

Taking Care of the Human Behind the Badge--Bringing Suicide Out of The Shadows **By Jennifer Tejada, Chief, Emeryville Police Department**

Suicide is a topic that is near and dear to my heart. My younger brother Paul died by suicide at the age of thirty. I know how suicide deeply impacts loved ones. I know the heartache of questioning why. I also know the futility of seeking answers when there are none. I also know that as a law enforcement officer I have a higher probability of death by suicide than I have of being killed in the line of duty. I also know too well that many of the warning signs of suicide are now part of my experience.

We make many sacrifices; giving up time with family, working long shifts, working holidays, comforting victims, comforting loved ones of those who have been killed or badly injured, comforting families of those who died by suicide. Every day we see the things that cannot be unseen. I had no idea that one day it would all catch up to me. I didn't know then what I know now; that eventually you pay the price.

All those stressful and traumatic experiences exist in a profession that doesn't teach skills in resiliency, doesn't encourage emotional expression, and doesn't encourage seeking help. This results in a profession with some of the worst health profiles. We have established norms that link emotional and psychological expression to weakness and failure (Bakker and Heuven 2006; Schaible and Six 2016). And according to www.BlueH.E.L.P..org an organization that tracks police suicide, we have one of the highest, if not the highest, suicide rate of any profession.

The nature of policing places law enforcement personnel in situations where trauma is unavoidable, chronic stress and post-traumatic stress are guaranteed, and suicide, depression, risky behavior, obesity, anxiety and addiction are dangerous potential health outcomes. In addition to these incident-based stressors, it is no secret that organizational stressors also negatively impact personnel wellness and a sense of wellbeing. This constant exposure exacts a heavy toll on individuals and organizations in our profession (De la Fuente Solana et al. 2013; Kop et al. 1999).

The consistent emotional demands of a police officer's shift, coupled with our culture of denial of emotional regulation, has measurable negative ramifications. According to the research literature, "police officer burnout has behavioral consequences...such as aggression" (Rajaratnam et al. 2011; Sack 2009), impaired ethical decision-making (Kligyte et al. 2013), disrupted problem solving (Arslan 2010), administrative and tactical errors, absenteeism, and falling asleep while driving (Rajaratnam et al. 2011)

Historically we have responded to this occupational stress and trauma through the construct of Critical Incident Stress De-briefing, Peer Support, and Employee Assistance Programs (EAP). In essence, we have been acknowledging that our personnel experience stress and trauma, but we wait to intervene until post incident. As a result, our profession is in crisis.

So far this year (January to October 2019) we have lost 188 law enforcement personnel to suicide; double the number who have died in the line of duty. We must recognize we are in a crisis of suffering and loss, and we must acknowledge the humanity of policing, and why the skill to be resilient is so crucial to surviving a career infused with trauma and stress.

In 2012 when I was at my lowest point, I stumbled into the field of mindfulness. [Mindfulness](#) started as a secular practice in 1979 and over the years as it has grown and evolved. In policing, some are now seeing the benefits, leading to efforts like Lt. Richard Goerling's [Mindful Badge](#) training (www.mindfulbadge.com). Mindfulness for first responders focuses on building resilience and optimal performance. In 2013 when I began practicing mindfulness in the evenings, I immediately experienced improved sleeping patterns. A study published in the Journal of Traumatic Stress found that breathing-based meditation decreases posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms in U.S. military veterans (Seppala et al 2014). I also discovered Compassion Cultivation (CCT), a program offered by the Compassion Institute at Stanford University designed to improve resilience and feelings of connectedness to others – ultimately providing an overall sense of well-being. <https://www.compassioninstitute.com>.

As I more regularly practiced mindfulness and compassion cultivation, the “fog” began to lift in small ways. I was more present with my family. My interest in hobbies returned over time. I learned about the neuro-plasticity of the brain and that new neural networks are generated via mindfulness practice. I learned to lean into emotional experiences and to accept where I was in my journey. Most of all, I learned I was not alone.

In 2013, working with Lt. Goerling, I began introducing this concept of mind, body, performance, and wellness into our police training curriculum. Since 2015 our focus at the Emeryville Police Department is on health, empathy, awareness, compassion, and understanding the relationship between stress and trauma. The core goals are building resilience and optimizing performance. There are several elements to our “Mindful Policing Initiative” including yoga, a department meditation room, bio-feedback technology, health screenings, Mindfulness Based Resiliency Training (MBRT) and Compassion Cultivation Training (CCT). If we can teach our law enforcement officers to be in the moment and be more acutely aware, we can be more effective collectively. That moment in time between stimulus and response, is a moment when a mindful officer who is aware of his or her body's reaction to stress and trauma, can take those crucial breaths to strengthen attention, gain emotional regulation, and respond versus react.

We need to continuously work towards removing the stigma associated with mental health and suicide. We can achieve this goal by employing the following practices:

- Actively manage and build resiliency in your organization
- Promote openness and support for mental health and suicide awareness
- Constant messaging that our occupational trauma and stress are not unusual
- Assurance that there is no stigma associated with seeking help
- Have a plan on how to accept those who sought help back into the organization
- Have clarity on when, how, and if you should remove a person's gun and/or badge
- Have therapists who are readily available and most importantly, can provide trauma informed care
- Ensure there are mentors within your organization who know how to respond to those in need
- Ensure that confidentiality is part of your process
- Ensure that you have psychologists embedded in your organization, or frequently visiting, to normalize the conversation about mental health
- Define the difference between the impact of a Recommendation and a Directive for a fitness for duty examination

- Ensure family is included in wellness initiatives and education around mental health resources
- Ensure Peer Support/Mentors are trained to ask the difficult questions

Police officers deserve a level of awareness, coherence in thought, and clarity that enhances performance and wellbeing. Paying attention to your mind and body is a critical resilience and performance skill. It is now undeniable that mindfulness meditation combined with compassion cultivation is one path towards becoming more resilient and increasing performance efficacy. These practices will serve law enforcement officers and our communities well when responding to a stimulus in an environment with life or death hanging in the balance.

None of us are immune to internal and external occupational stress and trauma. We live in the shadow of the next incident that will have negative repercussions on our agency, our characters, and our careers. We need to continuously nudge this culture in the direction of removing the stigma associated with mental health and suicide. I have learned over that past six years that sharing my story and being vulnerable gave others courage to step forward. I learned we are all human, and in our humanity, as we extend service and unconditional love and support to others, we can and must also do it for ourselves.

We need to take care of the Human Behind the Badge.

References

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www.BlueH.E.L.P.org An organization that tracks police suicide

FURTHER INFORMATION

Suicide Prevention Hotline: 1-800-273-8255

Safe Call Now: 1-206-459-3020

www.mindfulbadge.com/resources Research articles on mindfulness relevant to policing.

Training information for immersions and peer coach training (UCSD).

Mindful Magazine

www.mindful.org Online and print magazine with helpful information and resources on mindfulness practice.

Greater Good Science Center

<https://greatergood.berkeley.edu> Research and education center for evidence-based skills around self-efficacy and community building.

<https://www.compassioninstitute.com> “Courageous Heart: The Human Behind the Badge”