

**The Bill Blackwood
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**Post-Traumatic Stress:
A Deadly Secret**

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ABSTRACT

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a deadly secret within the law enforcement community. It affects many law enforcement personnel across the world. Some of the warning signs are depression, sleeplessness, alcoholism, domestic violence, just to name a few. Law enforcement is a highly stressful job, therefore, counseling should be mandatory for officers that go through a traumatic event.

Because of the stigma associated with counseling within the law enforcement community, many officers will not seek help. Traumatic incidents are also experienced in officers personal lives such as, a death in the family, financial problems, divorce, compounded with the horror they witness on almost a daily basis, can have an adverse effect on officers to the point of suicide. It is sad that the brave men and women who vowed to "protect and serve" lives of people they do not even know are taking their own lives at an alarming rate. When officers are ordered to go, it may help with the perceived stigma associated with counseling.

Cost is always an issue, however, if an agency considered the amount of training, equipment, knowledge, experience, and pay, for an officer to be off duty, the cost of counseling could be close in monetary value. Policy is needed in place to require all law enforcement personnel to be evaluated after going through a traumatic situation, whether on duty or off duty. It might save a career and a life.

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INTRODUCTION

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a deadly secret, a subject that no one in law enforcement wants to speak about, however, is very prominent in this line of work. Since PTSD is a “deadly secret” amongst the law enforcement community, the importance of mandatory counseling for personnel could be essential to not only the employee, but the department, the employee’s family, and the public. There are many police departments that do not offer or even suggest that their personnel seek counseling after a traumatic incident, whether the incident takes place on duty or off duty in their personal life.

Long ago when someone mentioned PTSD, it was automatically associated with military personnel. That is no longer the case. PTSD is also recognized in the law enforcement field because of the highly dangerous, highly stressful job duties. This paper will describe the effects of post-traumatic stress when a person is exposed to critical incident(s), whether on duty or off duty, on a routine basis. It will also address the need for counseling and how proper counseling could help save a career and maybe even a life.

Law enforcement personnel (including dispatchers, secretaries, etc.) face critical incidents almost on a daily basis throughout their careers. The dispatcher who takes the call of an infant that is not breathing, the mother screaming in the phone that her son has been shot and is dying, a woman that calls hysterical saying that she has just been raped and beaten, all can be traumatizing knowing that all they can do is sit there and listen to the screams and cries for help. The detective who works in the homicide division, the accident investigator who works fatal vehicle accidents, and the

investigator who works the juvenile sex crimes division, all can suffer from PTSD. Not only are there on-duty incidents but there are off-duty incidents in these same people's lives that can have a negative effect on them. While some may be able to cope without help, law enforcement personnel often need outside help in order to perform their normal job duties. Most personnel will not seek out counseling on their own, thus affecting their job performance and personal lives.

When counseling is mandatory, it could provide an officer with the help they need and want but are too scared or ashamed to ask for. It can also reduce a great deal of the stigma that is attached with asking for help, therefore, counseling needs to be mandatory for law enforcement personnel who experience a traumatic incident whether on duty or off duty. It could save a career and better than that, it could save a life.

POSITION

Counseling should be mandatory for law enforcement personnel because all too often, the person needing the help will not ask for it or seek help on their own. Mandatory counseling could help an employee who is currently suffering in silence because they are too ashamed to let anyone know that they are in crisis. Law enforcement personnel has learned to mask their troubles so that no one can tell how they are really feeling. An article stated "It is inbred into us in the academy, probationary training, and all aspects of law enforcement that, If we can't handle the stress, we need to get out" (as cited in Lindsey & Kelly, 2004, p.1). It is time to change that way of thinking.

Mandatory counseling could be beneficial to the employee and to the department as a whole. It could improve moral and work performance, it could reduce the number

of sick days that a suffering employee takes, and it could even improve the employee's personal life. With so much stigma attached to counseling, if it were mandatory, that might possibly reduce some of the negativity associated with it (Emily, 2012). PTSD is present in the law enforcement family whether anyone cares to admit it or not. It is time to expose the deadly secret and support the personnel who are in need of the help.

PTSD has been researched for years, going back as far as World War I. The term PTSD came from psychologists who were treating military personnel who were at war. The reason for the treatment was to help get the military personnel, who were struggling with the trauma they had witnessed, back in mental shape in order to get them back on duty as fast as they could (Gupton et al., 2011). It was thought that PTSD only affected war veterans, but it is now known to be common in police, fire, and emergency services personnel (Scoville, 2013). Today, the term PTSD really can be in reference to any person who has suffered a traumatic incident and is affected by that incident either psychologically (brain) and/or physiologically (body) by that incident(s). One definition of PTSD is ... "a psychological reaction occurring after experiencing a highly stressing event (as wartime combat, physical violence, or a natural disaster) that is usually characterized by depression, anxiety, flashbacks, recurrent nightmares, and avoidance of reminders of the event —abbreviation *PTSD*" (n.d.).

Mandatory counseling should be implemented for law enforcement personnel because there are numerous psychologists who agree and believe that PTSD causes psychological (mental) distress. Some of the psychological effects are depression, drug and/or alcohol abuse, sleep disorders, eating disorders, domestic violence, and suicide. Police officer suicides are rising at an alarming rate; "Although considerable obstacles

hinder the study of police suicides, mounting evidence suggests that self-inflicted deaths within the law enforcement profession are continuing a dramatic upward trend that began in the 1980's" (Violanti, 1995). One research showed that police officers took their own lives three times more than that of the general public (Baker & Baker, 1996). There is not an accurate count as to law enforcement related suicides because some have been ruled accidental or undetermined deaths due to the fact that an officer is the victim. Some people feel that there is a "shame" attached with suicide for the officer, the department, and the officer's family (Violanti, 1995).

Mandatory counseling should be implemented for law enforcement personnel because stress can causes physiological (health) problems also. Some of the health problems believed to be related to stress are the following: high blood pressure, stroke, ulcers, digestive problems, and sexual dysfunction (as cited in Carlan & Nored, 2008). Stress at work coupled with stress at home puts a person at a greater risk of experiencing some of these illnesses.

Many who have done research over the past twenty years have pin-pointed two main reasons for large amounts of stress: work related stress and personal stress (Gibson, Swatt, & Jolicoeur, 2001; Violanti & Aron, 1995). Work related stress received the most attention (as cited in Moon, 2005).The stressors that law enforcement personnel often deal with are chasing violent criminals, catching violent criminals, observing dead bodies, or people who are hurt real badly or possibly on the brink of death, no more faith in the system, and disappointment with the public's opinion of the police (Violanti & Aron, 1995). In the actual workplace itself, there may be polices

some might not believe in or agree with, fellow officers that some may not trust, or a supervisor that has something negative to say about everything.

Counseling for law enforcement personnel should be mandatory because stress is also believed by numerous psychologists to be a contributing cause of mental and emotional disorders. Some of the illnesses related to stress are anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, withdrawal, and substance abuse (Gibson, Swatt, & Jolicoeur, 2001). The combination of some of these stressors are largely the producer of higher rates of divorce, higher rates of domestic violence, and higher rates of suicide in the law enforcement community than what the norm is in other populations (Abdollahi, 2002).

There have been studies done in the field of police officer suicides. Although the research is limited, one study done in 1994 showed that 11 New York City police officers killed themselves, while two were killed by criminals (as cited by Baker & Baker, 1996). Another study showed that the number of police officers that commit suicide has doubled. That same study also showed that even though suicide among police officers is being researched, the numbers are not believed to be accurate. Some of the reasons for the inaccuracy is because the information is not collected or the department will not release that information. It has also been thought that many police officer suicides are ruled as accidental or undetermined deaths because of the stigma attached to suicide. It has been said that investigators may overlook some evidence on purpose in order to protect the officer, the department, and the officer's family (Violanti, 1995).

Counseling for law enforcement should be mandatory because law enforcement personnel also experience traumatic incidents off duty in their personal lives. The death of a spouse, a parent, or a child is devastating to any human being. A spouse having

an affair, a divorce, bankruptcy, etc. adds a tremendous amount of stress to a person who has to deal with stressful situations on a daily basis. Police are human, just like the rest of the population, and they have the same issues that the people they serve have. But as police officers, they also take on the general public's problems at the same time they themselves are going through a personal tragedy. It has been said many times that you have to, "Leave your home life at home and your work life at work." Problems go with people wherever they go, therefore, being in law enforcement and observing death, violence, sexual assaults, and missing children (just to name a few) over and over again can spill over into an officer's home life, as well as their home life incidents can spill over into their job life.

Use of alcohol and/or drugs, the start of or increase of domestic violence, the isolation of the officer causing the family to feel separated from the person even when that person is in the room with them may increase. The officer may feel that his/her family would never understand how he/she is feeling because they do not see the things he/she sees on the job. The sleepless nights, the sexual dysfunction, domestic violence, and divorce are all contributions of stress. Several researchers have agreed that the law enforcement profession has one of the highest rates for divorce, domestic violence, and suicide then that of the public they serve (as cited by Carlan & Nored 2008). Many law enforcement personnel going through psychological and physiological problems never seek professional help (Corrigan, 2004).

Counseling should be mandatory whether the traumatic incident takes place on duty or off duty because what affects the officer on duty, could ultimately impact the family in some way. Not only does the family possibly have to deal with the officer's bad

day, they might have their own personal kind of stress associated with having a police officer in the family. For the family, there is the stress of wondering if their loved one will make it home each time they walk out the door to begin their shift, each time the phone rings in the middle of the night, they may wonder if this is “the call” of death. Not to mention each time their loved one is due home, the family sometimes wonders if he/she will be in a bad mood today because of what the loved one endured while at work.

All these things affect people in different ways. Years ago, some police departments offered employee assistance programs, conferences, researched the conduct of police officers, and even offered some prevention programs. Most officers, however, did not use these tools because of the fear that it would not be confidential and they did not trust that the counselors could really help them with their problem(s) (Waters & Ussery, 2007). Some police officers learn to cope while others do not. The long term affects can be devastating to the personnel, their personal family, and their police family without proper help.

Counseling for law enforcement personnel should be mandatory because the most common reason police officers will not ask for or seek out counseling is the stigma attached seeing a professional psychologist (Corrigan, 2004). Even when the officer feels that the counseling is imperative to their well-being, whether psychologically or physiologically, they still will not seek help because of the stigma that is attached. In 2002, the president said that the major obstacle of people getting the counseling they need stems from the stigma attached to counseling (Vogel, Wade, & Hackler, 2007). Most officers feel that therapy is a sign of “not being able to cope with the job” any longer to his fellow officers and to the general public. A lot of people think officers are

unstable and not fit for the job if they seek out counseling or are in counseling. There are two types of stigma. First, there is public stigma, which is what officers might perceive the public will think about them if the public learned the officer was in counseling. Then there is self-stigma, which is what an officer may think about himself/herself if they sought out counseling or were in counseling (Corrigan, 2004). A lot of officers are afraid that a co-worker will find out that he/she are in counseling and that being in counseling might end up costing them their job. Therefore, people keep it all inside until it manifests itself in other ways. Most officers are viewed as superhuman, and officers are not supposed to have feelings or emotions. Many officers think that citizens as well as others in the law enforcement community will feel that the officer is too scared to do the job and no longer fit for duty if he/she shows one sign of fear, one sign of what they think will be perceived as weakness. Many times, when an officer responds to a call, the officer will advise the victim to seek out some sort of counseling and sometimes provide the information on places for the victim to find those types of resources. Officers are human also and, therefore, are victims at times themselves.

COUNTER POSITION

Some believe that counseling for law enforcement should not be made mandatory because the cost could be detrimental to the department. With the budget cuts that have been made over the last several years, and the high cost of counseling, it is believed that there is not enough money in the budget to cover the expenses of counseling for personnel, especially if that counseling is going to be for an extended period of time.

However, police departments, whether large or small, spend a great deal of money putting an applicant through a battery of tests in the hiring process. There is a written test in order to make sure the applicant can read, write, add, do the basics. Then there is the physical agility test to make sure the applicant is fit for the physical demands of the job. Then there is the cost of having background investigations done on the pool of applicants that pass the tests. After that, there is a psychological test for mental stability. Some departments even pay for a polygraph for applicants in the hiring process.

After the police department makes the decision to hire one of those applicants, there is the cost of uniforms, duty gear such as a belt, holster, magazine holder, pepper spray holder, flash light holder, etc. Then there is the equipment that is issued to that officer such as hand held radio, pepper spray, and ASP Baton. There is the three to six months of field training. As time goes by, there are additional specialized trainings that the department pays for the officer to attend. There is also the officer's salary. Add all that time, equipment, and training up, and it tends to be a lot of money (Lindsey & Kelly, 2004). If that same officer is suffering to the point where he/she is calling in sick a lot, then it now will cost the department even more money to pay another officer overtime to cover the sick officer's shift. It is far more a waste of money to allow that officer to "self-destruct" then it is to pay for some needed counseling, not to mention the cost to the department to have to start all over again with the hiring/training process. The economy is at an all-time low and it would probably put a financial strain on a police department if counseling was made mandatory; however, the department has already most likely invested hundreds of thousands of dollars into the suffering officer. The agency cannot

get back the time, money, and knowledge that it already has invested in the officer, and it could possibly cost the department more to replace the officer in the long run.

Another reason departments are resistant to counseling is that it will not be effective if an officer is forced to attend. The officer might question the confidentiality of counseling that is mandated by the department and, therefore, most likely will not be honest. The officer may also feel like it is punishment and, therefore, will not talk at all if forced to go. It is the officer's problem, therefore, it is the officer's responsibility to seek help if he/she feels like they need help. It is not the department's responsibility.

Police departments may possibly be held negligently responsible by retaining an officer who is not adequately functioning in their job duties (Delprino & Bahn, 1988). Police administrators need to be able to recognize the symptoms of PTSD and provide counseling for those officers in need of it. If they do not, and that officer does something negligent because he/she was too stressed out to focus on the job at hand, then the department can be viewed as negligent for retaining that officer and may be sued. Not only will it cost the department major revenue, it could possibly ruin the public's trust in the department as a whole. Law enforcement agencies create policies and procedures to aid law enforcement personnel in upholding and enforcing the law. Such policies and procedures are implemented to protect the public and promote safety among communities. Gupton et al. (2011) stated, "They also have a responsibility to implement programs designed to address the emotional well-being of the men and women who work for them" (p. 92).

RECOMMENDATION

Counseling should be mandatory after a law enforcement employee experiences a traumatic incident, whether the incident occurred on the job or in their personal life. Largely because of the stigma attached with counseling, most officers will not seek help even if they feel they really need it. They do not want to be perceived as weak in a profession that is perceived to employ the strongest of the strong. When counseling is mandatory, it can reduce the stigma because the officer has to attend as a condition of their employment. It might also help an officer that really wanted counseling but was too afraid to ask for it in fear of possibly losing their job.

If the officer is secretly suffering from any other symptoms of PTSD, such as alcohol or substance abuse, depression, anxiety, or sleep disorder, no one would ever know and the counseling could help in that area of the officer's personal life as well as improve his job performance. The officer could be having thoughts of suicide and no one in the department would ever know that, so mandatory counseling could possibly save a life that no one knew was in jeopardy. Mandatory counseling could possibly reduce the rates of divorce, domestic violence, and suicides for the law enforcement community. No matter if it is psychological or physiological, counseling has the potential to help an officer work through an awful time in their life, save a career, or even save a life. Officers are human and, therefore, can be victims as well as the general public (Reiser & Geiger, 1984)

Money will always be a factor, however, the thousands of dollars already invested in these officer(s) cannot be refunded to the department's budget. It would more than likely cost the department more money and time to find, hire, and train a new

officer than it would be to provide counseling to the existing officer(s) that the department has already invested time and money in. It is hard to put a price on all the skill and knowledge that a police department would be losing if that department chose to hire someone new.

The police department could also be held negligent for an officer suffering from PTSD and falling short of the job requirements. It is called negligent retention. One definition of negligent retention is: "retaining an employee, whose potentially damaging behavior was known or should have been known by the employer; can bring about a case of negligent retention" (Gaul, 2011)

Some research needs to be done on grants or assistance to help cover the cost for police personnel counseling. Police departments that do not have a counseling program need to meet with police departments that do mandate counseling and look at their policy. Once they have done the research, possibly applied for grants to help cover the cost, then they need to set a policy that makes counseling mandatory. The policy should state that as a condition of employment, the employee will meet with a counselor once a year near the anniversary of their hire date. The policy should also state that as a condition of employment, the employee will meet with a counselor after being involved in a traumatic incident whether on duty or off duty. This should ensure the employee that if they were in crisis and it was a secret, then it would stay a secret because the counseling session was mandatory.

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