The Importance of Peer-support

By

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Introduction

Last month, I was attending a three week law enforcement executive training in Boston Massachusetts. That night, we had a guest speaker from the City of New York who discussed the warning signs of police suicide. Several hours after the presentation, a 30-year NYPD veteran committed suicide in his car just after getting off shift. Days later, another NYPD officer would do the same. As discussed by, Haute, Mary Van & Violanti, John M. (2015), suicide among public safety officials is rising dramatically. Too often peers of those who are suffering either do not see, or ignore, serious warning signs. Without a healthy Peer-support system, many public safety officials will continue to suffer from depression, health related issues, and tragically, suicide.

Culture

Public safety personnel undoubtedly encounter some of life's most traumatizing events. In law enforcement, there is a sense of pride in being thick-skinned and mentally equipped to deal with the most evil human beings on the planet. It feels good to know the rookie officers look up to your courage, confidence and aptitudes. It feels even better when the veteran officers accept you as one of them based on what you have endured and conquered. There is a culture that exists that speaks to public safety officials with no words.

It is the unspoken body language and inferences that tell those in and around the group that nothing can penetrate a real cop's, firefighter, or EMT emotional and psychological armor. In today's world of public safety there is far more acceptance to seeking help after going through a traumatic or stressful encounter, however, a dark cloud still hangs overhead when someone asks for a helping hand. I hear people all over the country, once it's too late, discussing the

warning signs they ignored or downplayed after someone fell into depression of committed suicide saying, "I wanted to say something, but I didn't want him/her to lose their job." I just heard someone say this as recently as last month. That tells us there is still a negative connotation in seeking support. Some still consider it a sign of weakness.

Warning Signs

The warning signs may appear subtle upon first glance, yet in retrospect in examining what went wrong, the signs shine like a lighthouse beacon. Why is it that the divorce rate is so high among public safety officials? As discussed by Gilmartin, Kevin M., (2002), public safety officials tend to withdraw at home due to what he calls the constant "hypervigilance" required when working as a public safety official. To be on alert and ready for an emergency all day can be mentally daunting. Now add multiple adrenaline surges and any normal person is out for the count when they arrive home from work. Then repeat that every day for several years and you'll get the perfect recipe that can damage any at-home relationship.

We also see a significant amount of substance abuse. It is not normal to drink ½ a handle of vodka every night. Our peers know who is having marital problems and who is drinking heavily. Yet when asking peers why they do not intervene, most will say they do not want to make the person's life harder by impacting their job. It is incumbent on our culture and peers to rise to the occasion and understand saving a peer's life will always outweigh staying silent. You do not want to be the one that lives the remainder of your life with guilt, wondering what would have happened if you spoke up.

Peer-support

As discussed by Willis, Dan (2014), a Peer-support team can have an intense influence on a person's morale and long-term healing. Further, Willis, Dan (2014) goes on to outline important fundamentals of a Peer-support team. Peer-support teams must be trustworthy, knowledgeable individuals who provide support and resources during challenging times both personally and professionally. It must also be confidential so there is no perceived threat to the employee's job.

Peer-support teams must be supported and encouraged at all ranks within the organization. The culture must endorse and infuse the concepts of supporting one another. That means managers must embrace Peer-support beyond words. They must participate in the program as they expect all other staff to. The stakes are too high and managers owe it to their people for all their hard work, dedication and service.

Conclusion

There are many aspects to public safety wellness. All of them play important roles in keeping our brave men and women mentally, physically and spiritually healthier. As someone once said to me, "I believe the most important step in any journey is the first." Without having a culture that embraces peers supporting one another, we cannot attain other wellness concepts that are imperative for our valued public safety heroes.

References

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