

Law Enforcement Resources: Finding Mental Health Services

By James Espinoza, District Attorney Investigator, Ventura County District Attorney's Office

I was told many times by a wise retired police sergeant that every one of us is one major life altering event away from needing mental health services. This statement transcends occupation. Mental health services are not something we want; they are something we need. Whether that life altering event is a personal trauma, a traumatic call for service, a brush with death, or an accumulation of multiple traumatic events, support services provided with confidentiality and understanding seem challenging to find. This is primarily because many of us believe there's a stigma surrounding mental health issues, which sometimes leads to prejudice and discrimination.¹

I'm just a cop, an Investigator. Not a manager. Not an administrator. Just a cop. I get it. Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) can be limited and there is a concern whether it will remain confidential, as confidentiality is essential to protecting line-level employees from real or perceived career consequences for seeking this support. If I need help, how do I get it? Will I lose my job? What will my friends, family, coworkers and chain of command think if they find out? I get it.

In April 2018, I received that life altering call that changed my life forever. I was at work when I received a call from my 19-year-old nephew, the son of my only brother. He told me they found my older brother, a retired Army Lieutenant Colonel and West Point Graduate, dead of an apparent suicide. My world changed in an instant. My older brother was my biggest hero. I spent decades chasing his success, which exacerbated the heartbreak that day.

I found myself instantly thrust into the role of family leader and had to manage my own grief, along with the grief of my immediate family. Since we had lost my Dad five years prior to cancer, the loss of my brother compounded the stress, grief and turmoil for my entire family. The family of five I grew up with was now a family of three; Mom, sister and me. I have my wife and kids; my sister had her husband and my brother was survived by his wife and four kids. My immediate concern was the welfare of this group, individually and collectively.

Within two weeks, as a family, we buried my brother in New York and I quickly realized that we needed help. I was grieving along with my family but did not have the tools to support everyone through this challenge. I had to stay healthy to be there for everyone.

As a former SWAT crisis negotiator, crisis intervention team trainer, with a half-decade of detective/investigator experience and more than 10 years patrol experience, I felt like a fraud. I had watched men die by suicide and helped prevent countless others from ending their lives. I knew the signs (I thought). How did I miss the warning signs with my own brother? As I looked back, I could see the warning signs were there. In my opinion, he hid it from me. There was little I could do from 3,000 miles away. I now had to focus on the future of our family.

Like I said, I am just a cop. Regardless of rank, one major life altering event can change you forever. Add in the stresses of the job, the major trauma you have witnessed, the horrors you

have seen, and it may be a perfect recipe for something very hard to admit...I needed help for myself and my family to manage our grief.

According to Blue HELP, there have been 578 law enforcement officer known suicides from January 1, 2016 through June 31, 2019.² In my career, I have known at least two officers who either attempted suicide or died by suicide. Many of you know of officers who died by their own hand. I suspect that many of you have wondered how you missed it, too.

In the aftermath, I realized in order to help my family through this, I needed to help myself first. "Exposure to trauma is an occupational hazard for first responders and medical professionals, and as such, it is necessary to practice self-care and know the signs that trauma is taking a toll."³ I recognized that this may be time to seek professional help. My cup was full. I quickly learned, when the cup is full, a professional counselor can help you empty it enough so you can be there to help others.

My first step in this process was to look up online support services for survivors of veteran loss. I also reached out to a trusted friend who was aware of resources available. I found many non-profit organizations. Since I am also a military veteran, I was able to speak the language and navigate this complex system. As a result, I quickly found resources for all of my immediate family who wanted to talk to a professional counselor.

Regardless of whether you are a military veteran, first responder, or both, any of these agencies will likely connect you with viable resources. Your responsibility is to make the call. You have worked hard to save people you don't know. Your partners would do anything to save your family. Make the call.

As part of this process, it was critical for me to identify and eliminate the non-profits that were non-responsive or had a delayed response for services. If you find yourself in this situation, be patient; there are many services willing to help. You have to find the right fit.

Next, I asked the service providers I called if they were trained in veteran issues, first responder issues and/or traumatic therapy, commonly referred to as "trauma informed care." The ability to treat the unique needs of combat veterans and first responders who have experienced and seen trauma firsthand is a necessary skillset in order to achieve successful treatment. According to Psychology today, "Over time, exposure to such stress can take a toll on first responders' mental and physical health. In some cases, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) results, therefore it is necessary to seek trauma informed care."⁴

Finally, I committed to the meetings offered by the service provider. This is the most difficult and scary step. Was I crazy? Were we all going to be ok? Is this the end of my career? Simply put, I found that my response to a very traumatic loss and my family members' response to grief was quite normal and we continue to work toward a healthy response to our deep grief caused by tremendous loss.

If you find yourself having thoughts of suicide, struggling with the grief of a traumatic event, reacting or overreacting to otherwise "normal" situations, it is ok to recognize that you are not

ok. It is ok to seek the help of others, seek a peer counselor, seek professional services. Be patient with yourself. Be patient with others. Recognize that what you are feeling is normal and know that with the proper treatment you can be ok, and you will be ok.

References

1. Sack, D. (2017). Trauma and First Responders When the Helpers Need Help. *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/where-science-meets-the-steps/201701/trauma-and-first-responders-when-the-helpers-need-help>
2. Blue Help. Law Enforcement Suicide Statistics. Retrieved from <https://bluehelp.org/service/statistics/>
3. Reagan, L. (2015). When Helping Hurts: Trauma Effects on First Responders. Retrieved from <https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/when-helping-hurts-traumas-effects-on-first-responders-0212154>
4. Sack, D. (2017). Trauma and First Responders When the Helpers Need Help. *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/where-science-meets-the-steps/201701/trauma-and-first-responders-when-the-helpers-need-help>

List of Service Providing Non-Profits (Not an endorsement)

- Blue Help – www.Bluehelp.org
- The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - <https://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>
- Mighty Oaks - <https://www.mightyoaksprograms.org/>
- The Sparta Project - <https://www.thespartaproject.org/>
- Valor For Blue - <https://www.valorforblue.org/>
- Stop Soldier Suicide - <https://www.stopsoldiersuicide.org/>
- Veterans and First Responders Healthcare - <https://www.vfrhealthcare.com/>
- Battle in Distress - <http://www.battleindistress.org/>
- 22 Until None - <https://www.22untilnone.org/>
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Bio

James is a 15-year law enforcement veteran. He has worked at the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department, Ventura Police Department and Ventura County District Attorney's Office. The views above do not represent the views of the agencies above. He has also worked as a Gang Detective, Major Crimes Detective and is currently a District Attorney Investigator in Ventura County.