky to have a friend who saw my breaking point rapidly approaching and intervened before I crashed and burned. All the years of collecting baggage, along with a huge dose of personal attacks and betrayals, made for a toxic workplace, causing both a physical and mental reaction. And not a good one.

Toward the end of my career wearing the uniform, I had the unfortunate experience of working with and for what I consider the most toxic and unprofessional members of our industry I have ever met. In short, members of my command staff – my own team – created a work environment so toxic my body accelerated toward that breaking point. While I was trying to "fight the good fight" and repel the personal attacks, my body was headed for disaster.

By the grace of God, my friend – who was a doctor and jail medical director – noted my condition, took me out of work and introduced me to a great support network. This is when I first learned that I should have been practicing better mental health and not just paying attention to my physical health.

While working through my situation I was introduced to mindfulness stress reduction as a way to reduce my stress, depression and anxiety. I attended workshops and read several articles and books related to law enforcement officer mental health and the physiological effects of stress. I learned I was damaged and had not been properly mentally prepared for what I experienced.

While I did continue to fight and later prevail against my previous employer, I learned I had a lot more

baggage to work through. My battle had opened my eyes to all sorts of things I carry in my proverbial emotional duffle bag, traumatic memories lurking in my head and never properly processed out of my system. I learned how we can get caught in an infinite loop of trauma and how that negatively impacts us in many ways. I had been practicing what I call the "10-foot-tall and bulletproof" or "suck it up, it comes with the job" approach to survival.

I also came to realize that as a profession, we have been negligent in teaching proper coping skills to our brothers and sisters in public safety. We have been perpetuating an unhealthy approach to emotional survival and to law enforcement officer mental health in general. As Dr. Kevin Gilmartin – the author of "Emotional Survival for Law Enforcement" says – in the United States we do a great job of hiring strong, brave, upright men and women, only to retire them as burned-out shells of their former selves. I can attest that Dr. Gilmartin – and many others who have made the same observation – are absolutely correct.

Wake-Up Call

It's time for law enforcement as a profession to wake up and take a proactive approach to keep our modern-day warriors mentally healthy. We need to remove the expectation of being "10-foot-tall and bulletproof" and equip these brave men and women with the support and skills to properly compartmentalize their emotions so they can remain effective in the face of danger and tragedy. Law enforcement officers

must learn to process traumatic sounds, images and feelings in a healthy and timely manner, so they do not pile up like 800-lb. gorillas of emotion left to compost, only to spontaneously combust later in life.

According to national statistics, more cops and firefighters kill themselves each year than are killed in the line of duty. While we spend countless millions of dollars keeping others from killing our heroes every year by outfitting them with ballistic armor and tactical training, we spend almost nothing and virtually no time preparing them to stay mentally healthy so that they don't become depressed, anxious and suicidal. While we are well prepared for physical attacks and dangerous incidents, we seem to be ignoring the number one killer over which we have much more control and influence – ourselves!

If you are a law enforcement leader, with or without rank, you owe it to yourself, your comrades and your community to buck the old and dangerous "10-foot-tall and bulletproof" mindset and embrace and model healthy and effective law enforcement officer mental health practices. I recommend you read Dr. Gilmartin's book and research mindfulness stress reduction practices and mental health practitioners in your area. While mental health practitioners with an expertise in public safety are in short supply, the internet is a fantastic tool for you to start doing better self-care while connecting to the right network of experienced resources.

Law enforcement officers must learn to process traumatic sounds, images and feelings in a healthy and timely manner.

About the author

Bill McAuliffe is the director of professional services for Lexipol and a 22-year veteran of law enforcement. He served as a lieutenant for the Bonner County (ID) Sheriff's Office in positions including patrol watch commander, professional services lieutenant, chief pilot and jail commander. Prior to serving with Bonner County, Bill served as a deputy for the Santa Cruz (CA) County Sheriff's Office, working in detention, patrol and court security. He was a member of the SWAT team for eight years and a K9 handler for five years.

Leadership strategies to reduce officer stress

What can leaders, managers and supervisors within a law enforcement agency do to mitigate work-related stress experienced by officers?

By Damon Simmons, PhD, C.S.M.C.

As the landscape of police work evolves, so do the men and women who lead, supervise and manage law enforcement agencies. One thing that remains constant is that law enforcement is regarded as one of our nation's most stressful occupations.

Work-related stress, overall, has a devastating impact on our economy and our health:

- Researchers estimate that companies in the United States lose approximately $300 billion annually because of work-related stress issues
- Half of American workers feel they need assistance in managing work-related stress.
- Health issues prompted by work-related stress cost U.S. businesses an estimated $68 billion and cause a 10% decline in profits annually.
- $700M is spent annually by organizations in the United States to hire and train new employees to replace those aged 45-65 who die of cardiac-related disease.
- Approximately 1 million American workers are absent from work each day because of work-

related stress issues, equating to approximately 550 million days per year of employee stress-related absences.

- Forty percent of job turnover is a product of work-related stress.
- Ten of the world's leading causes of death, including cardiovascular disease (which is the leading cause of death for men and women), are linked to work-related stress.

Causes of officer stress

In a recent study I conducted, I found that law enforcement officer stressors can be divided into three categories:

- Operational stress (e.g., exposure to traumatic events, shift work and work-related injuries);
- Organizational stress (e.g., bureaucratic hurdles, administrative battles and career ambitions);
- Personal stress.

The operational and organizational stresses officers experience can reach beyond that of each officer, the uniform and the organization. People who have relationships with officers, especially intimate relationships, often experience the byproduct of an officer experience with work-related stress.

Work-related stress experienced by officers is linked to posttraumatic stress symptomology, anxiety and depression. High levels of anxiety and depression in law enforcement officers and exposure to hazardous situations are linked to high levels of alcohol use among law enforcement officers. Stress is also linked to a higher tendency to develop illnesses that are a result of deficiencies in the immune system and the development of sleep disorders in officers. A decrease in commitment to their assigned duties and attitude toward their colleagues is linked to occupational and organizational stress. Intimate partner violence or domestic violence has also been linked to operational and organizational stress.

What can the leaders, managers and supervisors within a law enforcement agency do to mitigate the work-related stress experienced by officers within their agency? This battle must be fought in three essential areas:

- Organizational structure: How labor is divided and managed within an organization.
- Organizational context: The social and environmental background of an organization.
- Organizational control: The direction and control of tasks in an agency.

Through these three areas listed above, leaders have the ability and opportunity to establish and promote supportive work environments that reduce stress experienced by officers. Below are a few suggestions related to each of the three areas that may help police leaders reduce stress experienced by officers:

1. Organizational structure: How labor is divided and managed within an organization.

- Researchers have found that 10-hour shifts are most beneficial for officers. Officers working 10-hour shifts get more quality sleep, experience less fatigue and report higher overall work satisfaction. Officers working eight-hour shifts report less sleep in a 24-hour period and work more overtime. Officers working 12-hour shifts are less likely to perform self-initiated tasks.

The operational and organizational stresses officers experience can reach beyond that of each officer, the uniform and the organization.

- Researchers have shown that pairing officers with a partner with similar personalities reduces job dissatisfaction and increases job performance.
- Emphasize monotasking! Multitasking is a myth. Humans are not effective or efficient parallel processors. Neuroscience researchers indicate that multitasking doubles the amount of time to complete a task and doubles the number of mistakes made while completing the task.
- Promote employee assistance programs (EAPs).
- Hire new officers based on individual background, coping abilities and education levels. Hiring new officers in this manner could provide your agency with individuals better suited to deal with stress.

2. Organizational context: The social and environmental background of an organization.

- Research has shown that officers who have a good working relationship with administration experience less stress.
- Relationships between administrators and police bargaining units are also important.
- Leaders can implement exercise and stress-reduction programs.
- Leaders can use anonymous stress surveys to identify sources of stress in the workplace.
- Leaders can take efforts to increase job meaningfulness.
- Lead by example, practicing self-care. If employees observe their leadership engage in wellness activities, such as staying physically fit to reduce stress, they are more inclined to participate in wellness activities.
- Show gratitude and practice empathy and compassion.
- Make wellness convenient by offering healthy meal and snack options at your agency.
- Train employees to deal with chaos.
- Focus on employee personal growth and development to promote creativity and increase productivity.
- Practice mindfulness, which can create mental habits that promote resilience and productivity.
- Include both officers and their families when developing stress-related policies, procedures and training.
- Understand the importance of race and gender when establishing policies and training. Researchers have shown that African American officers feel their job performance is viewed more critically. Researchers have also shown that male officers feel they must maintain masculine personas, while female officers feel that the male officers do not want them on a traditionally male-dominated job.

3. Organizational control: The direction and control of tasks in an agency.

- From a leadership perspective, middle managers hold the key to changing the workplace culture to one that supports wellbeing and reduces workplace stress, as employees most frequently see and communicate with middle managers.

Stress has an immense psychological and physiological effect on officers, their families and their friends, not to mention a devastating financial and operational effect on law enforcement agencies. Effective leadership, supervision and management are essential in preserving the well-being of every officer within a law enforcement agency.

About the author

Damon Simmons is currently a patrol sergeant with the Spokane County Sheriff's Office (WA). He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Sociology from the University of Great Falls, a Master of Science Degree from the University of Phoenix, and a Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Criminal Justice from Walden University. Damon owns and operates LEO Firstline, L.L.C., a company offering stress management education and training for law enforcement agencies, as well as the public.

6 steps to launching a successful peer support program

Peer support is not a silver bullet to solve all the problems today's law enforcement officers face, but it is an effective way of getting help to officers in need

By Jim Dudley

In March 1989 I was involved in a fatal shootout with a suspect on a street in San Francisco. Within one hour of the shooting, I sat in the main briefing room of the police station awaiting interviews with my sergeant, our homicide detail inspectors and the District Attorney's investigator.

As I sat trying to collect my thoughts on the incident, I was approached by another officer. The officer started slowly in his approach, asking if I was all right and if I needed anything. He then asked about particulars of the shooting, requesting morbid and graphic details of the event.

His line of questions shocked me, as if I had done something wrong. I was still feeling the rush of adrenalin and wrestling with the fact I had just taken a life. I looked at him in disbelief, shook my head and walked away, turning to a bulletin board that featured a memorandum announcing the Peer Support Program (PSP) list of PS officers at the station. I saw my own name as a peer support member and just below it, I read the name of this officer. I realized that not everyone is suited to be a peer support officer.

Over the years, I have come to know the true value a PSP can bring to an agency. Peer support gives officers the opportunity to talk with someone who understands their line of work and the associated issues that come with it.

Taking a mental health-centered approach to stress management

I joined the peer support group of officers during the fledgling years in the early 1980s where it was heralded by Lieutenant Al Benner, PhD, a respected and charismatic leader in the San Francisco Police Department (SFPD). Dr. Benner was a pioneer in developing mental health-centered ways for sworn officers to deal with job-related PTSD and other stress-related symptoms.

Until then, officers typically dealt with their stress at the local tavern, but relief by alcohol only added to mounting problems. Dr. Benner did a good job of convincing the leadership that these types of debriefings would manifest into larger problems. He was able to establish the first Behavioral Science Unit to focus on stress-related conditions experienced by officers. To this day, the SFPD maintains a robust Behavioral Science Unit and active Peer Support Program to address problems that may affect sworn and civilian members of the department.

How peer support programs work

Recent research shows two kinds of negative influences affect law enforcement officers: Organizational and environmental. Stress that is allowed to fester unabated may lead to drug abuse, alcoholism, anger, burn-out, depression, misconduct or harm to the individual or others.

Peer support teams were conceived in part to provide an alternative for officers before mounting worry and stress negatively affected them on the job and at home. Officers were trained by mental health care professionals to listen and provide support and practical assistance, with referrals to professional mental health care when needed.

Officers were instructed to wait for an officer or non-sworn member to approach them and not try to solve problems. Retired Lieutenant Lynnette Hogue, who was involved in the development of the Behavioral Science Unit along with Benner, explains this nuance: "It's certainly appropriate to do a 'check in' with an officer who may seem in some sort of duress, but they cannot be intrusive. The officer who asks about details of an event is wrong to do that, especially in an officer-involved shooting where the peer support officer must be careful not to get involved in information where they may be compelled at some point to testify."

It is essential to have credible and reliable officers who can abide by confidentiality protocols. Officers selected for a peer support program must be approachable and discreet. Training is a key aspect of a successful program. Hogue stresses the need for the chief and command staff to buy in to a program and for personnel to take a leap of faith in regard to confidentiality issues.

Dr. Ellen Kirschman is a noted psychologist in police mental health programs. She believes that peer supporters are valuable because they have "walked in the other person's shoes." She cautions though that, "Serious mental health concerns, e.g., suicidality, should be referred to a mental health professional."

Kirschman trains police officers in California with the California Peace Officers' Standards and Training (POST) programs. She stresses the importance of the

selection process of PSP candidates and the need for them "to be credible to their fellow employees, not struggling with their own issues, and able to hold confidentiality." Having a mental health professional (MHP) on hand to work with them, conduct training, answer questions and monitor issues is also important.

The effectiveness of a PSP may vary from agency to agency, based primarily on anecdotal evidence (by design) but may also be gauged by utilization numbers. The International Association of Chiefs' of Police (IACP) Psychological Services Division developed a Peer Support Guidelines policy in 2016 with priorities and standards listed for agencies that are creating new programs, or for those with already established programs (IACP Psychological Services Division, 2016).

Both Hogue and Kirschman agreed that PSPs should track the number of contacts, recurring issues, time spent and the number of referrals made. Each said that despite calls for PSP officers to document the numbers of contacts, most contacts were superficially so casual they were under-reported. Statistics can be misleading and successful interventions are difficult to quantify. It may be virtually impossible to list successes by the number of tragedies averted. Tracking is indeed useful not only in terms of hours devoted to peers, but also to identify emerging issues and trends such as alcohol or drug abuse, family issues, work-related trauma, critical incident responses and so on. Once a trend is identified, it may be used to allocate additional resources or training.

How to create a peer support program

There are six essential pillars to every successful peer support program:

1 Confidentiality

Confidentiality has been cited as critical to a successful program in order to build trust and confidence. A break in confidentiality will likely deter those fearing the stigma of reaching out for psychological support. Confidentiality and privacy must be maintained from the peer support officer to the chief or sheriff of the organization.

2 Administrative support

The adopting agency must have buy-in from the chief, sheriff and command staff. One point of contact

should assist in creating policy and general orders, securing funding, training and acquiring personnel. Importance should be placed on securing a credible and competent program director. The director should understand the value of the program as a priority and be able to articulate the concepts of vicarious liability and responsibility to members of command staff.

3 Professional mental health professional (MHP) support and guidance

The MHP is important at all stages of the Peer Support Program, from development of guidelines and policy, to the selection of peer support members, to advising and conducting training and as a conduit to mental health resources and services.

4 Personnel selection

As Kirschman noted, members of the PSP should be seen as credible, competent and trustworthy. They should be free of their own struggles or issues and adaptable to training. Candidates may apply, be nominated by rank and file, or be selected by the PSP director. Members should be regularly assessed throughout training and while serving on the team. There needs to be a mechanism to remove peer supporters who cannot conform to guidelines.

5 Training and support

Approved training according to POST standards should be available to each agency within a state. MHPs should be aligned with training to ensure that members are in accordance with approved mental health guidelines as well. Pitfalls should be addressed and revisited to ensure PSP members do not over-identify with their peers, do not try to solve problems, do not cover up criminality, 'fix' things, or advocate for an individual. Training should address active listening, staying neutral, understanding trauma, and watching for signs of suicidality or substance abuse.

6 Reviews and audits

As with any policy or program, assessments and reviews are necessary to maintain an effective program. Utilization numbers, training and monitoring peer members should be evaluated. In-house audits should be supplemented with a neutral outside auditor for objectivity.

Officers selected for a peer support program must be approachable and discreet.

Conclusion

Policing today may be more stressful than ever, due in part to the negative scrutiny from social media, politicians and special interest groups. Officers are asked to deal with social issues, such as homelessness, mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse, violence and problems with youth and families. Studies have shown that PSPs are effective in addressing problems and applying resources to help others in their peer group. Peer group participation in behavioral health has shown to "improve quality of life, improve engagement and satisfaction with services and supports, and improve whole health." In addition to one-on-one peer support, PSPs have been found to be useful in after action debriefings at critical incidents and traumatic events. They have been participants in return-to-duty procedures, as well by assisting a transition from a critical incident to preparing for duty.

Peer support is not a silver bullet to solve all the problems facing today's law enforcement officers. It is, however, an effective means of getting help to officers in need, from other officers who understand their problems. Police are asked to help strangers with a variety of situations on a daily basis; I saw the benefit of joining a program that gave me the opportunity to help other officers who I worked with and knew. Despite my rocky start with peer support immediately following my OIS, I was afforded outstanding support by a host of colleagues, including Al Benner, who helped me through the ordeal and back to work.

About the author

James Dudley is a 32-year veteran of the San Francisco Police Department where he retired as deputy chief of the Patrol Bureau. He has served as the DC of Special Operations and Liaison to the Department of Emergency Management where he served as Event and Incident Commander for a variety of incidents, operations and emergencies. He has a master's degree in Criminology and Social Ecology from the University of California at Irvine. He is currently a member of the Criminal Justice faculty at San Francisco State University, consults on organizational assessments for LE agencies and co-hosts the Policing Matters podcast for PoliceOne.

How self-care can reduce police officer stress

What we often see in law enforcement officers is dedication to the job taken to an extreme, which like any addiction, can cause problems

By Dan Fish

How do law enforcement officers end up chronically stressed, burned out and suffering from compassion fatigue? Why do so many officers fail to take care of themselves mentally and physically? And how can we help them achieve better health and balance?

Questions like these are dominating the public safety profession. Look at any law enforcement publication, website or conference line-up, and you'll see topics related to physical and mental well-being, post-traumatic stress, peer support and other behavioral health issues. (Full disclosure: The inspiration for this article was a presentation called "Keeping the Super Heroes Super," by licensed psychologist and organizational consultant Kimberly A. Miller, PhD, at the FBINAA California Re-Trainer in August 2017.)

In part, this shift is driven by sheer economics – recruiting is increasingly difficult for law enforcement agencies, so we need to find ways to retain good officers. But scientific developments are also driving the change. We're learning more about the essential connection between mental and emotional health and performance. And that changes job-related stress from something we should just "deal with" to something that presents significant risks for law enforcement agencies.

What's Stressing Officers Out?

There's no shortage of stressors in law enforcement. Depending on where you live and work, you may face media scrutiny or community distrust. Then there's the grind of responding to call after call where people are exhibiting their worst behavior or are victims of someone else's bad behavior. But let's focus for a minute on two even bigger factors that underlie these specific stressors.

First, law enforcement officers are hard-wired to focus on the negative. We are always in threat assessment mode. In the academy, we are taught to focus on the bad things that can happen – because doing so could save our lives one day. This hard-wired approach to focus on the negative can take its toll and make it difficult to differentiate situations where we should be looking for the positive.

Second, law enforcement is a 24/7 career. There is a high level of responsibility that comes with being a protector of the public. Coupled with that, law enforcement culture expects officers to be stoic and

Lack of sleep is linked to many adverse health effects, even cancer, and can worsen the effects of post-traumatic stress.

strong in the face of adversity. We are taught to resist normal physiological responses to tragedies or critical incidents. This combination creates a perfect storm: The profession becomes all-encompassing, but at the same time we don't provide officers with tools to deal with the effects of the profession.

How Do We Know We're Stressed?

The consequences of police officer stress pose a serious threat. Before we go further, let's consider a few definitions:

- Stress is mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or very demanding circumstances.
- Burnout is the cumulative process marked by emotional exhaustion or withdrawal associated with increased workload or institutional stress.
- Compassion fatigue is the emotional residue/strain of exposure to working with those suffering traumatic events. It can encompass physical symptoms, such as difficulty sleeping, and emotional symptoms, such as loss of self-worth or anger.

How does police officer stress manifest itself? Consider these possible signs and symptoms:

- Isolation and withdrawal;
- Being disengaged or unmotivated;
- Physical exhaustion;
- Nightmares and flashbacks;
- Poor hygiene or apathy about one's physical appearance;
- Loss of empathy or compassion;
- Relationship issues, including divorce;
- Substance misuse and abuse;

- Recurrent sadness or depression;
- Resistance to feedback;
- Resistance to change;
- Reduction in meaningful work product;
- Reduced job satisfaction;
- Increase in citizen complaints.

Most of these signs and symptoms can be traced back to depleted energy. For many officers, law enforcement is their identity. They don't leave much energy for their family, their friends or themselves. In turn, they can quickly feel isolated when dealing with the normal challenges of law enforcement. Once isolated, it's a short step to despair and depression.

How Can Self-Care Help?

The answer to the devastating consequences of police officer stress is self-care for mental health.

You may have heard this term tossed around, but what does it really mean? Self-care is not an exercise regimen or seeing a psychologist (although it could encompass those things). Rather, it's a conscious process of considering our needs and seeking out activities and habits that replenish our energy – so that we can do our jobs better. This last part is often difficult to understand. Our Type A personalities often lead us to believe that we do our best when we commit all our resources to something, working ourselves harder and harder. But that's simply not true.

We only have a finite amount of energy each day to expend. Just as taking a day off from the gym can help us train harder the next day, participating in activities outside law enforcement helps us refuel emotionally, which makes us more effective when we go back on duty. Combating the negative mindset also comes into play here. When you consider that negative emotion burns twice as much energy as positive emotion, the challenge and skill to remain positive makes its own case. We need to train officers to regularly assess their energy levels and focus on the positive.

One way to do this is by applying the "for vs. to" test to reframe an experience. Saying that something happened "to me" makes the experience negative and victimizing. Saying that something happened "for me" immediately turns the experience into a positive event and creates a challenge for officers to better themselves by developing their leadership and coping skills. Everything is a lesson and at minimum, in every tragedy/critical incident, there is a test of humanity. That test can develop good character if administered correctly, and should allow officers to feel relief instead of regret. The lesson is to not allow a temporary event to become a permanent state of mind.

Another important factor to understand about self-care: It's a perishable skill, just like driving, shooting or arrest and control techniques. To be successful in maintaining good mental health, officers must practice. Let's look at a few ways to do just that.

3 Self-Care Tools

As I mentioned above, Dr. Kimberly Miller presents frequently on the topic of self-care. She uses the analogy of "filling one's bucket" with coping mechanisms that help officers stay positive, develop identity and self-worth outside of law enforcement, and be more in touch with their feelings and emotions.

Here are three self-care tools she teaches.

1. Cultivate a life outside law enforcement.

Good bucket-fillers create time for relationships and activities outside of the work environment. Don't short shrift your spouse, children or friends for work. Because it can be hard to let go of the job even when you are off duty, you may at first need to schedule planned activities with family and friends. Otherwise, you may find that you spent yet another evening stewing over the day's events while your kids played games on their tablets in the other room. Remember, too, that "alone time" is beneficial. Find activities – hiking, swimming, reading, bird watching, listening to music – that you enjoy and make time for them, too.

Other tips: Disengage from technology whenever possible or at prescribed times of the day or week, and avoid energy "vampires" (people who demand too much of your energy).

2. Develop good physical health habits.

Dr. Miller suggests committing to an exercise regimen – one you can maintain. Consider whether you need to improve your diet, too. Law enforcement officers often find it difficult to eat healthy on shift, but preparing meals in advance can help. Cooking can also be a great way to spend quality time with your spouse and/or children.

Finally, do everything you can to get enough sleep. Most people need between 6 and 9 hours. Lack of sleep is linked to many adverse health effects, even cancer, and can worsen the effects of post-traumatic stress. I know it's not always possible, but when you can, plan for appropriate sleep time to avoid starting the day already low on valuable energy.

3. Practice meditation and mindfulness.

Dr. Miller and I agree that visualization, meditation and mindfulness also have promise as a focused method of improving the mental health of officers.

Visualization is a type of meditation about a specific activity or outcome and is widely used by professional athletes to focus on performance. Police officers are very much like professional athletes and this method should be considered as a part of any self-care program.

Meditation is focused on trying to empty one's mind of everything so that it can re-charge or clear the memory of negative thoughts.

Mindfulness is a technique I've written about before; it involves paying attention to thoughts and feelings and how they are affecting you, then altering the thought process to deal more effectively and efficiently with the feelings.

Thinking Long-Term

Our society praises selflessness. That's understandable; our natural inclination is to put ourselves first, and learning to push back against that impulse makes us better citizens and human beings. But like any habit, selflessness can become an addiction. What we often see in law enforcement officers is dedication to the job taken to an extreme. And like any addiction, over time, it begins to cause problems – physically, mentally, emotionally.

Law enforcement agencies have typically done a poor job of understanding police officer stress and helping officers cope. That needs to change. We need leadership role models who will demonstrate the important of actively choosing a balanced lifestyle. We need peer support and supervisors who show officers that it's OK to feel pain and emotional distress – that doing so builds resilience over time.

We cannot give away what we don't have; unfortunately, too many officers don't understand this concept. Today's officers require a new kind of bravery: The courage to change hard-wired habits and commit to self-care. This is not something we can put off to deal with in retirement – or we might never get there. When it comes to positive mental health, we simply can't afford to trade the now for later.

About the author

Dan Fish is a Senior Project Manager for Lexipol. He retired from law enforcement in May 2017 after a 30-year career where he served in all ranks of the Petaluma (CA) Police Department including Chief of Police. Fish earned his bachelor's degree in criminal justice from Sacramento State University and he holds a graduate certificate in law enforcement leadership from the University of Virginia. He holds several California certificates including the POST Management Certificate and the Phi Theta Kappa International Honor Society Leadership Development Program. Fish is a graduate of the POST Executive Development Course and Command College, the LAPD West Point Leadership Program and the FBI National Academy session #263.

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