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**An Atypical Approach to Officer Safety:
The Importance of Counseling Programs for the Assistance of the
Law Enforcement Professional**

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ABSTRACT

Dating all the way back to 380 BC, the infamous philosopher Plato recognized in writing *The Republic*, which were writings geared towards the most fundamental principles for the conduct of human life, that society would need a class of citizens who would be responsible for the management of society. Plato classified those responsible for management of society as guardians. Plato also broke that classification of guardians into those who are soldiers and those who are rulers. (Kemerling, 2011). Plato proclaimed that it would be these soldiers who would be tasked with defending the city against external and internal enemies while being placed on the forefront of dangerous situations accomplishing the acts with the virtue of courage and disregard for personal risk (Kemerling, 2011). While Plato spoke of the soldier and the importance of the responsibility given to them for the betterment of society, it is not difficult to see that the law enforcement professional has assumed this responsibility in today's world with an intense sense of pride and valor. These same prideful and courageous groups of law enforcement officials have, however, taken on this noble expression of protection to the utmost literal sense of the meaning "without regard for personal risk."

It is of contention that personal risk is far too often assumed to only include the physical obstacles that the law enforcement professional is asked to be prepared for and combat with on a daily basis. It has been apparent that law enforcement agencies have strived to prepare these law enforcement professionals for the physical barriers they may encounter through the enormous amount of "officer safety" training one must complete at a consistent level to maintain licensing. It is the skewed view of officer safety that law enforcement agencies can carry that is in need of adjustment. It must be

acknowledged that the constants of the law enforcement profession, through a variety of factors, can pose as dangerous a foe to the safety of the professional as the unknown assailant in that all too familiar task of a traffic stop or domestic violence call for service. A mindset must be established towards every law enforcement agency to include the psychological safety of the law enforcement professional as a legitimate concern as it is of equivalent hazard and can produce an equal amount of destruction as any situation of physical demand. Law enforcement agencies should be compelled to offer counseling assistance programs to help alleviate the demise of otherwise competent and courageous individuals who are suffering as a result of the sacrifice they have decided to make at the mercy of a better society for everyone else to enjoy.

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INTRODUCTION

“The happiest people I have known have been those who gave themselves no concern about their own souls, but did their uttermost to mitigate the miseries of others” was once said by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a social activist for an early women’s rights movement in the 1800’s (as cited in “Inspirational Quotes About Helping Others,” 2011). While Stanton was not speaking directly about police officer’s in particular, it can be easily paralleled into the profession of law enforcement. One of the fundamental objectives of a law enforcement officer, as a whole, is serving in a role of a problem solver in the community thus, unequivocally dealing with problems of other’s creation. As Stanton remarked about the happiness that should be associated with this noble gesture of placing themselves in danger for the sake of others well-being, there is no mistaking it can be a rewarding and fulfilling experience. However, the law enforcement profession has had a profound impact on many of the law enforcement professionals within the field who have undergone tremendous feelings of sorrows and pain within their own personal life as a direct correlation to the very same noble expression of placing others before themselves. It has been for many generations that those working in the law enforcement world have been generally associated with those same feelings of nobleness and valor because of the sacrifice that very few others in the general employment population are asked to perform during the course of their job. The ramification of the general toll that is caused on the law enforcement professional is of enormous detriment to the officer’s family, agency, and community he/she serves.

Considering the rampant spread of stress related issues within the law enforcement community, it should be an evident initiative to offer some sort of support

to a group of people (police officers) who statistically have one of the highest suicide rates in the country and second in divorce rates (Constant, n.d.). However, there are many law enforcement agencies with no counseling or assistance programs in place to relieve the physical, emotional, and spiritual effects that come with the challenging facets of police work. A City of Boston, 25 year veteran Edward C. Donovan, and stress consultant asserted that “negative stress can slowly debilitate the bodies of police officers and insidiously murder their souls unless those stressors are confronted, coped with, or prevented” (as cited in Madonna & Kelly, 2002, p. 35). The profuse need for counseling or assistance programs within a law enforcement agency can be seen just as crucial to a police officer’s well-being as any other threat preventative measures that are in place as they combat the criminal or hazardous element they find themselves in on a daily basis. Law enforcement agencies should establish programs to proactively battle the effects of the job on a police officer.

POSITION

The distinctive tools a police officer is almost certainly always equipped with before being thrown “into the fire” are generally a service gun, bullet proof vest, baton, and police radio. All of these instruments offer the officer some sort of protection because of the tremendous hazards involved in the day to day situations that a police officer finds himself in. These physical tools are then meshed with the mental tools offered to the police officer to keep him safe. From the time a police officer is in his general police academy, the issue of “officer safety” is the recurring theme in academy instruction. The officer safety element is preached to these cadets and harped upon until they realize that an officer’s safety comes first above all else.

The cadet then transitions into a police officer, where he generally begins his career by being under the tutelage of a seasoned police officer. This rookie police officer then begins to learn the job in the real world environment. As any police officer will attest, it is during this time that he was told by his field training officer that first and foremost, the most important factor at the end of the day is officer safety. This field training officer will then begin evaluating the rookie police officer's actions during the course of duty with one thing always being examined, "officer safety." "Gun side always away from the suspect," "Never search a vehicle when you're alone," and "Always be aware of your surroundings" are phrases that are constantly emphasized from early in an officer's career. As the officer continues in his career, the continuing training follows the sequence of expressing the importance of officer safety. Justifiably, the physical and mental tools to keep an officer safe are vital to the sound makeup of a police officer. However, the psychological means to keep a police officer safe can be oftentimes absent from the police officer's "tool belt."

The mindset to keep an officer physically safe is indisputably a core area of concentration. The widely used adage that, "the only goal is to make sure everyone makes it home at the end of shift" is a deep-rooted expression used to inform police officers that their physical safety is of the ultimate concern. With the intense awareness of officer safety issues ingrained into the law enforcement field, it is equally apparent that there are shortcomings in keeping officers psychologically safe from these stressors, which, at best, ruins relationships and, at worst, results in the death of that police officer. While there are some law enforcement agencies that have taken an approach to tackling the issue and initiating counseling or support programs, there are

also law enforcement agencies that have no support assistance in place. It is an assumption, but a valid one, that most law enforcement agencies support programs about officer safety training (assistance) which stresses physical protection readily available to their police officer's. The question revolves around why some agencies feel a stronger sense of importance to offering counseling programs while others do not.

The result of deficiencies in the areas of officer safety have generally classified that police officer a liability, generalizing that he would either get himself killed or have someone else killed. The fact that death is a possible consequence due to lack of officer safety encourages agencies to strengthen their officer safety techniques by offering their officers training upon training upon training. The realization that psychological safety, when ignored, carries some of the same consequences, including emotional and physical problems and even death has yet to be adopted by all law enforcement agencies. According to Cross and Ashley (2004), law enforcement agencies should, in a continual manner, make critical incident trauma management available, as that officers tend to receive training in protecting their citizens yet internally lack the focus needed to protect their own. The importance of such counseling and assistance programs is not new; however, it can be argued that it is typically ignored. In a Congress hearing in 1991 Congresswoman, Patricia Schroeder, made the recognition, "We must ensure that police departments make the availability of education, stress reduction training, and family support services an integral part of their work" (as cited in Law Enforcement Stress Program, 2005, p. 7).

The lack of counseling or assistance programs can affect the success or lack thereof of an entire agency. The trickle-down effect begins while police officers, who do

not obtain proper treatment or address their issues, begin a pattern of absenteeism, alcohol or drug abuse, and irritability. Each of those factors alone has serious ramifications on a broad level. From the infiltration of morale issues and productivity decrease to that of lawsuits, the very minimal onset of the symptoms of stress cause meticulous destruction within an agency. The effect of chronic stress on the police officer rears its head in a variety of ways. The failure to offer counseling or assistance programs allows lingering and contagious attitudes of irritability, negativity, and defensiveness. Typically, law enforcement agencies have taken the stance that issues related to stress are more of a personal problem as opposed to an agency problem.

A police officer is much like the rest of the population in that they, too, value the fundamental nature of family. However, the difficulty and challenge of sustaining healthy positive relationships with family is a demoralizing feat with enormous barriers to overcome such as an unusual working schedule, the development of cynicism, and detachment from sensitivity that often occurs in police work. Gilmartin (2002) suggested that a police officer has to act in a certain way to keep himself safe while on the job, but some of these same behaviors have a complete and adverse result while in an off-duty capacity. Gilmartin (2002) referred to this premise as every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Therefore, a police officer's attributes of being alert, alive, and quick thinking while at work would result in attributes of being tired, isolated, and detached while at home. This sense of alertness is something that is essential to the police officer. While an ordinary citizen may go to work and not be quite as alert, the result may include loss of product or revenue; but if a police officer arrives to work without a heightened sense of alertness, the end result may be death or serious injury

to himself or others. This will always be associated with police work; however, some law enforcement agencies are a proactive approach and realizing that these obstacles necessitate the need for counseling programs. Offering such programs for police officers has the potential to improve the officer's family life as well as the officer's relationship with the department and the community.

COUNTER POSITION

In the law enforcement field, it is standard that applicants in the hiring process get psychologically screened before being accepted into the position of a police officer. A psychological evaluation will essentially monitor any previous issues of concern that may hinder the applicant from being able to effectively serve as a police officer. The psychological stability of a police officer can be monitored before he is even placed in such a position of high susceptibility to stress. The applicant must be able to pass such procedures to show that he is psychologically safe to enter the agency.

The problem arises however, when this initial psychological examination is the last examination to assess psychological safety. The law enforcement agency errs in failing to taking to account the multitude of stressors and critical incidents that a police officer may see on a daily basis. The theory of articulating that their staff is psychologically sound because each officer was psychologically tested is a falsehood in that the effects of the job are not taken into account past the hiring process of the officer. A police officer may have, for instance, 15 years of service and by all accounts is a psychologically sound individual due to the fact that a psychological test 15 years previous indicated so. What was not taken into consideration was the fact that this 15 year veteran has witnessed a partner die in the line of duty, watched his marriage and

relationship with his children dwindle, and handled constant criticism from citizens and supervisors on how he could have been doing his job a bit better. The presumption that a preliminary psychological review before entering the agency is sufficient to track the psychological safety of its members is not a practical practice if solely used on that occasion. The psychological examination to assess the safety of the officer should be considered to be a yearly examination along with any yearly physical assessment or performance assessment that is reviewed to offer future development of the employee if needed.

A law enforcement agency could assert that the psychological examination could be a rather expensive and cumulative expenditure that could not be afforded. However, for this argument, it could be stressed to the law enforcement agency that they should review the cost and production results it would cause should a police officer take his own life, suffer a lawsuit due to unnecessary use of force, or even the costs associated with abuse of sick leave. Law enforcement agencies have put forth a tremendous amount of financial investment in each and every police officer through the channels of training, salary, and personal benefits that pale to the amount of financial loss that would be associated with the ever-rising outlandish awards linked to civil lawsuits. The clearly less expensive costs of attaining psychological examinations or implementing counseling programs benefits both for security reasons, as an investment, and as a method of compassion towards those that lay their lives on the line in the sake of the agency on a daily basis. Robert Pepler, an Assistant Sheriff of the San Bernardino, California Sheriff's Department once said, "We have a tremendous investment in cops. A dollar in psychological services now can save us hundreds of thousands down the

road” (as cited in Finn, 1996, p. 3). Similarly, in a 1991 Congressional hearing former Denver Police Department police chief, Aristedes W. Zavaras, stated, “From my perspective of chief, I am obviously concerned about the well-being of the officers, but it goes beyond that. I don’t, quite frankly, think that departments can afford not to have psychological services for their officers” (Finn, 1996, p. 3).

The law enforcement field is not entirely to blame for the passive approach towards obtaining assistance for police officer’s suffering from stress. It is also a logical point that if someone does not tell anyone there is a problem, and then naturally everyone assumes there is no problem. The natural tendency for a police officer is to display characteristics associated with strength. The mere suggestion that a police officer is experiencing emotions associated with feeling hurt or fearful immediately takes on a connotation of being a less superior officer. Therefore, since flat denial is often experienced when dealing with police officer’s and trying to determine if they are truly psychologically stable or are experiencing issues where an assistance program would be useful is an overwhelming task. When a question about suicide or depression is responded to with a denial, the second difficult task is breaking through and explaining to someone who is denying the problem all together to admit that he is suffering. Benson (2000) defined machismo as a hyper-masculinity that promotes physical strength, aggression, competition, and dominance while professing that lack of those qualities files one into the category of the weak. In addition to characteristics associated with strength, Kirschman (1997), when speaking of emotional control, stated that police officers maintain an occupational persona where they feel the pressure to always appear in control and on top of things. Kirschman (1997) continued that keeping

up with this public persona is another stress in itself and an emotional labor to keep up with. The law enforcement agency can be resolute in declaring that if these issues are not brought forth by those in need of assistance, how it can be that they are expected to offer services to those who deny they need the services in the first place.

This mantra of machismo has the tendency to influence the denial which arises in the police officer. Police officer's tend to implement techniques to completely avoid their realities and emotionally distance themselves from realism (Gilmartin, 2002). This machismo, however, can be penetrated through the utilization of confidentiality and possibly the use of peer to peer counseling. A police officer might take advice or be able to relate to another who has been in his shoes and seen or felt similar versions of what he may be going through.

RECOMMENDATION

There is an evident need for an intervention into the sorrowful events that continue to occur to a profession of individuals who selflessly risk their lives and place themselves in dangerous situations with the benefit of others at heart. Law enforcement agencies pride themselves on how well they have trained and prepared their officers to be ready to protect the citizens they serve as well as themselves. However, there is this blind spot when it comes to the issue of their officer's own psychological safety. The psychological safety blind spot is often in the background, at best. An administrative decision to tackle safety from a different perspective must be adopted in order to proactively combat the issues of stress as it too causes the death of officers just as any other of the many physical threats that are posed to an officer on a daily basis. The achievement of providing counseling programs to police officers to

better cope with their issues is feasible if viewed as an investment into their officer just as any other training is considered an investment.

Law enforcement agencies should psychologically examine their police officers on a yearly basis. The general practice of an entrance level psychological exam is not acceptable in terms of assuring that the police officers that they are placing on the streets are psychologically safe; however, the possible consequences of being psychologically unsafe exceed any monetary costs of offering and instilling a counseling program to adapt to the potentially vicious environment that a police officer finds himself in. Law enforcement agencies must discontinue the thinking process of believing that issues regarding stress and depression are a matter of a personal problem. They must educate and train to fight through the machismo mentality and show police officers that there is an option aside from arriving to work an irritable manner or, even worse, committing suicide. The negative stigma in police work associated with admitting that the work does actually have an effect on their lives must be alleviated. In this way, the personal sacrifice so generously given for the betterment of a community will not go unnoticed.

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