

Practical pointers for preventing suicide by inches

Training note: The dates and locations for the next Force Science Certification Course--the first to be held in the U.S.--have just been announced. The program will run from October 27-31, 2008 in San Jose, Calif. and will feature 7 instructors. An early registration discount is being offered and seating is very limited. For full details and to reserve a seat, e-mail info@forcescience.org

The Pain Behind the Badge, which features 3 officers who experienced emotional melt-downs from the cumulative stress of life on the street. Two contemplated suicide and the third saw the near-dissolution of his marriage before they sought help. Today we explore measures you can take to keep a career-related stress buildup from overwhelming you or another officer.

There's no doubt that law enforcement is a tough profession, says Dr. Bill Lewinski, the behavioral scientist who heads the Force Science Research Center at Minnesota State University-Mankato. The stuff you run into can emotionally bury you unless you take care of yourself.

Suicide, the most emphatic form of self-destruction, is one potential outcome, as The Pain Behind the Badge makes clear. In a typical year, an estimated 400 of the 870,000 LEOs in the U.S. take their own lives. But many more are committing what the legendary psychiatrist Karl Menninger called suicide by inches, Lewinski points out.

This refers to more gradual behaviors of self-destruction, like excessive spending in an effort to buy happiness, excessive drinking or compulsive adultery as means of escape, additively overworking at the cost of relationships with spouse and kids.

For a relatively few officers, these patterns may eventually culminate in suicide, but for a great many more such behavior dramatically erodes the quality of life as it's being lived. They experience a kind of suicide of the soul that long-range can be as devastating as pulling the trigger.

Police recruits are selected in part for their good mental health, and most officers maintain that status by and large throughout their careers, despite the ravages of the profession, Lewinski says. But for some, their innate personality traits and professional circumstances conspire to push them toward a breaking point.

Adds Dr. Beverly Anderson, a police psychologist who heads the Washington (D.C.) Metropolitan Police Employee Assistance Program: No human being, no matter how healthy, well trained or well adjusted, is immune to the long-term effects of cumulative stress or sudden critical incidents. A police officer's 20-plus years of peacetime combat can wreak a heavy toll personally and professionally.

What can you do to strengthen your defenses against the emotional risks of the job or to pull a fellow officer back from an abyss of self-destruction? Lewinski and other experts offer these practical suggestions and observations:

1. Open up to a talk buddy .

The way to have a long and successful career in policing is to realize very early that you are going to see and experience things that are not normal, says Sgt. Tom Harmon, director of the Las Vegas Police Employee Assistance Program, a 22-year veteran who appears in the documentary. The way to survive that is to deal with your emotions and reactions as they come along. Don't let them build up.

That means genuinely opening up recognizing and unloading what's troubling you emotionally to someone who's a good listener and supportive, in a non-choir practice atmosphere, says Lewinski.

That can be a tough assignment for cops, who often tend to be heavily invested in maintaining an impermeable, rub dirt on it and get back in the game facade. Yet hiding behind a thick emotional wall, which may seem to be self-protective, usually proves to be the greatest stressor over the years, Harmon explains.

A spouse, a civilian friend, a fellow officer, a pastor anyone who cares about you and is warm, trusted, nurturing and insightful could fill the role of a talk buddy, Lewinski says. In turn, you can help them by providing a sounding board for any issues they may want to share. Officers with this kind of give-and-take communication in place, he says, tend to survive tough times much better.

2. Develop a purpose outside of police work.

Officers can become so addicted to the unique excitement of the job that they over-invest themselves in the cop lifestyle. They live for working,

Lewinski says. Then they find out later that they've sacrificed everything that's truly meaningful in life: family relationships, for instance, for a profession that too often is not very supportive or nurturing, and they end up bitterly disappointed and disillusioned.

The police world can be so seductive that your life can get really out of balance unless you find something outside the job that gives you purpose and helps replenish you emotionally. Maybe it's coaching Little League or riding your motorcycle in charity runs or hunting or running marathons. I knew one really tough SWAT commander who built dollhouses as a hobby and won prizes in competition. The key is getting a self-fulfilling mix in your life that's emotionally nourishing rather than draining like the job can be at times.

An important part of that needs to involve tending to loving relationships. Have lunch with your spouse without other cops present. Devote time on a regular basis to being alone as a couple, doing fun things you both enjoy. Look for creative ways to say I love you. Nurture what's important to you.

An officer who develops a life that's balanced does so because he makes that a priority. He controls his life to make it happen.

3. Be alert for troublesome symptoms.

In today's relentlessly plugged-in world of cell phones, iPods, computers and other sources of constant mental racket, it's important to take time periodically to calmly and candidly assess your emotional state, Lewinski notes. That can help prevent an unconscious drift into dangerous waters.

These are among the symptoms that Washington's Beverly Anderson and Dr. Kevin Jablonski, a psychologist with the Los Angeles Police Dept., recommend checking for. Unacknowledged and untended, they can lead to crippling depression, even suicide.

Withdrawal from friends and family

Loss of interest in activities you usually find enjoyable

Thoughts/feelings of hopelessness

An increase in the use of alcohol or deadening medication

Obsession with unsolvable personal or financial problems

Mood swings

Longing for a relationship that has broken up

Persistent feelings of gloom, sadness, lethargy

Poor sleeping patterns

A dread of going to work

An increase in sick days

Chronic irritability, impatience, lashing out and criticism of others

Emotional numbing, where you just don't feel anything.

Officers who are contemplating suicide may talk about getting their things in order quickly, such as writing a will, or state that their problems will soon be completely resolved, says Jablonski.

The everyday stress of being a police officer can lead to serious difficulties when you add personal problems, too, warns Anderson. When such stressors are prolonged and overwhelming, your ability to cope becomes difficult.

In *The Pain Behind the Badge*, Dr. David Joseph, a police psychologist in Oakland, Calif., observes that the self-sufficient can-do attitude toward problem-solving that serves officers so well on the street can sometimes be a detriment in facing emotional warning signs. The belief that you can fix any problems that come up may cause you to delay or avoid seeking outside help when it is critically needed for the challenges you face.

In reality, Joseph says, if symptoms like those listed above persist for more than 2 weeks, professional intervention may be in order.

4. Consider a yearly psych check .

The police-run website, www.badgeoflife.com

Dr. John Violanti, a retired New York trooper who has written several books on law enforcement stress and trauma, endorses this idea as a possible useful tool in preventing fully developed PTSD and possible maladaptive coping, such as self-destructive behavior. In a sense, he says, an annual mental health prescription is inoculation against future psychological problems.

Lewinski agrees. Committing to the ritual of a yearly psych check forces you to focus on what's going on in your life, to take stock of yourself and how you're doing, he explains. Without that obligation, when do we take time to evaluate our mental health and our relationships?

Anderson points out, however, that before officers can overcome their inherent distrust of mental health services and seek counseling, no matter how distressed they may be, they usually need assurance of strict confidentiality. Most will engage in a productive meeting only if the counselor involved pledges not to report back to the officer's department anything discussed in the session, or even that a visit was made.

Generally, she says, the confidentiality of what's revealed to an independent, licensed therapist is protected under the Supreme Court decision of *Jaffe v. Redmond* (1996). But before discussing problems, an officer should get in writing from the therapist a precise clarification of the limits of confidentiality. Otherwise, what's said may be subpoenaed. Normally, legal privilege is not extended to fitness-for-duty evaluations or peer-counselor conversations.

5. Intervene supportively.

Often troubled officers won't or can't evaluate themselves critically enough to confirm the need for help. In Anderson's words, cops are champions at the art of emotional cover-up. More likely than not, it will take an astute friend, family member, supervisor or fellow officer to spot that an officer is on the slippery slope of deterioration.

If you see warning signs in another officer, it can literally be a life-saving show of friendship and concern for you to intervene, Lewinski says. The primary resource for an officer in need has always been fellow officers who step forward and throw him or her a lifeline. Changing destructive behavior is always easier when you have someone willing to work with you on it.

You need to be direct, perhaps even harsh, in laying out the negative behavior you're seeing and the consequences it's having on the officer and other people around him. But your directness needs to be expressed with some sensitivity in a way that is encouraging and supportive rather than just blatant criticism. He needs to know that you're going to be there for him and help him find the resources that can lead him out of the woods.

Of course, ultimately the affected officer has to make the decision to do some things differently in his life. Once he moves out of denial and accepts that he needs to change, then he opens up numerous possibilities for creating positive change.

6. Lobby your department.

The old attitude among agencies regarding any emotional problems officers might have was *If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen*, Lewinski says. Fortunately, that is changing.

Progressive departments are now instituting such services as:

Police suicide prevention training for recruits, in-service personnel and management at all levels.

Family seminars and support groups to discuss relationship problems, communication skills and conflict resolution.

Stress awareness programs.

Methods for tracking high-risk officers and getting them professional intervention when needed.

Still, Lewinski laments, there remain many agencies that do not understand that they have an obligation to help their officers who are out there protecting people.

Officers need more than cars and guns to do their job well and come home safely at the end of shift. Agencies need to be lobbied vigorously to proactively provide services that address their officers psychological well-being. It is an important way of saying, We appreciate who you are and we will help make the most of working for us.

For more information on the documentary *The Pain Behind the Badge* and the 8-hour block of instruction that can be presented with it, contact the producer, Sgt. Clarke Paris of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Dept., at 702-573-4263. On Oct. 13-15, the National P.O.L.I.C.E. Suicide Foundation will offer a train-the-trainer course in Baltimore on law enforcement suicide prevention. For details, visit www.psf.org

The FSRC was launched in 2004 by Executive Director Bill Lewinski, PhD. - a specialist in police psychology -- to conduct unique lethal-force experiments. The non-profit FSRC, based at Minnesota State University-Mankato, uses sophisticated time-and-motion measurements to document-for the first time-critical hidden truths about the physical and mental dynamics of life-threatening events, particularly officer-involved shootings. Its startling findings profoundly impact on officer training and safety and on the public's naive perceptions. For more information, visit www.forcescience.org

The positioning of his career so as to avoid unnecessary turbulence.

Motivation and sense of responsibility

Initiative is to enable individuals with targeted and appropriately dynamic internal energy, serious and lasting work is the premise of individual success in our cause and forge ahead with the characteristics of the individual will have a psychological cause of the cornerstones of success. A strong sense of responsibility of the situation often can choose an appropriate target, and lasting, self-confidence in pursuit of this goal, a strong sense of responsibility of easy success in our cause.

Self-confidence

Self-confidence in the face of adversity for individual exploration, innovation has provided confidence and courage, doubt and criticism for providing the courage, confidence and self-confidence often the sweetest of their own become a reality. Have no confidence in the people will become mediocre, timid, submissive. Like challenges, overcome failure to break through adversity is self-confidence and strong features.

Self-strength flu

Although the existence of differences between human capacity, but as long as the individual is the middle level of intelligence, coupled with the good at summing up experiences, lessons and be good at improving methods and strategies, then, after the subjective efforts, many things can be completed. Therefore, the success and failure can be attributed to the efforts of the working methods and the level of the pros and cons.

Self-awareness and self-regulation

Understand their own strengths and weaknesses, and the relationship between environmental organizations, and be good at regulating their own career planning and learning time.

Emotional stability

The emotional stability of the technical work has predicted. Calm and stability to the emotional state provided the appropriate level of activation. Anxiety and depression lead to unwarranted tension, problems or weakness, fear and easy to make haste to peak in the chaos.

Social sensitivity

On the nature of interpersonal relationships and development trend of insight and predictable, and be good at grasping interpersonal relations between the logic. . Action prior to the conduct Reflections on the results, put ourselves in other people think about the situation, and happy people contacts, to put ourselves to understand the feelings of others.

Social acceptance of

In recognition of all differences and lack of acceptance of others under the prerequisite of social acceptance of the establishment of deep personal relations. In good faith and to others interested in other people s words, words, to listen to and watch each other.

Social influence

With integrity and impartiality are the basis of convincing, so that development and others in a spirit of cooperation, consistency and endurance. Be good at communication and exchange. With self-confidence, humor, and so on the emotional appeal, careful, calm, calm, and so on the influence of the acts, instruments, such as the visual figure of influence, such as loyalty and integrity of the moral character of the appeal.

<http://www.sz-apttech.com>

About the Author

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