

First Responder Stress

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Introduction to Peer Support

The goal of peer support is to provide all public safety employees in an agency the opportunity to receive emotional and tangible support through times of personal and professional crisis and to help anticipate and address potential difficulties. (IACP 2011 guidelines)

Introduction to Peer Support

- What defines success as a peer supporter?
Recovery, wellness, full duty, retirement
- Who makes a successful peer supporter?
Public safety personnel who shares beliefs & values

*******Crisis Systems Management 2012**

Introduction to Peer Support

- Earliest stages of career:
Alert, Alive, Energetic
- Later stages:
Apathetic, Lethargic, Isolation
- Frequent encounters with violence leads to stress
- Untreated stress can produce
**anger, anxiety, depression, alcohol or substance abuse,
social isolation and psychological injuries i.e. PTSD**

History of Peer Counseling

- Officers recognize the need to meet and talk about issues
- Historically referred to as “Choir Practice”

Key to Peer Support

- Reluctance to seek help led to peer counseling
- Peer support is listening to help
- Peer support is assisting with stress, traumatic events, or decompress from daily grind
- Peer support is helping with family members
- What are the keys to peer support
TRUST, CONFIDENTIALITY, and RAPPORT

Obstacles to Peer Support

- The stigma attached to appearing weak
- Fear of being assigned to the "*rubber gun squad*"
- Fear of not living up to the ideals of the organization
- Fear of not be a leader or supervisor
- Fear of losing career opportunities
- Mistrust of mental health professionals
- Mistrust of "*treatment*"
- Belief of "*psychological disfigurement*"
- Belief that everyone will "*know*"

Stressors Related to Police Work

Multiple critical incidents

- Horrific crime scenes
- Catastrophic events
- Motor vehicle accidents
- Internal affairs investigations
- Police funerals
- Exposure to danger
- Child abuse investigations
- Officer involved shootings

Stressors Related to Police Work

Job Dissatisfaction

- Scheduling
- Work infringing on home life
- Lack of communication within organization
- Lack of control over workload
- Inadequate support and excessive workload
- Court

Stressors Related to Police Work

Perceived organizational unfairness

- Organization is overly critical
- Organizational betrayal
- Promotions
- Catering to public concerns at the expense of workers

Scrutiny by the public

Stressors Related to Police Work

Organizational limitations

- Rank (rank race or lack of)
- Peer pressure to be able to handle stress
- Formal lines of communication slow
- Inaccurate informal lines of communication

Common Effects of Stress

- Difficulty concentrating
- Feeling a loss of control
- Depression
- Helplessness
- Hopelessness
- Worthlessness
- Fatigue
- Domestic violence
- Divorce
- Impotence
- Anxiety

Critical Incident

- Events which have potential to create an overwhelming reaction in an individual to the point that they are unable to function during or following the incident, or are unable to cope psychologically with the event. (Mitchell, 1993)

Characteristics of a Critical Incident

Define Critical Incident

- Happens suddenly
- Victim not prepared
- Normal coping mechanisms fail
- Relatively short in duration (Acute)
- Potential to generate self destructive or socially unacceptable behavior

Critical incidents can be brought into the job or experienced on the job

Critical Incident Stress

- Critical Incident or Traumatic Event
 - A horrific or gruesome incident
 - The threat of actual or perceived death or serious injury
 - The event causes severe emotional or physical reaction to the victim
 - Divorce, loss of job, loss of respect or self-esteem, etc.

Critical Incident Stress

- Generates profound emotion
- Impacts present or future performance
- Surpasses coping skills
- Evokes distress in any normal, healthy person

Sub-critical Incident

- An event that may not be perceived as traumatic by a majority of people, but which has an emotional impact on an individual due to the meaning that individual ascribes to that event.

Critical Incident - Worldview

- **Worldview:** Occasionally, individuals experience traumatic, critical events that challenge their understanding of their world and their place in the world.
- As a result of their traumatic encounter a person may have difficulty integrating their worldview as they wish it would be with worldview derived from their experience.

Traumatic Events

Witnessed or experienced by others

- Observing serious injury or violent death of another
- Unexpectedly seeing a dead body or body parts
- Learning about events experienced by others include serious injury
- Death of a family member or close friend

Acute Stress versus Cumulative Stress Symptoms

- The signs that you may be experiencing cumulative stress tend to be similar to the symptoms that occur after a traumatic event, although onset tends to be more gradual and symptoms less intense.

Indicators of Cumulative Stress

Cumulative Stress = the buildup of stress

- Poor Relationships
- Undesirable working conditions
- Continual financial struggles
- Loneliness
- Continual exposure to accident and crime scenes

Common Stressors

- Pressure by supervisors to be successful
- Crime reduction
- Unsupportive supervisors
- Political stress
- Officer safety
- Zone integrity
- Scrutiny by media, public and courts
- Complaints by citizens
- Self-induced pressure (rank race/competition with other officers)

Signs & Symptoms

PHYSICAL

- Sleep (too much or not enough)
- Appetite changes
- Gastrointestinal problems
- Headache
- Nausea
- Muscular twitches or tremors
- Shock-like symptoms
- Activity Changes

Signs & Symptoms

EMOTIONAL

- Anger
- Irritability
- Fear
- Grief
- Anxiety
- Quiet
- Depression
- Feeling Overwhelmed
- Identifying with victims
- Emotional numbness
- Helpless/hopeless

Signs & Symptoms

COGNITIVE

- Memory Loss
- Inability to attach importance except incident
- Concentration problems (attention span)
- Difficulty with problem solving, decision making
- Flashbacks (especially nightmares)
- Amnesia of the event
- Confusion between trivial and important matters

Critical Incident Stress

- “Normal reaction to an abnormal event.”

Critical Incident Stress

- Also known as “Traumatic Stress.”
- Reactions can be reduced by **early intervention.**
- Critical Incident Stress can be an opportunity for positive change and growth.

Identify Intervention Strategies

- Early detection (Agency and Peers)
- Creating an environment where seeking help is not viewed as weakness
- Programs in place specifically for officers, dispatchers, and civilians
- Educating supervisors of warning signs
- Education on the effects of substance abuse
- Battle buddy concept (Thin Blue Line)

Strategies for Departments

- Educate on the signs and symptoms
- Fitness opportunities
- Improve physical and mental fitness for officers
- Educate on lifestyle factors
 - Not abstinence but control
 - Unhealthy lifestyle
 - Destructive lifestyle
- Promote personal growth

Early Intervention Strategies for Officers

- Deal with stress from inside and outside the organization
- Detect warning signs of officers experiencing burnout
- Detect warning signs of officers using substance abuse for coping
- Be both physically and ***Mentally Fit***
- Openly communicate hurt to family members and confidants
- Seek a hobby outside of law enforcement
- Seek professionals outside of law enforcement

Benefits of Early Intervention

- Help the officer before he has a problem
- Help the officer to recover quickly
- Help the officer with his personal life
- Help the officer with his professional life
- Protect the officer's reputation
- Protect the officer's family

Benefits of Early Intervention

- Protect the organization's reputation
- Protect the organization from lawsuits
- Protection of partners (officer safety)
- Less liability all around

When we have healthy officers we have healthy outcomes on the street.

Other Resources

- IACP Preventing Law Enforcement Suicide: A compilation of Resources and Best Practices CD
<http://www.theiacp.org/Sample-Suicide-Prevention-Materials>
- SSPBA Behind the Badge Program
<http://www.PBFI.org>
- Badge of Life, Andy O'Hara
<http://www.badgeoflife.com>
- Pain Behind the Badge, Clarke Paris
<http://www.thepainbehindthebadge.com>
- Survivors of Law Enforcement Suicide (SOLES) Teresa Tate, Founder (AskT8@aol.com)

In Crisis Now?

- Call 800-273-TALK (Option 1 for Veterans)
- 866-COP2COP
- Safe Call Now 206-459-3020
- Your local suicide hotline
- Develop and know your resources before you need them

THE
END