

Ptsd in law enforcement

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“ The police PTSD paradox is created by... the fact that we all know that stress can disable or incapacitate us on the job but when that happens to one of our own we defy logic and begin to shun them. Some agencies even do their best to throw those cops away because they feel like they are tainted or might create a liability. In many cases insurance programs don't provide for the proper medical or mental health treatments, or enough treatment and our medical leave programs seem wholly inadequate to respond to these situations. None of these categories seem to fit into a system for disability insurance and affected officers are left in limbo. It may just be an educational issue that we don't fully understand the effects of stress or causes of PTSD.

You see the crisis is not that police officers are getting PTSD, the crisis comes when agencies don't know how to help an officer with PTSD and they treat them poorly or worse, throw them away” (PTSD Paradox). After an officer has experienced a traumatic situation, post-traumatic stress disorder is inevitable. A police officer is still a person; a person who can be helped just like anyone else. It is an employer's job to ensure that an officer has been taken care of after a traumatic event. .

Several or all of these may be displayed through differing symptoms. There are many mental and physical changes displayed, including frequent and intense nightmares, insomnia, flashbacks and irritability weight loss/gain. These are only changes that family members and co-workers can see. However, there is so much going on in a victims' mind. Once the victim's family or co-workers suspects PTSD, the police officer should be treated

immediately to ensure the mental safety for themselves, their family and their community members.

“ Physical symptoms can include hyper vigilance, exaggerated startle response, difficulty sleeping, difficulty with concentration or memory, mood irritability, anger and depression. Intrusive symptoms can vary from recurring, distressing thoughts, memories, dreams, nightmares, flashbacks; physical or psychological distress when triggered, grief or survivor grief. Avoidant symptoms can be avoiding specific thoughts, feelings, activities or situations; loss of interest in significant activities, restricted range of emotions or numbness” (Flannery, Tamminga, Mason). Recognizing these symptoms after a loved one has experienced a traumatic event will help keep the threat of unhealthy addictions under control. After a traumatic event, law enforcement personnel should be evaluated and treated for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) immediately. The threat of any unhealthy addictions (alcoholism and abuse of narcotics) is very high in the police force.

The constant stress and heaviness on their shoulders leads too many police officers down the road of unhappiness and a life of unhealthy addictions. “ Indirect research has established a relationship between high job stress and excessive drinking. Officers interviewed cited guilt, anxiety, fear, nightmares and insomnia following involvement in shooting incidents” (Police Stressors). Substance abuse is all too real when dealing with the side effects of PTSD. The desire to feel numb, or to try and forget the experience, can affect officers’ performance on duty. “ Alcoholism, tobacco addiction and other job-

related health problems took the lives of far too many of our forefathers during the generations of internalized stress” (McKenzie).

With the proper help, family members and co-workers can help save the lives of those officers in an unstable mental state and keep the traumatic event from haunting every step in an officer’s life. The relationship of posttraumatic stress disorder in law enforcement can be experienced in dreams, flashbacks or recollections; intense psychological distress and physiological reactivity upon exposure to stressful situations. “ Too often in law enforcement, personnel equate mental disorders with being ‘ crazy’ and that an emotional response to trauma indicates ‘ weakness’. This myth must be erased. Law enforcement personnel must come to admit that they, too, are ‘ normal’ human beings” (Felt).

It is an officer’s job to protect civilians, but how well can they perform their job if they are too proud to seek medical attention that could save their lives? People in communities often forget the hard work and determination each police officer has when working in the line of duty. Civilians are quick to judge and rarely forgive an officer when they handle a situation that doesn’t agree with them. Dealing with a negative public takes a toll on an officers work experience. According to Senior Sheriff Bill Elfo, there is frequent exposure to danger as well as a possibility of exposure to weapons, physical assault, and hostile and offensive language from offenders and the public. The Whatcom Customs Officers undergo trainings that simulate an encounter with community members who are threatening, yelling and cursing at the officer on duty.

“ Research shows that they are affected by their daily exposure to human indecency and pain; that dealing with a suspicious and sometimes hostile public takes a toll on them” (Police Stressors). It is hard for officers to grasp the idea that the people they are so desperately trying to help would criticize and condemn them. Officers feel they have fewer rights than the criminals they apprehend, because the public is so quick to take action when they feel an officer has made a mistake (Police Stressors). Sheriff’s Detective, Ken Gates spoke about an arrest made at a public bar during cemetery shift. “ Once I made the arrest, the friends of the assailant gave me a really hard time because I, ‘ arrested the wrong guy’ and I, ‘ obviously wasn’t doing my job right’”.

There is nothing an officer can do while on duty that can prepare him for the actions of the people in the public. Their superiors can only prepare them for what may happen through situational work during training when they encounter civilians who are unhappy. But when an officer needs to cope, relieving stress by exercising, talking to friends or co-workers or even meditation are all healthy ways of reducing stress (McKenzie). The stress of feeling unwanted and taken for granted comes home with an officer and often times affects the relationships the officer has in a household.

Relationships are constantly put to the test when an officer is sworn into duty. It will be hard for spouses to keep a level head when their loved one is so involved in a high stress job with such a large time commitment.

It is not uncommon for law enforcement officers to be plagued by insomnia, fatigue and worse of all, the inability to maintain intimacy with their loved ones (Scoville). No police officer means for PTSD to engulf their lives.

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Unfortunately, it will become a burden on the success of marriage. Police stress reduces the quality of family life. " Police marriages have extremely high rates of failure. Schedules ruin birthdays and anniversaries.

Shifts create a single parent out of the non-officer spouse. The officer could be seriously injured or killed. Temptations lurk around every corner. Being married to a police officer brings with it constant nagging negativity" (Perin). Once a relationship becomes tested only the strong survive. The rate in which police officers get divorced is at a higher rate than the national average.

" Nationally, the divorce rate among police officers is shown to be as high as 70 percent in a society that has a divorce rate of around 50 percent" (Mattos). Regardless of the high percent of divorce, there are many counseling opportunities available for individual, couple, and family therapy that specialize in the field of law enforcement and can help families communicate to reach peace in their home again. In Whatcom County alone, there are dozens of therapists who are willing to help family units become whole again. They help family members understand how their behaviors can add un-needed stress in an officer's life. That is why counselors often specialize in helping law enforcement families regain their unity in a safe, non-hostile way. With the effects of PTSD, hostility, anger and isolation are some of the extreme behavioral changes one would most likely see.

Lack of rewards for good job performance and feeling like officers have fewer rights than the criminals they apprehend are the leading causes that would make for an officer feel hostility towards the civilians they protect (Police

Stressors). Anger and frustration from PTSD will affect an officer's job performance, especially because there is nothing that an officer can do or say to relieve some of the pent up anger directly to the problem. It is important that a police officer gets the help to ensure that the wellbeing for themselves and the wellbeing of their families are never stretched past the point of return. A family should remain on a sound and strong base no matter the circumstances, and with frequent evaluation, these unstable families can be restored. There are many resources available to law enforcement personnel in times of need; it's just taking a first step to find the help every officer deserves. The first step to getting help, is understanding that everyone responds to traumatic events differently from person to person, and everyone needs a different way of being helped.

That is why financial help and support is offered to law enforcement members and their families. " Hotlines and confidential forums exist to provide support to for law enforcement personnel... it is imperative that departments offer employee assistance programs, whether developed in-house or outsourced, to their employees (Scoville)." Once an officer has been either diagnosed, or self-diagnosed, there should be financial support for families who can't afford it. That is why funding for PTSD programs are often covered by worker's compensation or health insurance, employee unions, or employing departments which will minimize the out-of-pocket cost for the individual (Scoville). An officer begins his/her day knowing that their life is on the line. Yet, they do everything they can to protect and serve their communities.

It is the least communities and family members can do to ensure the safety of our officers. Without the help of others, PTSD will engulf the individual making their life a living hell. The rate at which law enforcement officers take their own lives is unbearably too high. Some research suggests that police officers commit suicide at a higher rate than other groups (Police Stressors). All the factors that weigh against an officer's heart will create a negative aura that will put them in a position where life gets too hard. Their addictions become life threatening, their family becomes more distant, the community members resent the hard work from local officers and they just can't seem to forget the traumatic even that put them in a mental prison.

They fear being seen as unfit, so they are almost always " the last people to seek out qualified help" (Felt). Police officers take law enforcement very seriously. It is their life and their passion and without it, they have nothing. When PTSD takes over that desire, it also takes over the victims' life. Having someone to talk to helps officers feel like there is someone who can relate to their mental distress.

Post-traumatic stress disorder is an emotional, sensual, psychological and physical behavior disorder. PTSD comes in a variety of ways that impact the victim negatively.