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Law Enforcement Suicide

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When you come home from a day at the office, you probably greet your children and spouse, sit down to a dinner around the family table, or meet up with friends for a nice chat. You may have had an important business meeting that day, or taken care of some errands that needed running. Most likely, you are able to crawl into bed in the evening, laugh at a sit-com, and fall asleep peacefully. That kind of day happens for many of us. That scenario, however, usually isn't the routine of a police officer.

When a Law Enforcement Officer finishes up his day, he may stop off to have a few drinks with his brothers in the line of duty. It helps to relieve the mental stress that grows with the trauma that he witnesses every day, while we were running our errands. As the hours pass, the alcohol helps the patrol officer to forget the drug filled home that he just left, witnessing the children that were severely neglected. Another officer may come home to her husband late in the evening after investigating a horrific murder scene, but her spouse believes that she hadn't been on scene that long and rather spent hours with her male police partner, stepping out on their marriage. Arguments ensue, crumbling the home life of the officer. These scenarios are told in great detail by the writings of James Wagner when he writes "The cop was fighting with his wife,' my dad was explaining, 'He was the type who liked to do a four-to-four tour.' A four-to-four tour is Job parlance for a cop who goes to a bar after a four-to-twelve tour. Bars in New York close at four a.m. Do the math."

Law Enforcement Officer suicide is an ongoing problem that is gaining attention, and deservedly so. Our first responders see things that we cannot possibly imagine, and the images are engrained into their minds. The build-up of traumatic events in an LEO's career takes a toll on the mental state, and after trying many methods to suppress the post-traumatic stress, many find suicide as the only way to end the suffering.

How common is this? When looking at statistics for the subject of Law Enforcement Officers, it varies from year to year, state to state, and department to department. However, every single statistic is staggering. According to Tearsofacop.com, New York City Police see 300 LEO suicides every single year. Compare that statistic to Officer.com's statistic of a national average of 126 suicides per year. In any way you look at these statistics, it is saddening. "Suicides can happen in any profession, but they occur 1.5 times more frequently in law enforcement compared to general population. LEO's kill themselves at a rate of 18/100,000 vs 12/100,000 of the rest of the U.S..." (officer.com) There must be some explanation as to how this is allowed to get so out of control.

Although statistics can be found, it is hard to decipher which ones are truly correct. Many Law Enforcement suicides are ruled as an accident to protect the families or loved ones, and also protect against the stigma of police suicide. "His death went down as an accident,' Dad said. 'An accidental discharge while cleaning his service gun. Oddly enough, the responding detectives found an open gun-cleaning kit on his desk.' Dad snorted. "Gee, I wonder how it got there?" (Wagner, p72) It is impossible to tell how many accidental shooting deaths were, in fact, suicides. The problem may be far more troublesome than we know.

In order to find the explanation, we must find out what life is like inside the life of Police officers. When a police officer first receives his badge, there is a time of socialization, in which they are taught the values and work of police work. Among many firsts for these police officers, many involve traumatic events. Those include: “Making the initial felony arrest, Using force to make an arrest for the first time, Using or witnessing deadly force for the first time, and Witnessing major traumatic incidents for the first time. Each of these rituals makes it clear to the police officer that this is not a normal job.” (Gaines, 194.) Detective Heatherlyn Drips of the Unified Police Department remembers that after her first year as a violent crimes detective, her mother commented how she had built an emotional wall around herself. The always sweet, emotional girl that her mother knew was now stoic and non-emotional. Drips credits the change to finding a way to separate herself from the every-day first hand witness to horrific crimes and interactions. Just about every officer has found a way similar to this to be able to endure each day on the job.

The culture inside the Law Enforcement Officers’ lives is one of a tight knit family. Each LEO considers each member a brother or sister, and would willingly put themselves in the path of a bullet to save the others’ life. However, just as in a normal family, brothers and sister are very critical of each other’s tactical technique, according to Sgt. Brian Lohrke of the Riverton Unified Police Department. Many men and women enter the profession with an authoritative personality, which serves them well but it also comes with the tendency to critique the way that other officers conduct each task. Sgt. Lohrke says “after an incident in our division, I require that my officers are debriefed. The debriefing includes opening the floor for each officer to critique him/herself in front of all the other officers involved. This brings to light what could have been done differently, opens conversation and keeps the murmurs of critique from circulating behind the backs of their fellow officers.” Keeping the moral of officers up is a main concern and responsibility of the supervisors for each division.

Burnout is a mental state that occurs when a person suffers from exhaustion and has difficulty functioning normally as a result of overwork and stress. This term is a well-used word to describe what Law Enforcement Officers experience. This can lead to Post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. “For police officers, such stressors might include the death of a fellow agent or the shooting of a civilian. An officer suffering from PTSD will: 1. Re-experience the traumatic event through nightmare and flashbacks. 2. Become less and less involved in the outside world by withdrawing from others and refusing to participate in normal social interactions. 3. Experience “survival guilt”, which may lead to loss of sleep and memory impairment. The effects of stress can be seen most tragically in the high rate of suicide among law enforcement officers—three times higher than in the general population.” (Gaines, 197.)

Lohrke also believes in counseling. Although counseling is not required in Salt Lake Police protocol, it is available at no cost for every member of the Unified Police Department. Not all officers utilize the no-cost help though. One theory is that admitting to a mental need could be a sign of weakness that would not bode well in a mostly alpha personality work environment.

Pat Reavy's quotes Salt Lake Police Sgt. Lisa Pascadlo in her article printed in the Deseret News, "We are the warriors. Warriors don't talk about things like mental health. It's not something our culture is open to... We have the warrior mentality. You kind of have to be in any first responder situation. We're all alpha people, as it were, and we're expected to go in and take charge. And when you're not in charge of your own life anymore, I think that scares some first responders and they don't know what to do with it."

Some think that it may show that an officer is not up to the job if after one incident, an LEO takes time off of work to see a counselor. "I have had a couple occasions when I have instructed an officer to not return to work until they have received counseling, and are mentally ready to return" said Lohrke.

The breakdown of mental stability may not always be deteriorating because of trauma endured on the job alone, though. Detective Heatherlyn Drips, believes that many mental stress issues are domestic, or come from home. "I would guess that it is around seventy five percent of home life that causes most stress" she says, "but sometimes it is a combination of both stresses." According to tearsofacop.com, "Alcohol is sometimes a factor, along with troubled marriages or relationships. Many policemen live with added pressure from families who complain that they "never have a day off"... They are usually the first on scene when babies are killed, when wives are battered. When addicts die of an overdose, or when accidents kill Miami citizens. It all takes a toll on the most hard-nosed officers."

Stressors can come from many different places for police officers, since their job is so diverse. LEO's cannot compare their everyday job to an accountant, engineer, or banker. "Each profession has its own set of stressors, but police are particularly vulnerable to occupational pressures and stress factors such as the following: The constant fear of being a victim of violent crime, Exposure to violent crime and its victims, The need to comply with the law in nearly every job action, Lack of community support, and Negative media coverage." (Gaines, 196.) These men and women endure so many stressors, not many people realize. "No one takes into consideration the Human being behind the cop." Said a colleague of New York police officer Michael W. Pigott, who committed suicide in 2008 after having ordered the fatal Taser of an emotionally disturbed suspect." (Gaines, 197)

Hormonal levels can be different for police officers than that of the general population. "Professor John Violanti and his colleagues at University of Buffalo have determined that police officers experience unusually high levels of cortisol, otherwise known as the "stress hormone" which is associated with serious health problems such as diabetes and heart disease." (Gaines, 196.) When other health problems pile on top of other horrible stressors, the snowball effect builds, making everyday life very difficult at home, and at work.

Detective Drips has had a very personal experience with suicide in the Law Enforcement community. Early in her career, she was in a relationship with a fellow LEO. Her boyfriend had a few different traumatic events during his years of patrol. In one instance, in a pursuit of a

robbery suspect, a chase came to a head in a Taco Bell Restaurant. The suspect somehow took control of the officer, and held him at gunpoint aiming his weapon at his abdomen. In an effort to escape, the suspect intended to kill this officer, and pulled the trigger to the gun.

Fortunately for the officer, the gun was jammed by the bullet proof vest, preventing the gun from firing. His life was spared. Looking back, Drips says, “this was the start to the post traumatic disorder that he suffered from.” There was not any counseling required after this event, nor did he choose to utilize the no-cost counseling available. He was tough. He wanted his fellow officers to know that he was rock solid.

Months following this event, their relationship suffered. They continued the on again, off again relationship, with a marriage to another woman that seemed to fit into each time they called it off. His home life was suffering. His relationships outside of the Police Force were always in turmoil. The post-traumatic stress disorder was rearing its’ ugly head, but no one noticed.

A few years later, this officer was a first responder to a horrific scene. When a very young refugee girl was missing in her neighborhood a search team was put into place. The discovery that this officer found was something that no one could ever get out of their minds, especially this man who had already endured so much trauma. The officer came upon the mangled, partially dismantled body of a tiny young girl in the bathroom of a neighbor. An event that sent the officer spiraling. Detective Drips remembers “we would go to dinner, and he would ask very intimate life questions to strangers, waiters, people like that, and when they answered his awkward questions, he would reply with how much he wished he had a wonderful life like they did and how horrible and not worth living for his life was. It was embarrassing.”

After six marriages and major change in his personality, the officer’s family began to take notice, and on his last days stayed with him. He had made many statements about suicide, and how it was a good plan. His family had removed what they thought was all threats from the home. All weapons, pills, alcohol was removed and he had someone in the home with him at all times. He was not taken to the hospital for evaluation, because the family believed they had it under control, and he wouldn’t be able to do anything to harm himself. As he turned through a photo album for hours that had pictures removed by a previous wife, he decided he had had enough. A pistol was stowed away, and used to end the sadness. Such a permanent solution to a temporary, treatable problem.

Following this tragic suicide, some good has come to the Unified Police Department. A Peer Support Group has been formed, enabling officers to confide in other Law Enforcement Officers when something needs to be talked out. Whether it is personal, from home life, or from the line of duty, an officer’s ear is always open. Each officer finds a way to pull another aside and ask about their day if something seems “off” about their demeanor. And similarly, an officer who has had a rough time at work or at home can at any time find a fellow officer to confide in. Conversations can happen sitting next to each other in the office, in a separate room, or after hours at a restaurant. It is understood that anytime is a good time. (Drips.)

Is Peer Support enough? Drips believes that some counseling may need to be mandatory. Sgt. Brian Lohrke concurs. As mentioned earlier, no cost counseling is available, but some officers may see it as a sign of weakness. Could it be possible that if the counseling were mandatory, Law Enforcement Officers would receive care that could prevent some suicides from happening, without the repercussions of showing weakness? Lohrke adds “there is a need for a specialist for this type of counseling. A counselor who specializes in Critical Incident Stress would be incredibly important to the mental recovery from the trauma that officers endure.”

Someone needs to notice these red flag changes in an officer’s behavior. “Intervention is necessary to help officers deal with this difficult and stressful occupation,” says Violanti, “Police officers need to learn how to relax, how to think differently about things they experience as a cop.” (Gaines, 196.)

Surely more can be done rather than just counseling. It cannot be a one way street. Police Chief Magazine published six ideas in their May 2012 issue for recommendation. “1. Encourage Law Enforcement Agencies to strongly endorse and develop peer support programs. We know that LEO’s in crisis, if they are going to talk to anyone, will probably first choose another officer in which to confide. 2. Encourage agencies to refute the myth that seeking help will cost officers their jobs by assuming officers that seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness. Remove the stigma that often accompanies seeking help. Must be endorsed by command staff as well as line supervisors. 3. Train officers in healthy self-care rather than maladaptive coping strategies such as excessive alcohol consumption, “stuffing it”, “escape avoidance”, or “distancing”. 4. Raise awareness about motivations and risk factors for suicide so fellow officers will recognize them when they see them. 5. Develop and disseminate a recommended course of action for chiefs following a completed LEO suicide, including recommended funeral practices, how and agency handles the death of a completed LEO suicide will set the tone that may will make the difference in whether or not the next suicidal officer seeks assistance. 6. Encourage agencies to investigate and report suspected LEO suicides using a collection of these data within a central respiratory would enable a more accurate assessment of the scope of LEO suicide and could possibly suggest improved prevention and intervention strategies.”

The awareness for this problem is rising. The toll of the daily grind is, in some way, being assessed in the police department in each city and state, and changes are coming. But the changes are slow. Mental health has always been hard to understand, and always difficult to handle. It is a touchy subject. An intervention is a difficult one, when superiors and family do not want to insult or taint the career of a Law Enforcement Officer. There is no telling what the tipping point may be, or if signs that are seen could be false alarms. A perfect solution will most likely never be found, but the issue demands attention.

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