

Another Cop Killer - Pt 2

The facts and factors of depression and policing

Posted: September 15th, 2009 10:16 AM GMT-05:00

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Author's note: This is Part 2 of our series on *Another Cop Killer*. If you have not already read it, let us refer you to Part 1 (linked below)

The next sixteen minutes were a blur. A blend of detached, buzzing surreality in the room around him, yet with a laser focus on a single panicked thought - Dear God, what have I just done to myself, my family, my career, my life? - He talked to Sherri on the phone about The Black and what it felt like, rambling and wishing he could just shut up but unable to. He heard her typing as he spoke, knowing his words were popping up on a mobile computer somewhere in the city. He felt his wife touching his shoulder and then wrapping her arms around him in a tight, tearful hug - who got her up? Made eye contact with his daughter, small and scared and watching in confusion from the stairs. And then he was suddenly staring into the broad face of a small mountain in blue!

- Sarge? Hey, howzit going, sarge? I understand things are feeling pretty rough right now, huh? That's okay. Happens sometimes, ya know. Let's see what we can do for ya, huh?

Dale. His first FTO seventeen years ago. A thirty year patrol guy - never had much interest in anything else, really, he just loved pushing a squad around for three decades - Dale was never known for soaring ambition. He was known as possibly the wiliest uniform anyone had ever known, the finest teacher of recruits, and the funniest, most happy-go-lucky cop in the house. Calm. Unflappable. And huge, with three hundred pounds draped on a 6'8" frame. Smiling even now... and then there was another wave of the surreal.

- So, sarge, can you talk to me? Tell me what is going on tonight?

- What did I do, Dale? I just wrecked everything, didn't I? I just destroyed my career! How are they ever going to trust a head case, huh?

- No, sarge, C'mon. You are not the first cop gone through this, believe me. It happens to a lot...

- No, Dale! No! I...

- Kurt! Kurt, I know. Trust me on this. It happens to a lot of us. You know what I mean, Kurt? A lot. Believe me, Kurt, I really do know...

Do police officers suffer from depressive disorders at a greater rate than does the general public? The answer to this question is elusive but it is clear law enforcement is a stressful and dangerous career, emotionally as well as physically.

Are police officers more likely to commit suicide than the general public? The answer to this one is not so elusive. Although it is not known exactly how many police officers take their own lives annually, it is

generally accepted that about two to three times as many will die by their own hand than will be killed in the line of duty in any given year. That translates to somewhere between 300 and 450 police officer suicides, and it is suspected this number is even an underestimation as there is anecdotal evidence that some suicides are deliberately classified as accidental deaths. Imagine a city of just slightly less population than Detroit experiencing that many suicides in a year, every year. That is a lot of tragic and unnecessary death.

A 1997 USA Today comparative study looked at suicide rates of six large police agencies (NYPD, Chicago PD, FBI, LAPD, San Diego PD, and US Customs) over varying time periods for each and then compared the suicide rates to the national average of about 12 per 100,000 persons. The suicide rate for each, in the order listed above (each per 100,000), was 15.5, 18.1, 26.1, 20.7, 35.7, and 45.6! And a 1995 study by the Fraternal Order of Police, in which suicide rates among 38,800 FOP members belonging to agencies ranging in size from 5 to 3000 officers and conducted by examining chapter insurance records, showed a suicide rate of 22 deaths per 100,000 officers (*USA Today*, June 1, 1999 and the National P.O.L.I.C.E. Suicide Foundation). A more recent study focusing on New Jersey LEOs and conducted utilizing the Centers for Disease Control's Violent Death Reporting System and the Uniform Crime Report showed the rate among all active New Jersey peace officers to be 30 percent higher than that of all males aged 25 to 64 in that state (*American Police Beat*, September 2009).

Of course, not everyone who suffers from a depressive disorder is going to kill themselves, or even contemplate suicide, but in a pilot study on the effects of stress on police officers, John Violanti, Ph.D, a University of Buffalo research professor (and retired 23 year veteran of the New York State Police) noted significant physical and emotional effects believed related to the stressors of police work, including increased blood pressure, sleep disorders, more destructive stress hormones, PTSD, heart problems and, yes, greater suicidal ideation among LEOs than among the general population (psychcentral.com/news/2008/09/29, Nauert, Rick, Ph.D. and Violanti, John, Ph.D, *American Journal of Industrial Medicine*, October 2008). High stress levels are also linked to increased family and interpersonal dysfunction, alcohol abuse, decreased job satisfaction, and poor self-care. Look around your department. Does that resemble anyone you know?

While stress does not affect everyone the same, and there is no guarantee someone under high stress will develop depression - some people are truly better and happier in a pressure cooker - it is a pretty good predictor. While we cannot say with certainty that there is a greater rate of depression in the law enforcement world, what depression there is has far-reaching, and often tragic, consequences.

Depression and the Police Reality

So, if the depression rate among police officers may be higher than that of the general public, and the suicide rate definitely is, then what is it about policing that makes it so emotionally hazardous? Police officers are carefully screened for physical, mental, and emotional fitness before hire, after all, so what are the sources of police depression?

First, some people simply develop depressive disorders in the course of their lifetime and cops are no different. Of those people, some will have severe depression and will contemplate or attempt suicide. Again, cops are no different. There may not be a higher rate of depression among police but when cops decide to kill themselves they are more decisive and effective - those hired as LEOs are screened for and selected in part because of their decisiveness, and they have greater access to firearms than most people - resulting in more completed suicides. But then, maybe that is exactly what it means. Maybe there is something about law enforcement, or the people who enter it, that has a greater propensity toward depressive disorders.

The lifestyle associated with law enforcement - shift work, long hours, working weekends and holidays, unpredictability - impacts family and social life, often leading to isolation and loneliness. It lends itself to

poor sleeping and eating habits, increased stress, and physical changes, all of which can upset the delicate balance that regulates mental health. There is a growing body of research that seems to show the law enforcement lifestyle can be detrimental on many levels.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is something all in law enforcement have heard of but few would admit to having. Most people think of PTSD as stemming out of a single, overwhelming traumatic event. For some that may be true, but for others PTSD may result from *cumulative* events witnessed or experienced over time, something likely to happen to many most cops over a career. Not all will develop PTSD, of course, but some will and for them depression will surely be a component.

For others, the problem may not be a genetic predisposition, lifestyle issue, or a reaction to trauma, but instead a normal reaction to low morale. Is it any secret that many police departments suffer from morale problems? We know, we are just being silly. Ask any police chief where 89% of his force claims low morale and he will point out that those 89% are just isolated malcontents. Just the same, low morale at work can easily infect emotional wellness in other aspects of life.

Finally, there is the compounding effect of the fear associated with even mentioning that things are not going so well emotionally. A great many police officers believe, often with good reason, that mentioning they are depressed, stressed or burned out, or in need of help, that their bosses and colleagues will judge them. They fear limitations on or the loss of their job, or that they will lose their gun. And they worry that, even if they try to seek help in confidence, they will be found out. The fear compounds the depression.

As law enforcement officers you have to take steps to ensure your physical health on the street. What steps can you take to ensure your mental health, when you need to, without compromising your professional self? Tragically, far too many LEOs are lost every year to the biggest cop killer of all. Next month, we are going to address how and when to seek help, and how to protect yourself professionally as you do.

In the meantime, BE SAFE!

Web Links:

- [Another Cop Killer, Pt 1](#)

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