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Therapy now the norm for cops in traumatic situations

BY MICHAEL AMON AND ROCCO PARASCANDOLA |
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After a drunken driver plowed into a limousine on the Meadowbrook Parkway in 2005, killing the limo driver and decapitating a 7-year-old girl, emergency workers at the scene were gathered together. The purpose: to talk about what they had just seen.

Once anathema to tough street cops, therapy sessions - many of them mandatory - are now the norm for officers involved in shootings, in-custody deaths and fatal crashes as departments recognize the high suicide risk faced by cops.

"It's standard operating procedure," said Dr. Audrey Honig, chairwoman of psychology services for the International Association of Chiefs of Police, based in Alexandria, Va.

To remove the long-held stigma of mental health counseling in law enforcement, departments have promoted therapy and sometimes required it.

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New York Police Department Lt. Michael Pigott, who was buried yesterday after committing suicide, went to at least one mandated counseling session after he ordered the firing of a Taser, leading to the death of a mentally ill Brooklyn man . **NYPD**, Nassau and Suffolk police supervisors can order officers into counseling on a case-by-case basis.

Experts disagree on the effectiveness of these measures. John Violanti, a University at Buffalo professor who has researched police suicide, said many officers, especially those under investigation like Pigott, distrust police therapists and participate halfheartedly.

"No one should be forced to attend these sessions," he said. "Individual therapy outside the department is the best way to go. The question is: How do you get them to go?"

In New York City, officers can go to an independent counseling group, the Police Organization Providing Peer Assistance. In Nassau, many officers are voluntarily debriefed after trauma by a trained colleague.

"We listen to them and tell them: 'It's OK to not be OK,'" said Scott Kitograd, a Nassau police ambulance medical technician who's done debriefings.

With stressful, highly scrutinized jobs and access to deadly weapons, police are considered high suicide risks, Honig said.

About 400 officers nationwide committed suicide in 2007, down from an average of 450 from 2004 to 2006, the National Police Suicide Foundation said. The last Nassau officer to commit suicide was in 2005, while Suffolk officials said they do not recall any recently. The NYPD had six in 2007 and three in 2006.

But it's not clear if police commit suicide more than others. About 10 to 20 percent of police suicides are job-related, experts said.

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