

**A CRACK IN THE SHIELD: Emotional Wellness in Policing**

Captain Michael Brown, Lafayette Police Department  
Lieutenant Chastity Arwood, Lafayette Police Department  
Lieutenant Joey Prevost, Lafayette Police Department

National Command and Staff College, Session #008

March 2021

### **Abstract**

Police forces must constantly strive to improve the sustainability of service delivery. Resilience requires appropriate skills so that police officers can think critically and deal with emotions effectively. Teaching Life/Coping Skills are important while training police officers. Officers should also have a clear understanding of departmental values, attitudes, and mission. Team resilience is associated with emotional mobility, fitness, and overall performance. Resilience builds strong bonds and relationships with others. Many properties allow you to categorize these high-quality associations.

### **A CRACK IN THE SHIELD: Emotional Wellness in Policing**

Stress is always in our lives and at work. Many factors cause stress in the workplace and due to individual fragility, it is often self-induced even though brought on by other factors. Circumstances such as critical incidents, calls of child death/abuse or the death of a co-worker can and will trigger responses. How we can navigate those responses determines our well-being and proneness to Post Traumatic Stress.

#### **Warning Signs/Behavior**

Administrators and supervisors should be able to recognize adverse changes in behavior in an employee. Training programs should be put into place for newly promoted supervisors to aid in this. If certain behaviors can be recognized beforehand and mitigation efforts put into place, we can often avoid the unthinkable with an employee in crisis. Police Agencies should always strive to improve the resiliency of their employees. This only serves to improve overall health of the individual as well as the organization. It also improves the delivery of service. Resilience training and anti-fragility gives employees the necessary skills to adapt to change and recover from adversity. Officers must have a good grasp of their own Emotional Intelligence and Personality Profile to have an understanding of what causes them to respond in certain ways. If officers can master this, they can master their emotions and be better predisposed to positive attitudes. Resiliency aids officers in thinking critically and dealing with emotions effectively. These are necessary skills in today's world of policing.

#### **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**

Post Traumatic Stress is a clinical condition that is brought about by a traumatic event. The event may be related to a critical incident, death of co-worker or other work-related event. The event may not always be life threatening. Anything occurring in an individual's life that

they could consider to be life altering may also have the same effect. A divorce, conflict with a superior or co-worker and end of a relationship could contribute to an individual's fragility and lack of resilience. It is important to remember that what may seem to be a small issue to one individual, may be critical to another. We must practice the skills of Suspending our Frame of Reference and Attending if we wish to positively affect someone possibly in crisis. (Anderson, 2019) There are approximately 900,000 sworn police officers in the United States. PTSD among them is often silent and goes unaddressed. This study will examine the issues and mitigations needed to address Officer Wellness

Mitigations that may aid an officer's well being are exercise regimens, the nature of their inner circle on the job and their support system in their private life. Resilience is the ability to "bounce Back" when a problem is faced that may not be an inevitable part of life at work, and there are various stressors that employees experience (Jackson 2019). Resilience creates strong bonds and relationships with other people. Many properties allow you to classify these high-quality associations. Stress is unavoidable in our lives and at work, but we can take precautions in how we deal with said stress.

Navigating changing work environments, shift schedules and conflicts in relationships require some coping skills. Police Commanders can help officers share their experiences and reconnect with goals and progress, which are the two main drivers of change. The goal is what police services are trying to achieve, but progress determines the next steps for both staff and those around them. They feel their employees are supported and are responsible for what to do next. Being responsible increases resilience, for those who are overwhelmed by their work, make sure that leaders are properly trained to help colleagues in need before a crisis occurs.

Implement and provide opportunities for support groups within the police agency. Also include critical incident debriefing teams and include family/employee events.

Self-help is essential to mental health and takes the initiative to encourage or develop it. This includes providing healthier meals at work, encouraging a fitness regime and may include counseling/support for officers and staff. Many health professionals provide services in the corporate workplace to improve the physical and mental well being of their employees. These services range from nutrition strategists to corporate health coaches to include monitoring and mentoring. Occupational and Physical Therapists can aid employees recovering from injury or a traumatic event to return to duty. We need to ask, do we offer the same support at our agency?

Online tools and apps such as My Compass expand access to the online treatment and support through 24/7 availability and anonymity. In addition, the Beyond Blue Workplace Mental Health eLearning program provides awareness to the signs and symptoms of anxiety and where to seek assistance.. The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) allows police employees to seek counseling for both job related and personal issues. This service also ensures that employee spouses and children can get the help that they need.

Suicide is a serious health issue worldwide as the number of deaths associated with police officers are far above national average. Healthcare staff are faced with the challenge of comprehensively understanding and implementing preventive measures according to best practice approaches.

Police personnel in particular have been associated with an increase in suicide deaths caused by failures to cope with work related factors and lack of social health. An analysis of suicide prevention strategies in police employees has shown the full suitability for the use of Total Force Fitness (TFF) in reducing officer suicides. Total Force Fitness refers to the condition

in which police officers, other employees and their families achieve optimal mental health and performance despite adversity. The goal of TFF is to form a team that is more resilient to the task and less likely to experience a mental/behavioral crisis. That may lead to the unthinkable. TFF provides a new platform for police personnel and the mental health of those with whom they interact closely, including civilians and police personnel. The success of TFF depends on the belief that resilience can be achieved individually or with the help of others. Police Leadership should invest time in resources in this pursuit of anti-fragility.

Police family health is a concept that promotes TFF and is based on the assumption that police personnel have families that contribute to their emotional stability. Professional counselors can encourage employees to interact with others thereby increasing their social and coping skills. The development of coping ability improves overall physical and mental fitness, which improves the overall wellness of the agency.

Police officers often face adverse working conditions and hours. Changes in the working environment, both real and perceived and have a profound effect on an employee. Changes in the outside environment can also adversely affect an individual. If the employee is both mentally and physically prepared, their individual well-being will fare much better in environmental adaptability. As a result, so will the organization.

Organizational leaders and stake holders should make every effort to increase resilience by providing personnel with counseling and psychological support need to reduce suicidal ideation and increase resilience. Commanders should ensure that these services are made available both on and off duty.

Agency Leaders must be aware of the signs exhibited in officer's behavior both in their professional and personal lives. Destructive behaviors can end careers and relationships, not to mention create liability issues for the department.

### **Violence and Post-Traumatic Stress**

Post traumatic stress is often the result of a critical incident occurring on duty. Stress is what most people face daily in the way of work issues, financial difficulties and domestic strife. Everyday stress often adds to the initial stress level of an officer when they are exposed to a critical incident.

Officers may be exposed to horrific traffic crash scenes, gunfire or the death of a co-worker. Mental and emotional stress contributes to the well being of the officer. Many agencies have a high turn over rate due to the disturbing events officers are exposed to on a daily basis that shock the sensibility of the everyday citizen.

Linebach and Kovacsiss (2016) explained the stress by watching how "explosive events" and scarring events affect individuals. Explosive events usually occur internally while scarring events occur slowly and devour the individual. (Linebach & Kovacsiss, 2016) Police officers are more likely to experience PTSD than the public because of their occupation. Due to this, some of these challenges faced by law enforcement administrators are employee burnout, which leads to agency liability.

One of the greatest disasters that affected law enforcement officers in this country was the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. More than seventy police officers responded to the World Trade Center. Two years later, more than one-third of those surviving officers suffered from rising PTSD rates. Police officers are faced with traumatic events such as suicide, murder, shootings and horrific traffic crashes (Houdmont & Burke 2017). Tragedy can have serious

consequences of professional performance and can even culminate in the progress of PTSD. Police officers are affected differently reliant on the challenges or the event that the individual face (Marchand et al, 2015). Officers dealing with victims of sexual assault may show signs of PTSD. These individuals may face secondary PTSD by dealing with victims, suspects, case load and the court system. Secondary stress is the development of post-traumatic stress symptoms in people traumatized by others.

Police Officers deaths due to suicide is higher than the normal population (Houdmont & Burke, 2017). There are many reasons why law enforcement officers are increasing in suicide deaths. Most law enforcement suicides are associated with relationship issues, substance abuse, negative police images, personal legal issues and judicial inconsistencies (Heffren & Hausdorf, 2014).

### **Signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**

PTSD can cause many other serious physical and mental health issues. Suffers of PTSD may have nightmares, decreased work performance, relationship issues, avoidance of people or certain places and chronic physical signs of hyperexcitability (MFMER, 2011) Individuals may suffer flashbacks, irritability, undue anger and lack of sleep.

The financial cost can be staggering to an agency. Medical expenses for an employee and their family not to mention the cost of any liability settlement could cripple an organization's budget. Efforts to mitigate these issues will depend heavily upon the discovery of shown symptoms. Individuals may not wish to discuss the issue out of embarrassment and be resistant to treatment. Administrators must take care not to cause more damage to the employee. Left untreated, PTSD can lead to the unthinkable act of an officer suicide.



Administrators should also take measures to lessen the negative impacts of trauma through organizational changes, support groups, supervision, and monitoring workload (Heffren & Hausdorf, 2014). These changes are easy to implement positively and affect the performance of the law enforcement officer.

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**Tables**

Table 1

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