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Summary:

The burden of dealing with tragedies associated with the day-to-day duties by police officers often remains unspoken and follows the officers into their off-duty and personal lives. Failure to recognize and provide an acceptable outlet for the disappointment and frustration felt by officers at the end of their shifts can lead to alcohol abuse, problems with personal relationships, self-rejection, disillusionment, and even suicide.

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Officer Safety Corner: Compassion in Law Enforcement

By Mike Force, Chief of Police, Lake Saint Louis Police Department, Lake Saint Louis, Missouri

The burden of dealing with tragedies associated with the day-to-day duties by police officers often remains unspoken and follows the officers into their off-duty and personal lives. Failure to recognize and provide an acceptable outlet for the disappointment and frustration felt by officers at the end of their shifts can lead to alcohol abuse, problems with personal relationships, self-rejection, disillusionment, and even suicide.

If asked what bothers them the most about their profession, many officers will offer concerns such as a lack of public respect, lack of manpower or equipment to do their job effectively, or a general frustration over the perceived ineffectiveness of the judicial system. Seldom will officers open their hearts to discuss the pain and frustration that stems from dealing with the injury, anguish, and distress suffered by the victims. Many officers are haunted by the effects of trying to resolve problems they encounter in their communities and with their victims only to find that the solution is beyond their control.

Officers do not discuss the sorrow they feel after having to notify loved ones about the loss of their spouse or child because of a vehicle collision. Nor do they discuss the tears that follow officers after having held an infant in their hands trying to breathe life back into the tiny body only to find that despite all of their training and practice their efforts are futile. Or the frustration of dealing with the children of a crack addict or an abusive parent who time after time evades the help of a system overburdened with cases that, left unresolved, ensure continued problems for generation after generation to come.

What Is Compassion?

Compassion is not a singular thing. Rather it is composed of five mental and emotional states.

* Respect and Caring -- these are mental and emotional attitudes associated with commitment, responsibility, and reverence towards others.

* Empathy -- is a deep understanding of the emotional state of another. It is what enables an officer to connect with others, which can lead to compassionate feelings.

* Selfless and Unconditional -- this is placing others' before your own needs; this mental and emotional state does not expect reciprocity

or equal exchange. It is giving unselfishly.

* Committed Action -- for compassion to exist, it must be characterized by a helping action, a willingness to act on the mental and emotional state.

* Benefitting Others -- this is action given without any thought of gain; an act to alleviate suffering and providing help without recognition.

The core of compassion is a heartfelt connection in situations where others are suffering and need help and the taking of action to provide help.

What Chiefs Can Do

Promoting Compassion

The most important step a chief can take is to lead with compassion. The compassionate leader is one who can inspire people with purpose, hope, and optimism. Compassionate leaders generate energy in others because they resonate, empathize, and connect with them.

People follow leaders for very specific reasons. Gallup has been researching what makes a great leader for over 30 years. Over 3 million people have taken the company's StrengthsFinder assessment. When asked, followers were able to describe exactly what they need from a leader with remarkable clarity: trust, compassion, stability, and hope.[i]

To lead with compassion, leaders should undertake the personal practices of kindness, thoughtfulness, and courteousness and compliment others. As a practice, these actions are infectious and will spread throughout the organization.

Organizationally, the department should share information about appropriate acts of compassion as human interest stories with others, including the media. The organization should formally acknowledge the officers to demonstrate the department's support of compassionate action. By communicating to the community the compassion showed by officers, the policing image can change from one of enforcement to a helpful police image.

Watching for Compassion Fatigue

The chief should ensure that the supervisors and commanders have been trained to recognize compassion fatigue. When an officer reports "feeling burnt out," it means they are not taking good enough care of themselves. Because emotions are contagious, a dispirited attitude can quickly spread and permeate the organization. It is essential that the organization is prepared to meet this challenge.

Note:

i Tom Rath and Barry Conchie, Strengths Based Leadership: Great Leaders, Teams, and Why People Follow (New York: Gallup Press, December 2008).

A 19-Year-Old Boy Commits Suicide

A police sergeant in a small department had responded several times to the calls from the parents and neighbors of a 19-year-old boy troubled by fits of psychotic behavior. The boy had seen frequent involvement with the sergeant as well as other members of the department. Many of these calls involved the threats of suicide. Officers dreaded the call that would eventually come to announce his successful completion of the act.

The call came, and the sergeant answered it. The boy had left a note to family members apologizing for his actions and reassuring them that this was the only way to escape the torment that engulfed his life. Knowing that the police and other emergency service personnel had tried hard to help him in the past and sensing that they would be upset by the decision he had made, he also left a note to the police. Carefully folded and placed under the rope around his neck that he would hang himself with, the note asked for forgiveness and thanked the police for all that they had done.

The suicidal boy had a twin brother and the sergeant often thought about the surviving brother and the sorrow that would ensue. Others did not know that the sergeant himself had lost a brother to suicide and knew firsthand the torment that would follow the death of this 19-year-old boy. The sergeant knew his role could not end here. He contacted the surviving twin and spent many days helping the young man to find answers to many questions that only another who had lost someone in this way could understand. They are friends today, and, although each still has demons that haunt their lives, together they help each other in a way that no one else can.[1]

The Murder of a Young Girl

Sometimes compassion takes a more subtle path, as in the officer who apprehended and helped prosecute a crack addict who had raped and murdered a young woman. A seasoned officer, he knew from past experience that most parents have no idea of the complexity of the U.S. judicial system, and he also knew the despair that victims encounter as they traverse the complex maze of

prosecution and judicial review.

The perpetrator was very familiar with the life that he would spend in correctional institutions -- having spent time in them, on and off, throughout his life. The case was solid, and his conviction was inevitable. After numerous cautions by the judge and strenuous objections from his attorneys, the man pleaded guilty to first-degree murder knowing that he would receive the death penalty. The parents of the murdered girl thought justice now would be sure and swift. But the officer knew that this was only the beginning of a long arduous road to justice. Appeal after appeal followed -- and with each appeal came another disappointment accompanied by a new hope on the part of the parents.

Through the next 17 years of quagmire, the officer remained at the parents' side. He was with them as they waited through each appeal and shared their feelings of disappointment and frustration and felt their renewed hope as each one was rejected. Throughout the trials, testimony of the details of the murder and the lack of remorse on the part of the perpetrator forced the parents to re-live the horror of their daughter's murder. During the appeals, the officer was always there with the girl's family.

Knowing that her parents had become so fixated on the execution of the man who had murdered their daughter, the officer did all he could to help them remember the wonderful times that they had spent with her in hopes that would enable the parents to recapture their lives and move beyond the tragedy of her death. Throughout the many years following the murder, he laughed with them, cried with them, shared their hope and their despair, all the while, wishing he could do more but knowing that the fate of this case and the closure sought by the parents may never be seen.

Years went by, and the family eventually moved to another state -- in part, to escape the daily reminder of their lost child. But even distance did not release the officer from his dedication to helping the family through their torment. He speaks to them often through email and on the phone. He sometimes visits the grave of their daughter calling them to comfort them at what always seems to be just the right time. Now, 17 years later, the officer has become part of their extended family as they wait for justice to finally be served.[2]

A Pair of Boots

Compassion is not limited to small town policing. While in small towns there are more chances for the officers to know the victims and residents needing help, compassion is found throughout law enforcement.

The November 2012 action of New York City police officer Larry DePrimo went viral when a passing tourist captured a video of Officer DePrimo giving a homeless man a pair boots and helping him to put them on his feet. The tourist filmed the action with her cellphone camera and then shared the experience. News organizations worldwide picked up the story.[3] Throughout the coverage of this act of compassion there were additional stories published giving local accounts of officers buying meals, pitching in to help put gas in cars, paying for bus tickets, hotel rooms, groceries, all without asking for recognition or public acknowledgement of their kindness and compassion.

A Bicycle

In March 2013, a Phoenix police sergeant stopped to talk with a young man walking late at night. The sergeant learned the 18-year-old had missed the last bus home. He was walking and traveling over six miles to his job at a fast-food restaurant, because he did not have a bicycle.

The police sergeant and her spouse decided to help the young man out; they bought him a bicycle. Since he did not know how to ride the bicycle, squad members taught him to ride in the parking lot of the precinct and donated a bicycle helmet.[4]

Positive Effects of Compassion

When speaking about their acts of kindness, officers will often relate that there is recognition on their part that they have made a small difference in the lives of others through a chance meeting. That they, themselves, are better persons and better officers because of the impact they had on each other's lives. That is why they dedicated themselves to the policing profession where they have a purpose and cause. They will say they care.

Negative Effects of Compassion

Some consider compassion fatigue as an occupational hazard in police work. Most likely everyone who cares about the community they serve will develop a varying degree of compassion fatigue. In highly stressful work environments, facing increasing workloads and dwindling resources and at risk of being physically assaulted, fatigue will develop in varying degrees. The signs of compassion fatigue follow:

- * Exhaustion
- * Difficulty separating work life from personal life
- * Hypersensitivity or insensitivity
- * Increased cynicism at work
- * Loss of enjoyment in their career
- * Anger and irritability
- * Increased use of alcohol and/or drugs
- * Absenteeism, missing work, taking excessive sick days
- * Problems with intimacy and personal relationships

- * Depression
- * Suicidal thoughts

Learning to recognize compassion fatigue symptoms serves two purposes. First it enables the employees to do their own compassion fatigue check and secondly, it enables the administrators to recognize officers approaching the danger zone and take positive action.

Individual Checkup: When officers feel or express that they have developed feelings of being unhappy and dissatisfied but are unable to explain or describe why, this condition could be a warning that they are experiencing compassion fatigue. By borrowing a simple scale of 1 to 10 used by many physicians to evaluate pain, (with 10 being the worst they have ever felt and 1 being the best they have ever felt) officers can recognize their level of compassion fatigue and if it is creeping up to the danger zone. For example, if an officer registers a 7 in thinking about calling in sick when they are not, they are approaching the danger zone of compassion fatigue. Individuals can recognize what is happening and implement strategies to correct their fatigue before it gets worse.

Organization: Organizational strategies can be implemented to protect officers from compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue exists on a continuum; at various times the organization's actions may help the officers to mitigate its damaging effects and at other times make them feel very beaten down by it. Often the stress is found not in dealing with victims but in the amount of paperwork required or the need to learn a new computerized system, the lack of equipment, or the case load; all brought on by the administration not properly planning an implementation strategy.

An easy but effective organizational strategy to protect officers is to openly discuss and recognize that compassion fatigue exists in policing. The organization can develop a supportive environment that will encourage proper debriefing after traumatic incidents, as well as formalize a peer support program. Officers should be encouraged to use the employee assistance program for professional help when "small matters" affects them. Compassion fatigue is a gradual, cumulative developing process, and, if the original small matters are handled, it could well prevent the development of serious compassion fatigue.

The agency's leadership can demonstrate and encourage a balance of work and life effort to break the repeated exposure to traumatic incidents and engage in pleasant activities, such as volunteering in community activities or recreational leagues. Prevention and recovery are not achieved by just taking an occasional holiday; rather, they result from a well-thought-through plan by the department and the individual officer to have work and life balance so they can continue to help others.

Notes:

1 Sergeant Kyle Dooley, personal interview, September 7, 2012.

2 Unnamed officer, personal interview, June 28, 2013.

3 Vera Chinese, Rocco Parascandola, and Joe Kemp, "NYPD Officer Larry DePrimo, Who Gave Homeless Man a Pair of Boots, Shares 'Once in Lifetime' Moment," New York Daily News, November 30, 2012, <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/shoe-giving-shares-lifetime-moment-article-1.1211335> (accessed June 13, 2013).

4 Deborah Stocks, "Phoenix Teen Gets New Wheels from Police," ABC 15, May 9, 2013, http://www.abc15.com/dpp/news/region_phoenix_metro/north_phoenix/phoenix-teen-gets-new-wheels-from-police (accessed June 13, 2013).

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