THE STRESS OF POLICE WORK ON THE OFFICER AND FAMILY: GROWING STRONGER TOGETHER

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OBJECTIVES

- Describe the four domains of wellness: Home; Health; Community and Purpose
- Develop an understanding related to the impact stress from the job can have on each domain
- Address the need for additional resources for officers and families.
- Discuss opportunities to strengthen the four domains of an officer’s life.
Larryville Blue by Les Lethal

The Officers Career Progression

The Rookie 0-5 yrs
The Rooster 5-10 yrs
The Seasoned Vet 10-20 yrs
The Old Dog 20-30 yrs

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Throughout their careers, individuals will be exposed to repeated significant and traumatic events.
During the first years of their career, public safety officers will be faced with many critical incidents.

CRITICAL INCIDENTS are unusually challenging events that have the potential to create significant human DISTRESS and can overwhelm one’s usual coping mechanisms.

These critical incidents leave lasting memories and images with the individual.
WHY DO SOME EVENTS EFFECT US MORE?

When faced with fearful or stressful situations our body releases stress hormones and neurotransmitters. These chemicals activate the "flight or fight" response which includes an increase in heart rate to facilitate the delivery of blood to working muscles. They also stimulate a brain structure called the amygdala.

Think of your amygdala as having a front door and a back door. What comes into the retina of the eyes goes fairly directly to the amygdala through its front door. It is through the front door that the amygdala reacts to things going on around you.

Adrenaline opens the back door of the amygdala which freezes the memories into the brain. When drinking caffeine such as high energy drinks, increases the adrenaline which increases the risk of traumatic memories being frozen.
Over time these can result in acute stress disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder.

Symptoms can begin to develop directly after a critical incident or over time due to exposure of repeated traumatic events.

There are symptoms that are normal to experience directly after an event such as emotional numbing, trouble remembering details, sadness, and feeling as if you are in a fog.

These can eventually affect your overall wellness if not addressed.
**Health**: making informed, healthy choices that support physical and emotional wellbeing.

**Home**: a stable and safe place to live

**Purpose**: meaningful daily activities, and the independence, income and resources to participate in society

**Community**: relationships and social networks that provide support, friendship, love, and hope.
Health:
Making informed, healthy choices that support physical and emotional wellbeing.
I'm depressed, sad, hurt, confused, lonely, unloved, judged, misunderstood, insignificant, broken, dying, insi.

Fine.
 PHYSICAL IMPACT OF STRESS

- Occupational stress is considered one of the strongest factors in the development of hypertension, the significance of which is evident in the 75% prevalence rate of pre-hypertension and hypertension among first responders.

- “Police officers, firefighters and correctional officers have the highest rates of obesity of all professions”
  - According to the Wall Street Journal, 40.7% of police, firefighters and correctional officers are obese versus other jobs at 14.2%.”
SLEEP

Our brains and body functions slow down at night and during the early-morning hours.

Officers may attempt to stay awake in order to spend time with their families, but this leads to greater sleep deprivation.

This combined with shift work can lead to poor performance and increased risk for mistakes.

Risk for accidents increases after being on duty for 9 hours or more and continues to increase with each additional hour.

Accidents are almost three times more likely to occur during night shift vs. day shift.
Public Safety Officers will use adaptive denial to minimize the physical and emotional risks of their job in order to perform.

Public Safety Officers have a strong need to conform and be part of team.

You may learn early that certain emotions are taboo and not accepted.

Public Safety Officers might associate negative feelings with weakness and with emotional disturbed citizens they have had to respond too.

You may emotionally distance themselves which places a barrier to getting help.

You may see yourself as a problem solvers not the one having the problem.
The brain is designed to help make decisions even when a person does not have enough information.

Two parts of the brain work when making decisions. The cognitive and emotional.
- The cognitive is split into two systems. Intuitive and impulsive (gut feelings), deliberate and logical systems.
- The emotional brain triggers the emotions to go along with the decisions.
- Stress will impact Emotions which lead to snap judgments.
- These decisions are typically 70% wrong.
- When people make a mistake it is because they are following emotions.

Fatigue almost certainly interferes with rational thinking, attentiveness, and ability to make sound judgments while simultaneously increasing irritability, anxiety and stress levels.
With repeated stress, the Alarm System “Express Route” becomes the main road.
Certain public safety work is about control. One must control themselves and others.

Showing fear is inviting an attack or indicating weakness.

Having compassion could interfere with your ability to assist situations that are out of control.

You may develop a fear that you will become a burden to others.
Anger must be stuffed away during work hours but then has the potential to be released in different ways after work.

May become an emotion that is relied upon in order to work through the shift.

If it is not addressed anger can impact the Public Safety Officers home life and lead to complaints.

Anger can be seen through cynicism and pessimism.
MENTAL HEALTH DISORDER

- The majority of first responders have been exposed to trauma
  - 46% have experienced anxiety
  - 27% of first responders have been formally diagnosed with depression

- Communicating about mental health issues
  - 61% of respondents feel comfortable talking to their supervisor about mental health concerns
  - 42% disagree that their supervisor openly discusses the importance of addressing mental health concerns
  - 50% of first responders believe their supervisor will treat them differently if they seek mental health help
PTSD

- A severe condition that may develop after a person is exposed to one or more traumatic events, such as serious injury or the threat of death.

- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can affect those who personally experience the catastrophe, those who witness it, and those who pick up the pieces afterwards, including First Responders.

- While everyone experiences PTSD differently, there are three main types of symptoms:
  - Re-experiencing the traumatic event
  - Avoiding reminders of the trauma
  - Increased anxiety and emotional arousal
HOME: A STABLE AND SAFE PLACE TO LIVE
FAMILY LIFE

- Families will adjust to spending holidays, special occasions and nights alone.
- Spending time with each other may become a struggle.
- Everyone is affected by shifts and sleep deprivation.
- Families will also have to adjust through the career stages. Such as:
  - The job becomes a priority
  - Disappointment and frustrations related to admin
  - Changes in social circles
  - Mood changes
FAMILY COMMUNICATION

- Communication can be challenging within a family.

- PSO may stop talking with their families about work because they react with fear, disgust, and disbelief which leads to staled or nonexistent communication.

- PSO may develop black and white thinking. This then impacts communication with spouses and children.
  - Spouses may want to know why the PSO is in a bad mood.
  - Children become very sensitive to their parent’s moods and prone to blame themselves.
CHILDREN

- Younger children start off with pride about their parent.

- As children get older, they may struggle with their peers related to their parent’s occupation, specifically police officers.
  - Struggle with being started at in a restaurant.
  - Dropped off to school in work vehicle.
  - Parent may leave family time to go address another matter or be called into work.

- Children imitate their parents.
  - Overly vigilant
  - Cynical
  - Apprehensive
  - Suspiciousness

- Overprotective regarding friends and places they may go.
The average rate of divorce for police officers is 14.47%.

Men in fire services average about 19.6% divorce rate where women are at 40%.

First-Line Supervisors of Correctional Officers have a divorce rate of 46.9%.

Dispatchers have a divorce rate of 46.6%.
Community:
Relationships and social networks that provide support, friendship, love, and hope.
Three paradoxes:

- **Hypervigilance:** How PSO stay safe but become reactive. Unable to relax in social situations.

- **Cynicism:** Expecting the worst of people or people have ulterior motives.

- **Emotional Control:** Control of self and control of others. Emotional life becomes restricted and the PSO can no longer open up to others or express normal feelings.
Public Safety Officers are most comfortable socializing with others because they can relax without having to be perfect or politically correct.

These gatherings may be dominated by shoptalk that excludes and isolates spouses.

Reinforces that their work is the center of their life.

Reinforces that this is not just a job.

Analyze and isolate from those who are not within the circle.
Purpose:

Meaningful daily activities, such as a job, school, volunteerism, family caretaking, or creative endeavors, and the independence, income and resources to participate in society.
The top four causes of death:

- **Suicides**
- **Automobile Crashes**
- **Gunfire**
- **Heart Attack**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHARACTERISTICS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average age of officers dying by suicide was 42</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average time on the job for officers dying by suicide was 16 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>15% – 18% (150,000) of officers suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress</td>
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<tr>
<td>91% of suicides were by male officers</td>
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<tr>
<td>63% of officers dying by suicide were single</td>
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*Behind the Badge*
You can't pour from an empty cup. Take care of yourself first.
The cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek.
Post-traumatic growth (PTG) refers to when a person experiences significant personal growth after a particularly stressful life event that has caused them to psychologically and cognitively struggle.

We all respond to trauma in vastly different ways, and our personalities can have a lot to do with those differences.

Even those of us who think we may not have grown at all after a particularly harrowing experience can look through these different domains and profiles of growth and perhaps see a small glimmer ourselves or our outlook represented.

Kelly Gonsalves, 2018
FIVE AREAS OF PTG

**Personal strength:** when people experience a greater sense of self-reliance.

**New possibilities:** when people find a new path in life that wouldn't have been possible if the trauma hadn't occurred.

**Relating to others:** when people become closer to others and develop greater compassion as a result of the trauma.

**Appreciation of life:** when people value their day-to-day experiences way more after the trauma.

**Spiritual and existential change:** when people feel they better understand spiritual matters and develop a "greater sense of harmony with the world."
There are ways to prioritize self-care. It may take practice, but self-care is not an option when you are a first responder — it is a necessity. Consider the following:

- **Prioritize sleep.** Adults need an average of seven to nine hours of sleep per night.

- **Eat healthy meals.** Nutrition will help you stay stronger both mentally and physically.

- **Make time for exercise.** Physical activity will help your brain process trauma and build body serotonin and other mood-boosting hormones.
Create a break. Although somewhat symbolic, changing clothes or washing your hands after leaving work can help create a mental shift between work and home.

Connect with your coworkers. Camaraderie builds strength and positive regard of others; make it a priority to engage in a connected workplace.

Take time away. Take time to get away from the sights and sounds of your work environment. Even a small day trip or weekend getaway can be rejuvenating.

Consider therapy. Therapy and counseling are not just for your clients or community members. Everyone can benefit from the support of an experienced clinician.
Self-compassion can be a protective measure against compassion fatigue. She lists three practices of self-compassion.

- **Self-kindness**: Instead of being harshly self-critical during times of failure or pain, be kind and understanding to yourself.

- **Common Humanity**: Rather than viewing traumatic experiences as isolated events that negatively affect you, perceive them simply as smaller parts to the whole of the human experience.

- **Mindfulness**: Maintain a balanced awareness of painful emotions rather than allowing them to define you. Acknowledge the emotions and allow yourself to feel them, but don’t wallow in them.
PUTTING THINGS INTO PERSPECTIVE.

YOU WILL NEVER KNOW THE VALUE OF A MOMENT UNTIL IT BECOMES A MEMORY.
Home life and support of positive significant relationships are key to buffering work stress and maintaining overall wellness.

In order for families to be successful and supportive it is important to be able to:

- Flexible and change rules
- Open communication
- Compromise
- Problem solving
- All family members included in decisions
- Members can be independent
IT'S **NOT** ABOUT THE NAIL
# Self-Care for Families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotional</th>
<th>Physical</th>
<th>Spiritual</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>watch a good movie</td>
<td>dance party</td>
<td>a gratitude list</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>write each other</td>
<td>go for a walk</td>
<td>go outside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positive notes</td>
<td>family bike ride</td>
<td>talk about forgiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>verbalize and talk</td>
<td>take a hike</td>
<td>write thank you’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>about feelings</td>
<td>play kickball</td>
<td>volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>draw self portraits</td>
<td>tag</td>
<td>spend time outside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Say “I love you”</td>
<td>roller skating</td>
<td>or with nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spend time writing</td>
<td>go to the pool</td>
<td>practice positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have a sing-a-long</td>
<td>jumprope</td>
<td>self-talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tell jokes</td>
<td>kids yoga</td>
<td>plant a tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>try a new craft</td>
<td>wii fit games</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<th>Mental</th>
<th>Practical</th>
<th>Social</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>read together</td>
<td>clean up</td>
<td>play in the park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>draw or write stories</td>
<td>declutter old toys</td>
<td>call or visit relatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kids meditation</td>
<td>assign chores</td>
<td>have family dinner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>find shapes in clouds</td>
<td>make a grocery list</td>
<td>play boardgames</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>practice belly breaths</td>
<td>together</td>
<td>host a sleepover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>go on a walk to find new things</td>
<td>learn about money</td>
<td>invite friends over</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>make vision boards</td>
<td>make a weekly budget check-in</td>
<td>plan a bbq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>try Headspace for kids</td>
<td>make a weekly cleaning check-in</td>
<td>join a team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>create mandalas</td>
<td>homework/study</td>
<td>do a neighborhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>make mindfulness jars</td>
<td>have a morning &amp; night routine</td>
<td>food drive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>play mind strength games like memory</td>
<td></td>
<td>have talks about friendship and how to be a friend.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Man, I would 100% rather sit with you for as long as it takes and listen to the shit your going through than sit there for 15 minutes listening to your eulogy.

Remember that.
Peers Support has emerged as the virtual “standard of care” in law enforcement and fire communities.

The Peer Support Team (PST) functions as a support and debriefing resource for employees and their families. The PST provides support to personnel experiencing personal and work related stress.

It also provides support during and following critical or traumatic incidents resulting from performance of duty.
USE PEERS WHEN:

- Recipient group is specially trained/ educated.
- Group possesses a unique culture.
- Group members perceive themselves as unique, little understood, misunderstood.
- Group extends minimal trust to those outside the group.
- Generally not necessary with groups from general populations of primary victims.
Peer Support can work with professional mental health guidance/support.

The need to view peer support/first aid as only one point on the overall continuum of care.

Knowing when one is over one’s head (underestimating severity).
RESOURCES

- Badge of Life: http://www.badgeoflife.com/


- COP Line: http://www.copline.org/resources.html

- Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance: http://www.ffbha.org/


- Safe Call Now: https://www.safecallnow.org/
REFERENCES

- American Institute for Stress: https://www.stress.org/stress-effects/
- John M. Gottman. the Gottman Institute at www.gottman.com
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